

**Nicholas Lash**  
*University of Cambridge*

## **RELIGION AND THE PUBLIC ORDER BEYOND MODERNITY**

### **1. The Ending of the 'Modern' World?**

There is much talk these days, in European academic circles, about 'postmodernism'. No-one seems quite sure just what 'postmodernism' means, nor whether we should welcome it with open arms or nervously lament its dawning, but the mere fact that the notion is so fashionable would seem to indicate a widespread recognition that the world which we called 'modern' is now drawing to a close.

The scale of change is disconcerting and it is, in part, a change of scale. While, in this century, the population of the planet has enormously increased in size, the world itself has shrunk, contracted to the point at which we all are, for both good and ill, close neighbours. Dallas and New Delhi, Hong Kong and Hyderabad, Cambridge and Calcutta, are rapidly becoming - in some quite non-trivial respects - districts of a single city.

To illustrate the unpredictability of outcomes in the seamless web of cause and consequence which we now know the world to be, exponents of so-called 'chaos theory' used to say that rainfall in Topeka, Kansas, may be triggered by the movement of a butterfly's wings in Tokyo. The reality, of course, is often less benign, for what is 'globalised' by globalised communication, for example - by telephone and television, fax and e-mail - is not only information but, more dangerously, is power.

What power? How wielded, and by whom? And what images are conjured up, by questions about great or global power? An aircraft carrier, perhaps; a parliament; some sleek procession of ministerial limousines? To my mind, a more appropriate image than these would be that of a group of young men in their shirt-sleeves, tapping at computers in a dealing-room.

Politically, the main players in the 'modern' world, the principal agencies of power, were the institutions known as nation-states. One of the most dramatic developments of this century has been 'the rise of the modern State to its apogee in the early part of the twentieth-century, with the remorseless decline in its legitimacy thereafter'.<sup>1</sup> I do not know how things seem, at present, there in India, but - from Russia to Great Britain, from the United States to Sweden, from Italy to Mexico - one key indicator of the shift beyond modernity is an 'evaporation of confidence'<sup>2</sup> in the political processes and institutions associated with 'the state'.

Jawaharlal Nehru is reported to have said, in 1950, that 'Every state in the modern world barring two or three is a secular one'.<sup>3</sup> My competence to treat the topic indicated by my title is, in at least two key respects, extremely limited. On the one hand, I am neither a political scientist nor a social historian, but only a Christian theologian with an interest in the modern world. On the other hand, I am most ill-equipped to comment on the debates, so sensitive, so complex, and so central to the identity of modern India, concerning the extent to which, and the sense in which, the Indian state is to be understood as 'secular'.

Nevertheless, one of the defining features of the modern world has been the growing conviction that public institutions and arrangements are, or should be, 'secular', and secularity is defined - sometimes explicitly, sometimes in tacit and unexplored assumption - in contradistinction to 'religion'. It by no means follows, of course, that societies which deem their public institutions to be 'secular' necessarily suppose themselves indifferent or hostile to religion. Thus, for example, Dr. Radhakrishnan's insistence that 'Secularism here does not mean irreligion', but only that 'Our state does not identify itself with any particular religion',<sup>4</sup> could be echoed in many other

---

1. Peter Sedgwick, 'Theology and the State', *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 7/2 (1994), p. 106.

2. Sedgwick, art. cit., p. 98.

3. *Hindustan Times*, 3 June 1950, p. 6, cited by Ved Prakash Luthera, *The Concept of the Secular State and India* (Oxford: University Press, 1964), p. 153.

4. S. Radhakrishnan, 'Foreword' to S. Abid Husain, *The National Culture of India*, p. vii, and *The Statesman* (21 August, 1961), p. 1; both quoted from Luthera, op. cit., p. 160.

countries (even the almighty dollar still bears the message: 'In God we trust'!).

Nevertheless, across a spectrum of constitutional arrangements that runs all the way from the atheism of former Communist Albania to the anachronism that is the established Church of England, it remains almost a definition of the mind-set of 'modernity' that 'religion' and 'secularity' are to be understood in terms of contrasts drawn between them. And, limited though his competence as a social scientist may be, the theologian does have a legitimate interest in the ways in which people understand religion!

Whether or not the modern world is now ending, there is little doubt that it once had a beginning. And one way of highlighting some important features of our present predicament is to consider the circumstances in which distinctions and assumptions, the validity of which is still quite widely taken for granted, were first drawn up and put to use.

In what follows, therefore, I shall, first, say something about the organisation of knowledge in seventeenth-century Europe; secondly, comment on the understanding of 'religion' which emerged from these arrangements; thirdly, reflect on the relationship between power, and peace, and violence; and, finally, express the hope that other cultures might learn, from India, that, in order for public discourse to be peaceable, it is not necessary to endorse the 'modern' view that 'reason's' voice is *neutral*, uttered at no particular place or time, and acknowledging no history as its own.

Let me conclude these introductory remarks, however, with a parable. In January 1990, Dr Karan Singh and I were among eight hundred delegates to a very grand affair in Moscow, a 'Global Forum' of what the organisers called scientific, parliamentary and spiritual leaders.<sup>5</sup> We were addressed by such luminaries as the Secretaries General of the United Nations and Unesco, Carl Sagan, Elie Wiesel and President Gorbachev. It was an interesting occasion but, for a theologian, somewhat dispiriting. It became increasingly

5. I hasten to add that Dr Karan Singh was a member of the International Advisory Committee, whereas I was a humble foot soldier.

evident that the organising narrative went something like this: it is the duty of scientists to find out what is going on, of parliamentarians to develop public policy in the light of the scientists' conclusions, and of spiritual leaders to persuade people to so modify their values and preferences as to facilitate the smooth implementation of policies designed by the politicians at the scientists' behest. It was, in other words, a very 'modern' affair. And when a group of us – a splendidly ungrateful confederation of Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Jews and Buddhists – protested that, in our understanding, the narratives of religion also laid claim to truth, it was agreed, with some reluctance, to enter this strange opinion in the record.

I offer the Global Forum as a parable of the attitudes and assumptions of the 'modern' world because it gave such clear expression to the view that what is called 'religion', though it may serve public purposes, has more to do with private feeling than with public truth.

## 2. The Organisation of Knowledge

How did the privatisation of what we now call 'religion' come about? Before attempting a direct answer to this question, I would like briefly to sketch the contours of the revolution in the organisation of knowledge which took place in Europe, in the seventeenth century.

I refer to 'what we now call "religion"' rather than simply to 'religion', for two reasons. First, as a reminder that the sense of what religion is *about* – its sources, scope, and character – underwent, as I shall indicate, profound changes at this time. Secondly, because I shall, in due course, suggest that nineteenth-century Englishmen in India did an unwitting disservice to the cause of mutual understanding between Christians and Hindus by imagining that *dharma* was well translated into English as 'religion'.

The 'brave new world'<sup>6</sup> that opened up in Europe in the early modern period through the invention of printing and the voyages of discovery was so vast, so complex, so diverse, as to require new instruments for its conceptual mapping and control. Thus it

6. William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, v. 1.

was that, using materials derived from late medieval logic and the rediscovery of ancient Stoicism, there emerged a new ideal for the working of the mind: a philosophy or science which spoke plainly, directly, unequivocally, in order to describe a world now seen as made of one kind of stuff and driven by one set of forces. Serious thinkers had no time or patience now for narrative, or poetry, or paradox. Theologians, philosophers and scientists alike developed a single-minded passion for pure prose. All knowledge is of objects and objects are to be measured, and described, as objectively and simply and straightforwardly as possible. (And what goes for natural objects, also goes – or so it seemed – for God.)

In other words, modern deism emerged as a key factor in a twofold process of dissociation within the wider culture. This was, on the one hand, a dissociation of memory from argument, of narrative from reason. For Francis Bacon, whose *Dignity and Advancement of Learning* was published in 1605, as for Denis Diderot, editor of the massively influential French *Encyclopaedia*, a hundred and fifty years later, tradition is no longer that which shapes us, makes us what we are: the story into which our lives are woven. It is now, at best, a kind of data bank containing raw materials that reason may find useful and, at worst, the dead weight of prejudice and custom, inhibiting our freedom and our flourishing.

Thus, for example, whereas, traditionally, God's revelation had meant self-disclosure, the shining of God's presence in our memories and hearts and minds, clarifying our confusion by the Spirit's guiding touch, shaping our story to God's saving story for the world; it now meant no more than a source of information supplementary to that which might be gained from study of the natural world.

On the other hand, what was occurring was a dissociation of things measured from the measuring observer, of objects from subjects, things from thoughts. And this twofold dissociation entailed, in turn, a cleavage in the concept of philosophy. On the one hand, philosophy is now transformed into natural philosophy which, in turn, becomes mechanics (a development for which – thanks to Isaac Newton – Trinity College, Cambridge, must take some responsibility!). On the other hand, philosophy transmutes into epistemology and consideration of the content of the conscious mind.

And where do these developments leave God? On the side of the object, God, understood in modern deism to be the maker of the system of the world and its ultimate explanatory principle, could (by the later eighteenth century) be quietly disposed of with the recognition that the system of the world needs no such explanation. On the side of the subject, God became a useful fiction, symbolic of whatever each one dreams of as the fulfilment of their restless striving: money, sex, peace, security, self-importance, power. It seems to me, as a Roman Catholic Christian of quite conventional views, not unreasonable to interpret a fair amount of nineteenth-century atheism as an attempt to call things by their proper names! As late as 1967, a collection of essays was published in England with the extraordinary title *The God I Want*.

I am, deliberately, painting the dark side of the picture. Authentic Christianity, the quiet practice of discipleship, the quest for holiness responsive to God's Spirit and attentive, in whatever darkness, to God's Word, did not simply disappear. Nevertheless, the understanding of religion that shaped the conduct and imagination of those who ruled India in the nineteenth century was, for the most part, both deistic and unselfconsciously instrumentalist. Edward Gibbon's eighteenth-century description of the world of ancient Rome has an uncomfortably modern ring: 'The various modes of worship... were all considered by the people, as equally true; by the philosophers, as equally false; by the magistrates, as equally useful'.<sup>7</sup> (Gibbon would have felt at home, I think, in Moscow, at the Global Forum!)

So much for the general outlines of the story. Let me now go back to the beginning and, specifically, to Francis Bacon. 'History, poetry, and philosophy', he tells us, 'flow from the three distinct fountains of the mind, viz. the memory, the imagination, and the reason'.<sup>8</sup> On this basis, Bacon, in the *Advancement of Learning*, arranged all disciplines and discourses in a pattern which was to remain dominant, in Western Europe, for the best part of two hundred years. According to this pattern, history and experience – the province of memory – are (as I mentioned earlier) of little interest except as conveyors

7. Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London, 1853), Vol. I, Chapter 2, p. 36.

8. See Francis Bacon, *First Part of the Great Instauration. The Dignity and Advancement of Learning*, Book II.

of raw material for reason (and Bacon wastes little time upon imagination!). In this comprehensive modern edifice, the place of *reason* was to be the central space, the universal forum owned and governed, not by wayward human agents, conflicting parties, or particular interests and prejudices, but by impersonal and calculable forces which it is our human task to understand and, so far as may be, to control.

For the most part, the cool, public halls of reason, the parliaments and markets of the modern world, were not understood as temples. Except for brief, eccentric episodes during the French Revolution, people did not ask what deities were worshipped here. Public truth and public power were, increasingly, deemed 'secular'. The memories people shared, the stories that they told, the traditions they acknowledged, being their private or domestic business, must not obtrude into the public sphere, disturb the peace of reason. One bizarre consequence of this set-up was to allocate all non-European cultural practices to the territory now thought of as 'religion'. (This seems, at least, to be one way of reading the nineteenth-century invention of a unitary phenomenon known as 'Hinduism'. I know I am out of my depth here - but I hope to come back to the question later on.)

The tragedy of modern Western culture - which is no longer 'Western' but, in its pervasiveness and, increasingly, its independence from political control, is in danger of becoming simply the system of the world - is that its breathtaking achievements, in science and technology, in medicine and agriculture, education and communication, and in the increasing sophistication of its acknowledgement of universal human rights, have to be set against the dark and blood-stained background of the cost, in human suffering and the irreversible devastation of the planet, of the length of time that it has taken us to learn that there is no neutral vantage-point, no universal standpoint, no 'nowhere in particular' where only 'reason' reigns, and from which alone truth is to be discerned and the pattern of right action estimated. (It is no disparagement of modern science to insist that, while numbers may be neutral, the uses of numbers never are.)

The 'ditch' which, in the eighteenth century, Lessing saw, and feared to be unbridgeable, between the accidental truths of history and necessary truths of reason, simply does not exist:

the truths of reason are never quite as necessary as those who formulate them may suppose, and historical contingency may bear the truth of God.

I am not arguing that human beings 'only' tell stories (a formulation which betrays the rationalist's mistrust of narrative as a vehicle of truth). It would be more accurate to say that narrative comes first, and that the formal systems we construct - whether in philosophy or science - are coloured, shaped, determined, by the story-telling soil from which they spring.

The European and North American thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were not wrong to be suspicious of tradition-specific discourse - of the kind sometimes labelled, in the West, 'sectarian' and (I think) there in India, 'communal'. Nor was it dishonourable to seek, beyond the obscenity of violence perpetrated in the name of God, for reasoned peace. Their mistake lay in the expectation that the human grasp of truth could ever be other than tradition-constituted.

We are not incapable, as human beings, of making sense of things, of speaking truth and acting with integrity. But all these things we do from somewhere, in ways shaped by some set of memories and expectations, bearing some sense of duty borne and gifts that have been given. All sense, and truth, and goodness, is carried and constituted by some story, some pattern of experience some tradition.

### 3. The Invention of 'Religion'

Against this general background, I now want to look a little more closely at the new understanding of 'religion' that developed as part and parcel of this early modern world.

To find this modern notion of religion still at work, alive and well, it is not necessary to go back to the time of its invention in the seventeenth century. In preparation for this paper, I read two fascinating studies of the problems of the Secularity of the Indian State, both of which took this early modern notion quite for granted. They were Donald Smith's *India as a Secular State*, published in 1963,



and Ved Prakash Luthera's *The Concept of the Secular State and India*, which appeared the following year.<sup>9</sup>

What is important, for my purpose, is to notice that, although they differ quite sharply in their conclusions – Smith judging the Indian Constitution to provide ‘a relatively sound basis for the building of a secular state’, the secularity of the state being ‘interpreted as a pragmatic solution to the problem of religious pluralism’, whereas Luthera argues that ‘it is neither possible nor desirable to have a secular state in India under the *present* social circumstances’<sup>10</sup> – both studies share a common understanding of the kind of thing ‘religion’ is.

Smith uses the term ‘religion’ to refer to ‘organized religious groups and also to religious beliefs and practices which may or may not be associated with such groups’. He assumes that ‘religion and the state function in two basically different areas of human activity, each with its own objectives and methods’, and that, ‘in a secular state...religions are viewed by the state in much the same way that it views other voluntary associations based on common social, cultural, or economic interests’.<sup>11</sup> I find nothing in Luthera’s study which leads me to suppose that he would take issue with any of this.

In other words, both authors suppose a religion to be a kind of club, a voluntary special interest group, rather like a society of stamp collectors or railway enthusiasts. And, of course, both of them are well aware of the fact that the vastly diverse cluster of cultural phenomena known, since the early nineteenth century, as Hinduism, is not like a club at all. Whereas Smith, however, supposes that Hinduism’s lack of ‘ecclesiastical organisation’ (a telling phrase, betraying his assumption that, if something is ‘a religion’, then it must be, more or less, ‘a church’) improves the prospects for the secularity of the Indian State on the grounds that ‘the more highly organized a religion, the more difficult to establish a secular state’ – because these private interest groups, these clubs, may prove too powerful to be amenable to state control – Luthera reaches the

9. Donald E. Smith, *India as a Secular State* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1963); Ved Prakash Luthera, *The Concept of the Secular State and India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

10. Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 134, 139; Luthera, *op. cit.*, p. 147 (his stress), see p. viii.

11. Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 4,6,7.

opposite conclusion: 'the secularization of the state', he says, 'presupposes that the religion professed by its people...is an *organized* religion...(and) Hinduism is not organized'.<sup>12</sup>

For Smith, in other words, the project of a secular State in India is viable because Hinduism is a disorganised club, whereas, for Luthera, it is *too* disorganised a club for the secularity of the State to get off the ground. It is, however, their unexamined common *premise* that urgently requires attention: namely, the assumption that 'a religion' is a voluntary special interest group, whose activities are confined to a particular 'area' of human life. For the circumstances in which this premise was invented, we must return to early modern Europe.

The seventeenth century, in Western Europe, was not only a time of discovery and innovation on a hitherto unprecedented scale, it was also a period suspicious of change and wracked by social conflict. It being axiomatic, in this society, not only that truth is unifying and unitary but also that it is, as Matthew Hale put it in 1677, 'more ancient than error',<sup>13</sup> the increasing diversity of religious practice and opinion was deemed evidence of cultural degeneration.

Against this background, a powerful and long-lasting myth was born: the myth that, once upon a time (the timeless time of fairytales) all human beings, having equal and clear-sighted access to the one true God, had lived in peace and harmony, but that this single, pure religion had become corrupted as a result (as Charles Blount put it, in 1695) of the introduction by priests of polytheism and sacrifice.<sup>14</sup>

It is incumbent on me, as a Cambridge man, to admit, with no great pride, that a group of thinkers, known as 'Cambridge Platonists', and associated especially with Emmanuel College, played a key role in the invention and expression of the deist myth (for the warrants of which, historically, there is not, of course, a shred of evidence - although it took anthropologists and archeologists quite some time to notice

12. Smith, op. cit., p. 40; Luthera, op. cit., p. 147.

13. Quoted from Peter Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 132.

14. Quoted from Harrison, op. cit., p. 144.

this). Nor will it, I hope, be thought indelicate of a Roman Catholic to mention the part played in the myth's invention by fear and suspicion of Catholicism (hence the antipathy to 'priests' and 'sacrifices').

In fact, we can go one stage further. You will have recognised how similar is the story told, in the seventeenth century, by the Cambridge Platonists, to that endorsed, with such enthusiasm, in the nineteenth century, by reformers in India such as Ram Mohan Roy. There are complex historical and cultural ironies in the extent to which reform movements in nineteenth century Bengal were inspired by seventeenth-century English upperclass mistrust of Catholicism!

Let me put it this way. It is, I think, now generally agreed that the category of 'the religions of the East' was invented by the European imagination in the early nineteenth century, and that the conceptual framework used for this invention was most ill-suited to its contents. That framework, I have suggested, was fashioned in the seventeenth century. As we now, at the end of the twentieth century, emerge from the culture of 'modernity', it becomes easier to see that the modern understanding of what counts as 'a religion' distorts the so-called 'religions of the West' – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – no less disastrously than it does the traditions of thought, and discipline, and devotion, now known as Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, or Confucianism.

The early modern project of Enlightenment, suspecting all 'local' reasoning, all cultural diversity, all particularity of custom and symbol-system and tradition, as arbitrary and divisive, sought to ground public life upon the cool transparency of universal 'reason'. To say that the modern world is ending is to acknowledge that this not necessarily ignoble universalising project (which underpins all modern theories of 'the State') can now, in its turn, be seen to be little more, in fact, than the extrapolation of one particular set of 'local' circumstances: namely, the circumstances of seventeenth-century Europe.

The point that I most want to emphasise is that the project of characterising 'religion' as a genus of which Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam (for instance) would be specific

instances or variants rests upon assumptions which cannot but misrepresent the self-understandings of each of these traditions.

The price which secularising theory exacts is the admission that the self-understandings, the enacted narratives, which *constitute* the different traditions, belong to our primitive, premodern past, and have no place in what we call 'advanced' societies. Thus, Donald Smith acknowledges that 'Traditional Hinduism and Islam were far more than "religions" in the usual (!) meaning of the word. Historically, both came very close to being total ways of life in the most literal sense'.<sup>15</sup>

Notice that 'traditional': the message is that Hinduism and Islam must now get up-to-date; they must, in other words, transform themselves into private clubs for those whose hobby happens to be 'religion'. As Smith himself puts it: 'The role of Hinduism is being reduced approximately to that of religion in western (by which I think he means American) society: private faith and worship, and corporate religious life expressed through voluntary organizations .... (the question) is simply whether religion is or can be made relevant to the needs of modern society'.<sup>16</sup> (But who, I ask in passing, is to decide just what these 'needs' might be?)

According to Professor Smith, 'It is very doubtful that there is any clear distinction in the minds of most people between the religious and the cultural aspects of the Hindu temples which the government is helping to restore'.<sup>17</sup> This, I take it, is good news because (speaking, obviously, under your correction) it seems to me quite certain that no such 'clear distinction' *could* be drawn in ways that did not seriously distort Hindu tradition.

As an illustration of how such distortion operates, consider what is entailed in worshipping the Creator of the world - surely a central feature of all religious traditions that confess the world to be created. (You will forgive me if I offer the illustration in Christian terminology, because that is where I am at home, but I

15. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 265.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 331.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 384.

do not think that a Hindu, or a Muslim, will find it difficult to make the necessary transposition.) What Hindus do in temples, and Christians in churches, and Muslims in mosques, we call 'worship'. But few Hindus, or Christians, or Muslims, would contend that worship is *confined* to what goes on in places set aside for formal, ritual celebration of our relationship with God.

If all things whatsoever that ever have been, are, and will be, are created; are moved, indwelt and held at every instant by the holy mystery that we call God; then, in our every thought and word and action, it is with that holy mystery that human beings have to do. The creature's relationship to the Creator is not some part or 'area' of its life: it simply *is* the creature's very being.

It may well be, firstly, that not all human beings notice this or understand it to be so and, secondly, that there are radically different traditions of acknowledgement and celebration of the fact that it is so. And, of course, these differences have ramifications across the whole sweep of public and domestic life, affecting our ethics, our politics, our economics, and our art. But, if *all* human life, and by no means only that one 'area' of life which is its ritual distillation, is, or should be, worship of the creator, then what is needed is an account of public order which - instead of supposing worship to be optional, part-time, indulgence in some private or domestic fiction - can foster harmony and cooperation between distinct, and sometimes potentially conflictual, enacted narratives of creaturely existence; between, in other words, different traditions of worship and wisdom and devotion.

It is my impression that India's quest for some such framework, through its constitutional arrangements, has been hampered by the influence of that early modern 'grammar' of the concepts of 'religion' and the 'secular' the origins and disadvantages of which I have been trying to indicate.

Thus, for example, it seems to me insufficient to note, as Judith Brown did in her Teape Lectures for 1979, that whereas 'In Western usage the secular state is one which is officially separate from any religious belief or institution... In Indian English the secular state is one which does not divorce itself from religion, but treats all

religious traditions with cordial impartiality'.<sup>18</sup> The point is that the somewhat Olympian notion of 'cordial impartiality' risks presupposing just that understanding of 'a religion' as a (more or less well organised) private club, with little impact on or implications for the public realm, which is built into the notion of political secularity.

Before I move the argument on, there is one more complication, where uses of the word 'religion' are concerned, that must be mentioned. When Indian scholars of the nineteenth century needed a word which would translate what they took the English word 'religion' to mean, they settled for *dharma*.<sup>19</sup> In view of the preoccupation of the British ruling class with order and with ethics, rather than theology or metaphysics, it was, perhaps, an unsurprising choice. Nevertheless, it was, I think, a less than happy one.

It would be foolish of me to pretend that I have begun to grasp the proliferating, protean complexity of '*dharma*'. But if it speaks about the field, or ground, or context, which shapes the pattern of our actions on the battle-field of life; about the 'natural law', the order and the ordering of things, the way things go, the way we go with the grain of things; about the responsibility we bear, the duty we discern, upon *this* field, in these particular circumstances; then there is no one word in English whose map of usage closely corresponds to this, and certainly not 'religion'. In fact, the only word that I can think of whose uses might come close would be '*ratio*' in medieval Latin (which, interestingly, has similar connotations of 'field', or 'ground', or 'background', as well as 'law' or 'reason'); but no-one, to my knowledge, has ever suggested that '*ratio*' might be translated as 'religion'.

I mention this matter of translation only to underscore the extent to which 'religion' is a dangerous word, with a long history of misleading uses; a word which, therefore, needs always to be handled with critical suspicion and the greatest care.

---

18. Judith M. Brown, *Men and Gods in a Changing World. Some Themes in the Religious Experience of Twentieth-Century Hindus and Christians* (London: SCM Press, 1980), p. 12.

19. See Julius Lipner, *Hindus. Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 217. For a careful discussion of the ways that '*dharma*' has been treated in the encounter between Indian and European thought, see Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany, New York: SUNY, 1988), pp. 310-348.

#### 4. Violence, Power, and Peace

Those who built the public spaces of European Enlightenment were not, for the most part, irreligious people. Their insistence that tradition-specific narratives, rituals and symbol-systems must be banished from the public realm, the business of which was to be conducted solely by criteria of disinterested rational calculation, was seen as service of the deity that constructed the marvellous machinery of the world. It was only as this demiurge, this projected image of the order of the world, dissolved with the acknowledgement that mathematical procedures do not need external warrant, that the dark suspicion dawned that the neutrality of reason, what we might call the secularity of the secular, may be an illusion.<sup>20</sup> Behind the mask of 'reason', what forces were at work? Or, to put it another way, of what divinities is 'secular society' in *fact* the shrine or temple?

Emile Durkheim, one of the founding fathers of the social sciences, defined religion as 'the system of symbols by means of which society becomes conscious of itself'. On this account, what qualifies as 'religious' ritual will be, in his words, the 'totality of (social) practices concerned with sacred things';<sup>21</sup> concerned, that is to say, with dreams, beliefs, ideas and institutions that we deem outside our control, too powerful to tamper with, too dangerous to touch.

If we put on Durkheimian spectacles, we see that tales of 'secularisation' may simply serve to render ideologically invisible the sacral or religious character of many of modern society's most powerful institutions and foundationally entrenched beliefs. Banks and stock exchanges may turn out to be temples in which ritual sacrifices are performed to the deities of the market; and dictators who despise what they think of as 'religion' may serve as high priests in the liturgies of nationalism.

In other words: instead of asking, with Professor Donald Smith, whether religion, in India or elsewhere, 'can be made relevant to

20. See Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

21. Emile Durkheim, *Suicide. A Study in Sociology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 312; 'Concerning the Definition of Religious Phenomena', in W. S. F. Pickering, ed., *Durkheim on Religion. A Selection of Readings and Bibliographies* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 88.

the needs of modern society',<sup>22</sup> we might do better to seek out the shrines and temples of secular society, and to ask what gods are worshipped there.

In a powerful and wide-ranging recent study, entitled *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*,<sup>23</sup> my Cambridge colleague, John Milbank, has argued that the entire *project* of modern secularity is both illusory and self-defeating. The attempted systematic exclusion of tradition-specifying narratives from the public realm, by the mere device of labelling such narratives 'religious' and declaring them to pertain solely to the category of private pastime, has the entirely unintended and extremely dangerous effect of allowing the stories and commitments which, in *fact*, shape and animate the public order, to operate - 'behind our backs' - unchecked, uncriticised and uncontrolled.

It is, for example, possible to disdain all behaviour thought of as 'religious' and yet to worship 'freedom', while never noticing how closely this concept conjugates, in fact, with dominance, and wealth, and power. My freedom may be your necessity, my wealth your poverty, your slavery my power.

No other thinker has seen through the modern mind, unmasked its ideologies, with the prophetic penetration and disturbing clarity of Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche's terrifying vision was of a world constituted, fashioned, shaped - not by reason, order, freedom - but, from its beginning to its end, from creation to the twilight of the gods, by *power*: the dark face of which is violence, dominance, control.

Between Descartes, in the seventeenth century, who celebrated freedom as our human likeness unto God - for freedom makes us *authors* of our destiny, and Nietzsche, in the nineteenth - for whom freedom is the dark predicament of creatures in a wilderness inhabited only by predators and victims, the moods of freedom in modern Western culture have swung from optimism to despair.<sup>24</sup>

22. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 331.

23. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.

24. See Nicholas Lash, 'Incarnation and Determinate Freedom, in Leroy S. Rouner (ed.), *On Freedom* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), pp. 15-29.



And, although Nietzsche speaks more directly to our time than does Descartes, the *anomie* of contemporary Western culture (as Durkheim would have called it) arises in part from the fact that stoics and utilitarians, hedonists and Aristoteleans, Nietzschean pessimists and Cartesian optimists, now live side by side while lacking any shared conventions, any common cultural 'grammar', according to which such fundamental questions might be reflected, dwelt upon, discussed, towards the forging of some common wisdom.

Overburdened statesmen might object that they have no time for metaphysics, and that it is their business to concentrate on more down-to-earth, pragmatic, day-to-day concerns. There is a hint of this in the cross-section of 'views expressed about the nature of the state in India' which Luthera sets out in an Appendix to his study.

It would be churlish not to sympathise with this suspicion of 'grand theory' on the part of busy men. A Radhakrishnan is a rare phenomenon. And it might seem mere academic pedantry to criticise Pandit Nehru for saying, in 1954, that, although the use of the word 'secular' to describe the nature of the Indian State, is 'perhaps... not a very happy one', it will, 'for want of a better word', do well enough.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, I hope you will be tolerant of my perhaps romantic European belief that there is a better chance in India, than in most other countries, of the ineluctably metaphysical – and, thereby, theological – implications of the stories that we tell, the policies that we pursue, the ideals that we cherish, finding widespread and educated recognition.

The stakes could not, after all, be higher. If there is another way of acting out the world, of being human, than as the agents or the victims of the will to power, it will be shown, enacted, in the performance of some better and more peaceful story.

In an Inaugural Lecture delivered in the University of Lancaster in 1992, Professor John Clayton suggested that 'the classical Indian *vada*-tradition of philosophical contest or public debate' might point

25. Luthera, *op. cit.*, p. 153, citing the *Hindustan Times*, 10 August 1954, p. 4.

Western societies 'in more promising directions than those paths we have been strolling along since at least the European Enlightenment'.<sup>26</sup>

On the Indian model (according to Clayton) 'tradition-specific reasons can have a place in public rationality: admission to public space is gained through contestability, not neutrality'. Moreover, whereas the Western model supposes the 'end served by rational debate' to be 'the achievement of consensus', on the Indian model the end served 'is the clarification of difference'.<sup>27</sup>

Assuming (as, in my ignorance, I must) that Clayton has correctly understood the Indian traditions to which he refers, it would follow that the project of fashioning a State which (in Nehru's words) includes 'in its wide fold various religions and cultures, gives protection and opportunity to all and thus brings about an atmosphere of tolerance and cooperation',<sup>28</sup> is hindered and not helped by employing the vocabulary of the European Enlightenment and, in particular, the accounts which were constructed there of 'secularity' and of 'religion', and of the relationships between them.

Having banished the great traditions to the margins of the public realm, that realm has proved to be, in Western cultures, not a neutral home for an explaining and enabling power; a 'Reason' without ancestry or context, but a bleak and dangerous, rapacious and unlovely wilderness. I hope that it is not altogether fanciful to plead that Indian culture, having rejected the illusion of a neutral public space – a 'nowhere in particular' from which to view, and rule, the world – might draw upon its own resources to help India, and the rest of us, to reintegrate the different traditions of wisdom, duty and devotion, into a common quest for justice, harmony, and peace.

---

26. John Clayton, *Thomas Jefferson and the Study of Religion* (privately printed by the University of Lancaster, 1992), p. 26. Professor Clayton, I might mention, is a Texan Baptist.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

28. *Luthera*, op. cit., p. 159, citing the *Hindustan Times*, 18 April 1949, p. 6.