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On the Possibility of Religious Pluralism

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One of the great perplexities of our age is this: we seem to think that religion matters a great deal to politics but are unsure about just why it matters, how it matters, or indeed even what religion is. Certainly, reference to religious language seems to pervade politics, moral argument, and social conflict around the world. But what are we to make of this “return” of religion? Is it merely “flotsam on the sea of a post-religious age,” to use a phrase of Charles Taylor’s?¹ Or does the rise of religion represent something more fundamental? What would count as evidence for or against these views? Religion is a trope around which a good deal of conflict seems to be organized; but it is equally true that for every conflict that is attributed to “religion,” there is a rival explanation that traces the root of the conflict to some other cause altogether: misdirected class conflict, failed states, incomplete nationalisms, repressed sexual needs, or even unmet social aspiration.

We are, at one level, profoundly ambivalent in how we understand the place of religion in collective life. We premise a justification of liberal society on the thought that it allows different religions to flourish, but worry about the limits that need to be placed on what thus flourishes. While the social functions of religion seem to dissolve, in that religion cannot order the world as an unbroken totality, its subjective functions seem to acquire a new intensity. In an age of subjectivism, we want to grant religion some special status—we want to affirm it as something important, an act of choice that is somehow

more significant than choosing between flavors of ice cream—but are unsure about how to affirm its status. We want to be open to the possibility that religion will be a source of meaning, yet at the same time worry if the needs and demands of society are subject to any imperatives that come from outside the realm of the social, something that subordinates the social to something perhaps more transcendent. Religion is something we cannot seem to affirm or disavow. We are not sure quite what to do with it.

This dilemma over the status of religion may be endemic to modernity. But two particular historical developments make this dilemma existentially more vivid for citizens of modern democracies. The first is the challenge of pluralism, the fact that many liberal democracies are now composed of citizens who profess a variety of beliefs. In a way, there is nothing new about this predicament. But the challenge of pluralism is exacerbated by the fact that there is a fairly thick range of normative restrictions on the kinds of argument that are acceptable when accommodating diversity. Many early modern societies have a wonderful history of toleration, with different faiths and ways of life coexisting, sometimes even intermingling. But this toleration usually exhibited two features. First, it was hierarchical, with the political superiority of one or another of the faiths being openly acknowledged. The second feature was that this form of toleration was what might be called segregationist: different ways of life were given their own space and domain, without it being assumed that members of different groups would speak a language of common citizenship. The modern challenge arises because all citizens have to be treated equally—*prima facie* hierarchical conceptions of toleration are suspect—and because all modern states have a conception of common citizenship that involves citizens making decisions over collective life together. Therefore, to each community its own practices are not always a normatively viable solution. The challenge for modern democracies is not pluralism *per se* but reconciling pluralism with a common political identity.

The second source exacerbating the dilemma of religion is globalization. Globalization and the challenge of pluralism are connected most straightforwardly in many ways. Patterns of migration have made the dilemma of pluralism more urgent; transnational religious movements are possible in a new and unprecedented way. But perhaps most important, globalization has created all kinds of identity dilemmas in which religion plays a complicated part. In short, the functions that religion or religious identity perform in the public sphere have been made vastly more complicated as a result of globalization. It makes rather more complicated questions such as *Is religion about belief? Is it about a way of life? Or is it a marker of identity? Or what combination of the three?* This observation is the starting point of this essay.

A first section problematizes the concept of religion, not with a view to debunking the concept but in order to underscore that it is not always clear what we are invoking when we invoke “religion” in contemporary argument. A set of distinctions about what is at stake in religious pluralism provide a starting point. A corollary of these distinctions is that the line between religious and secular can often be a function of politics and not at all self-evident. The second section argues that what counts as a religious motive is indeterminate, but that is the source of religion’s potency in politics. It is precisely because religion is not easily available as a way of life that it becomes a self-conscious ideology. The third and final section of the essay takes up the case of India in order to illustrate the complex relationship between religious pluralism, globalization, and world politics in the contemporary era.

The Stakes of Religion

What is at stake in invoking religion? Is it a way of life or a “true belief”? Perhaps the best introduction to these issues is provided by two classic passages from antiquity that lay out the stakes.

In the first century B.C.E., Cicero wrote in *De Natura Deorum*:

for religion has been dissociated from superstition not only by philosophers but by our own ancestors as well. I may mention as to these two terms that men who used to spend whole days in prayer and sacrifice in order that their children might survive them (essent superstites), were called superstitiosus, a title which afterwards extended more widely, while such as heedfully repeated and, as it were, “regathered” (relegerent) everything that formed a part of divine worship, were named religiosus from relegere, in the same way that elegans is derived from eligere, diligens from diligere, and intellegens from intellegere, for in all these words the force of legere is the same as in religiosus. It was in this way that with the words superstitiosus and religiosus the one became the designation of a fault, the other of an excellence.²

Lactantius, a Christian writing more than three centuries later, responded:

We are fastened and bound to God by this bond of piety, where religion itself takes its name. The word is not as Cicero interpreted it from “re-reading,” or “choosing again” (*relegendo*). . . . We can know from the matter itself how inept this interpretation is. For if superstition

and religion are engaged in worshipping the same gods, there is light or rather no difference . . . because religion is a worship of the true; superstition of the false. And it is important, really, why you worship, not how you worship, or what you pray for. . . . We have said that *the name of religion is taken from the bond of piety, because God has bound and fastened man to Himself of piety, since it is necessary for us to serve Him as Lord and obey Him as father. . . . They are superstitious who worship many and false gods; but we, who supplicate the one true God, are religious.*³

The contrast could not be more striking.⁴ For Cicero, religion is more akin to tradition, a body of practices inherited from ancestors. It is an ongoing way of life. For Lactantius, religion is ultimately about worshipping the correct God in the appropriate way. It involves two thoughts. First, that the believer be sincere in his belief for it to qualify appropriately as religion. Second, mere worship is not enough: the God being worshiped must be the true God, not any God but one who is truly our creator. For Lactantius, the distinction between *religio* and *superstitio* is marked by the opposition between true and false. This distinction is not particularly germane to Cicero's understanding of religion. Like the Romans, he too contrasts *religio* and *superstitio*, but the grounds of the distinction are quite different. The relevant contrast is not between true and false but between excess and moderation. For him *superstitio* consists in an act of not choosing rightly from tradition; it does not refer primarily to belief. For Lactantius, the focus of religion primarily is: *Whom* do you worship? For Cicero, it is almost as if the real question is: *How* do you worship?

It is often thought that a religion more concerned with truth will lend itself to persecutory ideologies. But this claim should not be overstated. Pagan religions like that of Rome, or occasionally religions like Hinduism can generate their own politics of persecution. But the grounds of these ideologies are surely different. It is unlikely that Rome or Hinduism is worried about the falsity of other religions. What are a few more Gods among the numerous that already exist? They rather become persecutory when they link the presence of rival doctrines as a palpable threat to their way of life. In other words, the boundaries between doctrines, practices, and beliefs that are tolerated and those that are not are marked politically rather than theologically. Whereas for Lactantius, those boundaries of toleration are clearly marked theologically, for Cicero they were more political.

These contrasts have great consequences for how the distinction between the religious and the nonreligious gets drawn. For Lactantius, this distinction marks the boundary between Christians and others, especially pagans. But this rather commonplace observation poses a serious challenge. Can the boundary

between the religious and the nonreligious be derived independently of particular theologies? Does the term “religion” pick out a universal domain of experience? Is it possible to have a “religion” and for it not become your “identity.” What is the relationship between identity and belief, and which way does the causation run? Conversely, is it possible for a “religion” to become your identity without subscription to any particular set of beliefs? This is the phenomenon known as the ethnicization of religion, where participants come to participate and share in a religious group identity in an abstract sense. I identify as a Hindu or Sikh or whatever without any beliefs associated with a religion whatsoever. (In Cicero’s case this was clearly a possibility: he could disbelieve Roman theology yet practice Roman religion—most commentators see this as an instance of Cicero being inauthentic in the profession of his priestly duties. But why do we suppose that that relation between belief and practice has to correspond to a classical Christian model?)

Perhaps we are living in an age where the two models of religion that Cicero and Lactantius represent are no longer available to us as distinct models. In part this is because even the so-called customary itself is, in some sense, an act of choice, governed by complex principles and considerations; it is subject to the demands of justification and can no longer claim authority on the ground that it is customary. It seems no longer possible to identify religion with a particular way of life, or a set of customs; nor can our usage simply restrict it to identification with a true theology. Arguably, the term “religion” is invoked because neither custom nor theology is self-validating, as they were for Cicero and Lactantius, respectively. So what are we talking about when we invoke religion?

Attempts to define religion often miss an interesting question. Who draws the boundaries around what counts as religious? What makes something religious rather than not religious?⁵ Can the concept of religion be used across traditions? Can the concept be taken to refer unproblematically to the same phenomenon? It seems here that there are two options that are tempting but pose problems. The first option is an expansive notion of religion that makes it almost synonymous with culture. It was this sort of definition that would allow scholars to assert things like: For Hindus all aspects of life are religiously regulated. But if a religion can pervade the entire domain of activity of a particular culture, the whole concept becomes meaningless. On the other hand, if we define religion by listing certain essential attributes, it is not always clear by whose authority a particular set of attributes are thought to be essential to a definition of “religion.” Why should we include beliefs but not moods and motivations? How do we classify particular acts as being religious?

In contemporary discussions of the challenges posed by religious pluralism, many different things are at stake. At a first approximation we should

distinguish three different issues. The first issue is this: What are the *grounds* for belief? For liberal theory, such as that of John Rawls, this is the central issue. Should reasons derived from religious conceptions be acceptable in the public sphere, given that not all citizens can subscribe to those grounds for belief? Are such reasons compatible with the idea of citizenship based on reciprocity and fairness? The first line of contest is therefore this: Should arguments based on appeals to religion be legitimized in the public sphere? Or should conceptions of political morality always depend upon freestanding arguments? This is a large philosophical question that is perhaps more germane to academic discussions of secularism than to the global politics of religion and pluralism.

The second set of controversies arises from the *scope* of religious belief. There are some religious movements where religion has been more effectively privatized. This does not mean that beliefs are not sincerely held, or important to their adherents. It simply means that these beliefs do not apply to vast areas of social life. The extent to which religion poses a challenge depends upon how much area of social life comes under its jurisdiction. The more the religion is an effective way of life rather than simply a set of beliefs, the more germane this issue. Typically matters pertaining to the “family” are the last to be emancipated from religious jurisdiction. Many of the conflicts are over issues such as: Should family law or gender relations still be governed by religious precepts? Who decides where the boundaries lie? How far can religion dilute its scope without being rendered irrelevant? On this view the issue is not the legitimacy of religious argument; it is the scope of these arguments. This is a question haunting many religious adherents and is discussed at greater length in the next section.

The third set of controversies arises from the *intensity* of religious belief. This has two aspects. The first is the thought that there is often a passion associated with religious belief that is the source of political instability. This passion itself may immobilize reason and civility. Here the issue is not so much philosophical as psychological, rooted in the Enlightenment fear of what the eighteenth century called “enthusiasm.” The second aspect has to do with identity. The passions associated with religious belief can be particularly destructive when religions construct images of nonadherents that are often the source of conflict. Under modern conditions of globalization, these images may have less to do with actual beliefs or ways of life. Rather, members of a particular religion are marked out as posing a threat because of who they are. This intensity of distrust of members of other religions is often exacerbated where religion becomes the basis of a national identity that marks out other religions as a possible threat. A prominent example of this is interreligious violence in India. This has less to do with disputes over the grounds of belief, or the scope

of religion. But it has more to do with the fact that some groups want to make religion the basis of national identity. These sorts of disputes have more to do with particular histories of nationalism than religious arguments as such.

It is important to keep these distinctions in mind, since they require different sorts of responses. The challenge posed by religion to liberal theory is not exactly the same as the challenge that arises out of the conjunction of nationalism and religion.

Whatever one's views on defining religion, there is something useful in thinking of religion as a politically constructed category. A full-blooded nominalist line on religion has its advantages: what religion is depends upon who is defining it. Hobbes made the persuasive suggestion that the line between the religious and the secular is itself a function of sovereign power. Hobbes's radicalism was not simply to subordinate religion to politics; it was to assert emphatically that what counts as religious was itself a function of political power. The issue then becomes not "What is religious?" but "What is at stake in marking something as 'religious'?" Is it a stratagem to marginalize an argument, or a device to claim authority for it? Perhaps rather than obsessing with what religion is, we should be more attentive to the contexts in which the term is invoked and the purposes it serves. Perhaps we should look for its effects rather than its essence.

Hobbes may have been right that the distinction between the sacred and secular emerges only as a result of the advance of sovereign power. But this claim has two enormous consequences to which we have not paid sufficient attention. First, if this claim is correct, then there is something profoundly misleading about the dominant "church-state" metaphors we use to describe the relationship between religion and politics. Our prevalent metaphors for talking about regimes of religious toleration often disguise the stakes. No secular state, as is now familiar, can be neutral or impartial among religions because the state determines the boundaries within which neutrality must operate. Similarly, another metaphor used by Amy Gutmann, which describes the separation of church and state as a two-way accommodation whose purpose is to protect religion from the state as much as it is to protect the state from religion, does not adequately acknowledge the fact that the two-way accommodation metaphor works only when vast areas of what might be considered religious have already been ceded to the state, arguably to the point where religious practice becomes socially less consequential.⁶

The two-way accommodation metaphor also belies the fact that all states extensively regulate religion; one might say that they define the normatively permissible boundaries of religion. Particular aspects of religion are given protection, recognition, and support; others are the subjects of indifference, and

many aspects are curtailed and proscribed. But the most crucial point is that the boundaries between the permissible and impermissible will be set by the state. It is therefore a little misleading to argue that the point of normative theory is to figure out the balance between “two realms,” where religion does not encroach upon politics, or politics does not encroach upon religion. There is no such thing as “two realms” independent of where politics draws the lines.

If this is indeed the case, then it calls into question at least one move that liberal theorists are inclined to make in response to challenges from “religion.” This is to invoke what you might call the sovereignty of the political. This is the idea that there is some freestanding realm of the political, which trumps the claims of the so-called comprehensive views that characterize religions. But invoking the political does not answer the question about who draws the boundaries of the political. This itself is a political question, in that there is no self-validating answer to it. The return of “religious” politics can therefore be read another way: When religion challenges politics, it is not so much a way of the transcendent disrupting the social as it is simply a reminder of the inherent instability of the political. Religion is invoked to destabilize the boundaries, and the secular is invoked to secure them. But can either realm be self-referential, self-instituted, self-sufficient, and self-validating?

But we can look at the problem from the reverse angle as well. If politics is not a self-validating realm, neither is religion. The sense in which the distinction between the secular and the sacred, or the religious and the nonreligious, has become problematic is this: Our dominant picture of talking about this relationship comes from thinking of the “church” and “state” as two different and independently identifiable institutions. But modern politics is characterized by a profound fragmentation of authority. Yes, institutions like the church—or their functional equivalents in other “religions”—still exist, but none can be unproblematically identified as a locus of authority within the religions they came to represent. In a way, it is characteristic of our times that the contest over authority goes all the way down, even within so-called religiously inspired movements. It has been argued, with some plausibility, that Al-Qaeda, far from being a return to religion in any conventional sense, represents the breakdown and a perverse kind of democratization within Islam. For what it has done is called into question the whole idea of authority within Islam. But if there is no locus of authority, how can the boundaries of the “religious” be defined? When George Bush claims that he has some intimations of God’s plan for the world and his own role in those plans, what conception of God’s authority is being invoked? If the political is not a self-validating realm, neither is religion. Perhaps it is not an accident that we are tying ourselves in knots trying to characterize contemporary religious movements. If Al-Qaeda calls into question the

authority of the sovereign state, it equally calls into question any conception of religious authority. Perhaps it is not an accident that we are endlessly searching for what Islam or Hinduism or Christianity's true teaching is, trying valiantly to assure ourselves that Islam or Hinduism does not really teach this or that. This search, as a response to political challenges, is distinctly odd because it is premised upon the hope that there is a necessary truth of a religion, that this truth will be benign, and that this necessary truth once apprehended will move those who claim adherents of that religion. But the fact that we are engaged in this search itself suggests that the question of authority in matters "religious" has been opened up to an unprecedented degree.

The point of the foregoing is found in the following thought: what marks our predicament is not the return of the religious but the fact that neither so-called politics nor so-called religion appears to carry self-validating authority. What we can expect, therefore, is not the conflict between religion and politics but a deep politicization of fundamental questions all the way down; not a contest of authority between "religion" and "politics," as two identifiable realms, but as an unsettling of authority that cuts deep into both politics and religion.

This interpenetration of religion and politics is evident in the rhetoric of Osama Bin Laden himself. As Charles Glass has argued,

His message is plain: leave the Muslim world alone, and it will leave you alone. Kill Muslims, and they will kill you. "America won't be able to leave this ordeal unless it pulls out of the Arabian Peninsula, and it ceases its meddling in Palestine, and throughout the Islamic world," bin Laden told the *al-Jazeera* correspondent Taysir Alluni six weeks after the 11 September attacks. "If we gave this equation to any child in any American school, he would easily solve it within a second." When Bush said in 2004 that his was "a war against people who hate freedom," bin Laden responded: "Perhaps he can tell us why we did not attack Sweden, for example."⁷

Of course Bin Laden is, to put it mildly, being disingenuous, but quite revealing as well. Is this a religious argument or a political one? Or both? What will hang on this classification? The same question can be posed for literally any phenomenon. Is the headscarf affair in France a religious or a political affair? Is Falun Gong a religious or a political movement? When Hindu nationalists mobbed a fifteenth-century mosque, was it a religious frenzy or an articulation of a warped kind of political nationalism? The very fact that in all these instances the line between the political and the religious remains precarious suggests that religion is also an extremely politicized concept: it is not a natural kind.

What Is a Religious Motive?

If the question “What is a religion” is difficult to answer, determining what exactly a “religious motive” is, is even more so. David Hume thought that the peculiarity of religious politics stemmed from just this fact. How can religiosity be embodied in this world? What counts as a display of *religion*? Hume thought that religious believers would be consistently haunted by this anxiety. Most human beings conduct their ethical lives according to a variety of motives drawn from different sources: self-interest, social relationships, and so forth. A truly virtuous man might be drawn to righteousness as a matter of duty. But they might all still worry whether they had acted *religiously*, acted, that is, from a special motive that was an expression of their genuine piety toward God or fidelity toward their faith.

One might be tempted to think that the search for a *religious* motive is akin to what Gilbert Ryle once called a “category mistake.” It is a bit like a man who, having visited all the Oxford colleges, asked where Oxford University was. A religious motive, it might be said, is not a special kind of motive. It is simply a functional ordering of all our normal motives; it does not pick out a special class of actions as much as a form of organizing all our actions. This leaves open the possibility that one could be religious, as it were, without acknowledging oneself to be such. But Hume suggested that this answer would not suffice, at least for those who were superstitious about their religion. Hume wrote:

He considers not that the most genuine method of serving the divinity is by promoting the happiness of creatures. He still looks out for some immediate service for the Supreme Being in order to allay those terrors with which he is haunted. And any practice recommended to him, which either serves no purpose in life, or offers the strongest violence to his natural inclinations; that practice he will most readily embrace, on account of those very circumstances which should make him absolutely reject it. It seems like the more purely religious, because it proceeds from no mixture of any other consideration.

For Hume this quest to prove that one was acting on a purely religious motive, undistorted by any other consideration, led to the most unnatural and self-denying behavior. This is what prompts the religious to extreme austerity and sacrifice, to look for a site where his devotion or piety can be embodied. Ordinary actions and morality are not sufficient because a religious person thinks

he is bound to perform them—as everybody else does—irrespective of God. On the other hand, as Hume put it, “If he fast a day or give himself a sound whipping,” this has, in his opinion, direct reference to the service of God.

For Hume the problem with the quest to embody a religious motive is this: other motives have a clearly specified objective. Someone who wants to make money makes money, even though he can engage in an excess of it. In our motives, the objects that will satiate them are clearly defined. But how exactly would a *religious* motive manifest itself? Hume thought such a motive was a motive necessarily without a specified objective, or at least without an objective that can be clearly specified. Second, this is precisely what makes a religious motive protean: it can express itself in serene self-possession or an anxious drive to mastery; a religion of *momento vivere* or a religion directed toward some future world. Third, this motive was insatiable, in that there were no limits to what would count as fulfilling it. Thus the minute persons become anxious about whether or not they are being *religious*, that anxiety will weigh pitilessly upon those unfortunate enough to be under its grip. It will saturate their lives with great exaction. (Perhaps that is why Nietzsche was to say that the love of one thing is bad—even or especially God.)

This piece of moral psychology is pertinent to understanding what we normally call religious politics. In some ways the anxiety “Am I being religious?” would not occur in quite the same way when the social order or natural world is seen teleologically as embodying God’s purposes. It is possible to imagine social structures where God’s presence is palpable and direct in every aspect of social relations: the quest for a religious life finds social expression in an ongoing way of life. But when social life is not itself structured by religious rhythms and teleologies, when it is difficult to comprehend the world as a single religious totality, the question of where religion is embodied becomes more insistent. This is not to suggest that it is impossible to hold on to the view that the social world is or ought to reflect God’s purposes. But under conditions of modernity, endowing an ongoing way of life with religious significance is an altogether more abstract gesture. As many observers have noted, religious identities are no longer connected to participating in distinct cultural practices. In fact, cultures and nations have, for good or for ill, ceded so much space to the modern economy, the modern state, and often the egalitarian aspirations of modernity that it is more difficult to hold on to a sense of difference that is embodied in a concrete way of life. Or to put it slightly more precisely, much of the realm of public collective action, especially the polity and the economy, is not the site for expressing such differences in ways that become the cornerstone of identities. Rather, the differences are expressed more in private spaces or social spaces.

It is precisely because substantive values and horizons of meaning are shrinking that greater and inordinate weight is placed on markers of difference. As Valentine Daniel put it, “Nationalism is the horripilation of culture in insecurity and fright.” Finally, in the realm of culture, it is often argued that culture is to be valued because it is constitutive of someone’s identity. This alignment of culture with identity can be misleading in a couple of ways. First, the minute we are talking of identity, we are talking of difference rather than diversity. It is possible for individuals or groups who are more like each other in most respects to have a profound sense of having a different identity, a different sense of who they are. Indeed, as many have argued, we see more and more identity conflicts not because of the objective diversity between people but because of their increasing likeness. Stress on difference becomes a way of defining identity in the face of narrowing differences in other spheres of life.

It is a commonplace experience of the modern world that, contrary to what Arjun Appadurai argues, culture, politics, and economy get disembedded from each other. After all, it is not an accident that when defending religious diversity very few are defending the right of a society to be governed by a Hindu view of the division of labor, or for central banks to run on Islamic principles of usury or power to be allocated by Confucian conceptions of elite. While it is true that religion is not simply an add-on to material resources, it is palpably misleading to argue that the culture, economy, and politics cannot to some degree be disembedded from each other. This is a greater functional differentiation that modern societies produce.⁸ In this context, it is quite possible that individuals and groups are sharing more and more; they are embedded in similar matrices of political and economic institutions, yet want to assert their sense of difference. In fact, as Michael Ignatieff has argued, following Freud’s insight that conflicts born of the “narcissism of small differences are most acute,” identity differences do not by themselves signal greater diversity. Rather, invocation of identity may be a sign that diversity is decreasing.

This is an old anxiety about modernity. Bhudev Mukhopadhyaya, the nineteenth-century Bengali poet, enjoined Indians to strenuously hold on to their toilet habits because in the long run this would be the only site at which they could assert a real sense of a different religious identity. This was a bit indelicately put, but not far off the mark. If the economy and politics are governed by their own logic and imperatives, where in concrete ways of acting will a religious life be embodied? This is a pressure that most religiously based conceptions of identity are facing under conditions of globalization and modernity. It is not an accident that almost all religions of the world—Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism—have constructed a narrative for themselves, in which they appear beleaguered, as ways of life get more disembedded from

their dictates. There is an old saying that “we put ourselves under God’s yoke most when we feel his presence least.” And there is something to the thought that effective secularization of society will increase religiously based assertions. In a world where it is no longer clear how one’s convictions can be embodied as a way of life in large spheres of social action, people look toward willful acts of assertion to embody those convictions. This quest can take many forms: it can take the return to a nonpolitical orthodoxy that many religious groups all over the world are experiencing. If our customary social practices differentiate us less, more observances are called for. So the heroism of religion consists in a strict private regimen of observances. Or it can take a more overt political form: an attempt to endow forms of collective existence with religious significance. Arguably, the United States is undergoing such a political phenomenon, even though its full strength is mitigated by the enduring power of American institutions. I mention this only to signal the fact that the politics of religious assertion is likely to remain a feature of organized political life in many countries, and India is no exception. But as religion ceases to be called upon to control directly the natural and social world, as many vital areas of activity lose their religious coloration, Hume’s question becomes more rather than less pressing: Where concretely can a religious motivation be embodied? Is it enough to hold on to it as a matter of private belief or personal sensibility? But if not, where will religion express itself?

Another way in which this struggle for affirming the status of religion is expressed is philosophical. What does it mean to affirm the status of religion under the conditions of pluralism? Ask a value pluralist the question: What makes something valuable? The difficulty in answering this question is not because there is not much to be said on this score. One can give a whole range of answers. A given practice may contribute to human flourishing, or the satisfaction of desire, or it may be intrinsically a good and so on. But none of these considerations are decisively authoritative for any given individual. For any individual can deny that those reasons are authoritative for *him or her*. Ultimately the value of an action or a practice will be due not to its intrinsic properties but to the valuation of the one who puts value upon them.

Thus liberal society is left in the awkward position of saying that the value of religion—or most other things that are valuable—will ultimately depend upon the individual who values it. In short, such valuation will be subjective. The experience of pluralism may lead not just to the realization that one’s conception of the good is simply one good among many; it may threaten the authority of the idea of the “good” itself.

So it would be futile for liberal societies to pretend that they can protect and respect anything other than the rights of individuals, within certain limits,

to value whatever it is that they value. This is why there is something awkward about a public discourse that claims to “respect” religion; one can respect the rights of individuals who made particular choices, but it seems that it will be impossible to affirm some special epistemic status for “religion.”

This point is important because, there has been something of an inflation in the expectations about what liberal societies can do for religion. Obviously, by preventing persecution, they can make room for all kinds of individual practices, beliefs, and faiths. But this is no more than the freedom given to every individual compatible with a similar freedom to all others. But many believers are coming to the view that while a liberal society acknowledges *them* qua individuals, it does not adequately acknowledge the force of their *beliefs*. Take, for instance, the controversies around free expression, when religious sentiments are ostensibly offended. More than an affirmation of rights, the believer looks for respect of his beliefs. But it is not easy to articulate what exactly counts as giving such respect. It has been said, not entirely without justification, that liberal societies take the right to expression seriously, but only by not taking expression itself seriously; similarly, it has to be said that liberal societies can do no more than take the right to religion seriously, but in the end religion will be nothing more than one among many choices its citizens make.

So whatever the doctrinal content of a religion, it will hugely underdetermine its relationship to the world. A religious consciousness often tries to fulfill itself, practically speaking, in visible, historical, and concrete ways and cannot remain purely at the level of intellectual abstraction or personal piety. In a way, the conjunction of religion and political formations should not therefore surprise us. Apart from the fact that often religious identities, in their ethnicized forms, are markers around which there is a legacy of social and historical subordination, a religion that tries to express itself materially will relate to the institutional formations of its time. Christian fundamentalism in the United States latches on to the mythology of America as the chosen nation, just as Hindu nationalism can harp on the theme of an Indian exceptionalism. The question of the relationship between religion and the world will likely be negotiated through a complicated set of lived experiences, not argumentative refinement.

Religion, Pluralism, and Globalization in India

India is, at first glance, a wonderful illustration of the ways in which these larger trends in the global politics of religion are playing out. India has always been at the forefront of the conjuncture between religious pluralism and globalization. Although more than 80 percent of its citizens are legally classified as Hindu,

India is also the second-largest Muslim country in the world, with a sizable number of Christians and members of other communities. Indeed, it could be argued that its identity has been profoundly shaped by the conjuncture of globalization and religion in its successive formations. It was one of the earliest countries to receive Christian missionaries, and the expansion of Islam and the formation of successive Muslim empires have left a deep imprint on Indian culture. The onset of modern colonialism brought a heady mix of Evangelical Christianity, Enlightenment values, and a modern state. And alongside all this, there remains the continued vitality, inventiveness, and adaptability of Indic religions. It is a hugely successful liberal democracy, but also one that has experienced intense religious violence. How is this complicated landscape being shaped by contemporary globalization? What are some of the emerging fault lines?

Most scholars would agree that in India religious conflict has arisen not from disputes over permissible grounds of belief in the public sphere, or even because of deep conflicts over ways of life. In Indian history, there is a striking absence of any articulated discourse of *intolerance*, the idea that the state can legitimately persecute someone for his beliefs. The reasons for this are complex. In part they turn on the character of Hinduism as a religion, which has never had a single locus of authority or ideas about the relationship between belief and salvation that would give succor to persecutory ideologies. Islam in the Indian subcontinent has had a varied history, but it too has experienced the imprint of India's religious pluralism, accommodating itself to the imperatives of a plural society. This mode of religious accommodation was not liberal in the sense of acknowledging the worth of individuals as free and equal citizens; yet it allowed groups not only to pursue their ways of life (with all their internal contradictions) but also to generate creative new synthesis as well. *Therefore, the challenge to religious pluralism has seldom come from persecutory religious ideologies.*

Despite this propitious cultural ground for accommodating religious pluralism, India has experienced serious conflict among religious groups. What is the source of this conflict? How has globalization exacerbated it? To answer these questions we need to reexamine the way in which modernity itself has shaped the character of religious conflict. The discussion focuses first on structural dilemmas that the modern conception of citizenship brings forth for religious pluralism and then on ways in which globalization is mutating religious identities.

Religious Conflict and Citizenship

The first and perhaps most paradoxical fact we have to acknowledge is that challenges of religious pluralism in India are shaped profoundly by modern

conceptions of citizenship in at least two different ways. The modern conception of citizenship shapes religious conflict by posing two pointed questions. First, what should be the *scope* of religious belief or ways of life? Second, How can religious differences be made compatible with modern ideas of representation?

Modern conceptions of citizenship raise the question of the scope of belief in the following way. Much of the legitimacy of the modern state is founded on the fact that it liberates individuals from oppressive intermediate communities. But in order to do so, it has to take more and more domains of social life under its sovereignty. The most common example of the state expanding its sovereign domain over social life is its attempt to delegitimize a whole series of personal laws that, say, govern marriage and inheritance. Modern states argue that laws that violate gender equality, for instance, or institutionalize practices that do not acknowledge that all citizens are free and equal, should be proscribed. Like many liberal constitutions, the Indian constitution was premised upon progressively moving toward a condition where the more morally egregious aspects of social life (caste, or gender inequality) would no longer get legal recognition. The process by which this social reform was carried out, first under the aegis of the colonial state, and then under a liberal constitution, is a complicated story. But the central point was that the state had to assert authority over areas of social life that traditional religious practices had claimed as their own. So the state could intervene and abolish the practice of disallowing untouchables from entering temples, or reform personal laws to bring them more in line with a liberal egalitarianism. The immediate question that this program of social reform raised was *how* should the state claim authority over these domains of social life? Legislatures and courts, dominated by Hindus, could at least claim a modicum of authority in relation to Hindu practices. They could argue that the legislature was the institution through which Hindus were collectively and democratically reforming their traditional practices. In the absence of any authoritative source to settle questions of reform, Hindus had opted to democratically reform their institutions.

But it was difficult to apply the same logic to reform of Muslim personal laws. Would a legislature dominated by Hindus have the same authority in relation to Muslim laws as it did in relation to Hindu laws? It was partly in recognition of this conundrum, and also because of the imperative of reassuring Muslims about their place in independent India, that the state came up with a *modus vivendi*. It deferred the question of the reform of Muslim Personal Law. The courts incrementally tried to reform these laws, and there have been important attempts by the Muslim Personal Law Board to reform laws relating to marriage, divorce, and property. But state authority over Muslim personal law remains largely undefined. This issue remains very much alive in Indian

politics. Right-wing Hindu groups charge the state with double standards: too ready to intervene in Hindu laws, but reluctant to assert authority over Muslim law. On the other hand, from the point of view of Muslim identity there is the reverse dilemma. If the state exercises sovereignty over a domain that was left for Sharia, where would Muslim identity be embodied? The issue is not so much what the content of Sharia should be. The issue is, rather, should the scope of state sovereignty be extended over a domain traditionally reserved for Sharia? This conundrum has not been formally resolved.

But this brief illustration is instructive for the relationship between religious pluralism and globalization in the following way. On the one hand, it highlights the way in which the modern discourse of equal citizenship requires the state to enlarge the scope of its authority to all domains of social life. This has the potential for creating new forms of social conflict. On the other hand, the dilemma for religious groups is this. If they cede even these remaining areas governed by traditional laws to the state, where will vestments of their identity be embodied? This is the process of disembedding religion from thick ways of life addressed earlier. What would the authority of Sharia mean? And what would remain of Muslim identity without the Sharia? It is perhaps not an accident that many states, from Europe to India, are experiencing a version of this dilemma.

The second and related way in which modern conceptions of citizenship can produce a crisis of citizenship is around the issue of representation. The introduction of representative government introduces a large question. How is this representation going to be organized? This question becomes more rather than less acute under conditions of universal suffrage. If there is a significant minority, with some legitimate vestment in its identity, it fears being swamped by simple numerical majority rule. It therefore seeks forms of representation that can protect its interests, or give expression to its identity. But here arises a dilemma. If minorities are given representation in excess of their numbers or some special protections, there is the danger of a majority backlash. The majority fears the entrenchment and institutionalization of what it thinks are unfair concessions to the minority. Minority representation turns out to be in tension with the majority's vestments that the state be its own. Take, for instance, the case of prepartition India.

What we think of as Hindu-Muslim politics in India was born squarely in the crucible of representative politics—an underappreciated fact. To simplify a complicated story for the purposes of illustration, Syed Ahmed Khan had early on sensed that the gradual introduction of representative government might prove to be a threat to Muslims, because it would naturally advantage Hindus numerically. Thus began a complex debate over Muslim representation that was never quite resolved. Various proposals were floated: separate electorates, the

grouping of Muslim-majority provinces, and so forth. But in retrospect it is clear that no stable solution to this conundrum was forthcoming. Any “extra” concessions to safeguard minority interests would provoke a backlash from some section of the Hindus. Why give Muslims representation in excess of their numbers? This was the crux of the Hindu Mahasabha’s and the Congress Party’s own right-wing critiques of various representative schemes. A different, more regionally oriented solution was also proposed. This was premised on something like a mutual hostage theory. The interests of Muslims in Hindu-majority provinces would be safeguarded by the fact that there would be a Hindu minority in Muslim-majority provinces. But the question then arose: What about the center? If Muslims did not have something close to parity or some veto power at the center, would not the center be partial to Hindus? But if some such provisions were made for Muslims, some cried back, would not that violate some principle of equality, giving Muslims special status in excess of numbers? Why should they get parity at the center?

And so the argument went back and forth. Whatever one may think of the history of Hindu-Muslim relations, the almost sixty years of negotiations did not produce a single representative scheme that was internally stable and fair, that did not run the risk of leaning in one direction or the other. Meanwhile, the aspiration had been unleashed that the state that succeeds empire be representative. But who shall it represent? “All Indians” would be an obvious answer. But that answer would not solve the problem: How would the identities that differentiate Indians be represented, at least along this axis? Partition was a nonsolution, but a nonsolution to a problem that had proved insoluble. That it resulted in the context of an empire of long duration, and on the backs of a nationalist movement as liberal and progressive as they come, does not augur well for similar problems elsewhere. Alfred Cobban’s pithy formulation—India could be neither united nor divided—remains an unassailable account of the postcolonial condition, from Cyprus to India, from Iraq to Sri Lanka.

Contemporary Iraq is an uncanny rerun of an analogous dilemma. One can take chapter and verse from royal commissions from the 1920s—the Donoughmore Commission for Sri Lanka, for example—and find the same issues at play, in more or less the same terms. To simplify a bit, the dilemma is structurally the same. The Shia majority want numerical democracy because it favors them; too many veto powers to the Sunnis (and Kurds), and the Shias cry discrimination. Too little veto power to the Sunnis, and their interests in a numerical arithmetic are not protected. This arithmetic may be made all the more precarious by the fact that Sunnis might be targets of resentment. It is true that the added fear is that Shias want a more orthodox regime, but even if that were not the case, the dilemma of minority representation would remain. In short, the

dilemma is the same: If special provisions are granted to protect minorities, the majority uses a simple notion of one person one vote to cry discrimination.; if, however, we go for a simple rule such as one person, one vote, the minority remains unprotected.

There is a cautionary tale in all this. It has proved to be almost impossible to find a solution to the conundrum of representation in societies where groups think of themselves as permanent majorities or permanent minorities and demand that representation protect the vestments of these identities. Can there be representative arrangements that allow all parties concerned to feel that those arrangements are, in some senses, their own, and protect the vestments they have in their identities? Unfortunately, the only stable answer to this question turns out to be paradoxical. Representative institutions function best when there are no permanent identities to be protected, when the question of identity becomes detached from the question of citizenship. Structures of representation can be most trusted when they are least tested by the burden of identities. From India to Iraq, from Fiji to Sri Lanka, the structure of the dilemma is uncannily the same. There are many paths to the detachment of identity from citizenship: sheer coercion, gradual evolution, or forced territorial consolidation that makes the question of representation irrelevant by completely fusing identity and citizenship. But none of them has ever been brought about by a straightforward democratic solution.

The lesson for religious pluralism is this. A political order can give space for religious freedom of individuals, but if the political order is required to be representative of religious communities, then there is no solution to the problem of representation. In short, conditions of modernity entail that religious groups give up the aspiration that a political order will represent *them*, qua religious groups in some respect.

Independent India is, in some senses, struggling between two competing questions. On the one hand, there is the modern aspiration that what rights people have should be independent of any religious identity they may have; on the other hand, identities should be given political recognition. What India has produced in the process is a messy but workable *modus vivendi* that sometimes breaks down (as it did horrifically in the Gujarat riots of 2002). But the crucial point is that Hindu-Muslim conflict emerged out of the crucible of modern politics itself in a contest over the scope of the authority of the state, and in a contest over the terms of fair representation. Both Hindu nationalism and Muslim nationalism in India were offshoots of this conflict. Interreligious tension has less to do with disputes over beliefs. It has something to do with the conflicts over where the boundaries of the state should be, that is, over the scope of religious authority. But it has more to do with the fact that some groups want

to make religion the basis of national identity. These sorts of disputes have more to do with particular histories of nationalism than religious arguments as such.

Religion and Political Identity in an Era of Globalization

Globalization has exacerbated the structural dilemma inherent in modern conceptions of citizenship in at least three ways that are profoundly impacting politics. The impact of globalization on religious pluralism is most evident in that the quest for religious recognition and competition among religious groups has become truly global.

Transnational linkages of religious groups add to local competition and put a strain on local patterns of accommodation. All three of India's largest religious groups are experiencing versions of this phenomenon. Hindu nationalism, for instance, draws support and sustenance from the Hindu diaspora; Christian groups are often very much allied to funding sources from abroad; and various pan-Islamic groups have been growing in strength. It would be a bit of an exaggeration to say that this competition would not exist without these transnational linkages. But these linkages help in two crucial respects. They provide a broader context for the mobilization of resources, and they set parameters for new forms of ideological conflict.

Two examples from the Indian context illustrate this dynamic. The Indian state has always been wary of proselytizing. This wariness is rooted in a number of causes, including a sense of vulnerability among some Hindus that lower castes would be an easy target for conversion and a historical association of missionary activity with forms of imperialism. Formally, the Indian Constitution guarantees freedom to propagate religion. But the Indian Supreme Court has held valid laws that aim at regulating propagation that is undertaken with the intent of conversion. The philosophical basis of this position is deeply problematic, but what is of interest is that a number of states, ruled by both the Congress Party and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, have passed legislation with the intent of regulating conversion. The ostensible rationale given is heightened evangelical activity that traces its roots to Southern Baptists in the United States. Certainly Christian groups in India receive a large proportion of the funding that comes through official channels under the Indian Foreign Contribution Regulation Act. Whether such regulation can be normatively justified is a matter for another occasion, but there is an invocation of transnational linkages of these groups as a ground for anxiety.⁹

The transnational linkages of Islam in India present an even more complex picture. Indian Islamic groups have had all kinds of transnational links,

and there is a sense in which Islamic identity still has recourse to a community and political imagination that transcends the boundaries of the nation-state. India has been one state that has been the *object* of terrorism, with foreign militant groups targeting it. But until recently, there was a sense that a lot of militancy directed against India was rooted squarely in the geopolitical imperatives of the region, including the movement in Kashmir and strategic objectives of Pakistan. Indeed, India prided itself on the fact that despite such a thicket of transnational linkages, it was one of the few places where Al-Qaeda found no recruits whatsoever.

But there is a sense that this is changing for two reasons. First, the riots in Gujarat, in which Muslims were the principle targets, may have radicalized a section of the Muslim middle class. But second, the U.S. invasion of Iraq has once again brought international issues to the forefront of Muslim consciousness in India. After independence, for a variety of reasons, pan-Islamism had very little foothold in India. But there is growing evidence that pan-Islamic issues and identities are once again beginning to cast a shadow on Indian politics.

The growth of pan-Islamism in India is interesting for two reasons. First, it is a reminder that globalization is perceived by many to be not a seamless and open interchange but something driven by the strategic imperatives of the United States. In short, the renewed allegiance being given to transnational forms of Muslim identity draws aid and succor from the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. In other words, the way in which globalization shapes religious identities and conflict will very much depend upon the fate of U.S. foreign policy. There will be a political imperative to how identities are formed. Second, managing the growth of radical Islam, which challenges the nation-state form as the most important locus of political allegiance, will pose new challenges for religious pluralism.

Globalization has managed to produce an uncanny crisis of religious identity in India. This might seem a strong claim in face of the fact that religious identities seem resurgent. But across the world, adherents of many faiths have now internalized a narrative of victimhood. On this narrative, Hindus have been for centuries at the receiving end of onslaughts from others, the Christians and Muslims. Hindutva, for many who have internalized this narrative, represents a coming to grips with history, an assertion of the will that will finally put Hindus in charge of their own destiny, invulnerable to takeover or corrosion by outside forces. To be fair, this is a narrative to which there are analogues in most religions, insofar as they have political leanings. Versions of Islam tout the same sentiments vis-à-vis the West. There is a real sense that pan-Islamism has been nurtured on the idea of a Muslim community that has been at the receiving end of the grand geopolitical designs of the last century. Even the

Christian Right in the United States draws some of its support from presenting Christianity as beleaguered, though mostly at the hands of liberals! These narratives represent a wider failure of these religions to give a meaning or teleology to everyday life under the complex conditions of modernity, and to their inability to accept the facts of difference.

In the Indian context, this narrative not only sustains groups like the Hindu nationalist Vishva Hindu Parishad and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. It also makes even those otherwise ambivalent about those groups hesitant in their denunciations. In fact, the crisis of Hinduism is signified by the fact that so much of contemporary Hindu identity is vested in this narrative. This is not to deny that we often witness genuine acts of faith, or a religiosity that runs deep, or even that Hinduism provides an astonishing grammar with which to comprehend life and creation. But, increasingly, being a Hindu is coming to be identified with participation in the creation of a communal identity that can now fully, and often furiously, discharge its role in history. It is an identity constituted by a sense of injury, a sense of always having been on the losing side, a sense of innocent victimhood. This narrative strings together Islamic Mughal rule in the early modern period with the loss of territorial integrity during post-World War II partition. It draws sustenance from the threat of international militant jihadi Islam and plays upon the sentiment that modern secularism itself is a contrivance to favor minorities. Much of the understanding of history that sustains this sense of injury is simplistic if not often false. Of greater import is the fact that Hindu identity, in so many ways, is coming to rest upon a sense of resentment. All religions may be undergoing a version of this crisis. But a religion that requires the ghosts of imagined injuries to sustain itself is conspiring to create darkness where we will not be able to recognize each other as citizens, as human beings. Instead, we will be defined by our resentments rather than achievements, by our willfulness rather than the moral quality of the objectives to which our will is directed.

An identity constituted by a sense of injury will inherently be a fragile one, constantly looking to secure itself through clear benchmarks of what makes that identity what it is. Under such conditions it will draw the boundaries between insiders and outsiders more sharply and will render invisible the claims of all those who might appear different. There is a sense in which underlying the resurgence of religious nationalism is a crisis of genuine religious faith. How will, how *can* religiosity express itself, when it has ceded control of so many domains of collective life. All that remains are totems of identity, hankering for a political project to get attached to. For some, like Hindu nationalists, giving the nation-state in India a Hindu hue is the project; for others like the Christian Right, there is also the quest for some acknowledgment of its

primacy within the American context. For others still, like Islam, that political project may be fighting what it thinks of as imperialism.

Conclusion

There are four general lessons I want to highlight from the overall discussion and the Indian example. First, the distinction between what is religious and what is not is regulated by state power; it is not a self-evident distinction. Second, much of the investment of modern states in the religious-secular dichotomy—increasingly cast as a way of managing cultural and religious diversity—may exist because a focus on religion exempts secular movements like nationalism from political scrutiny. Indeed, the threats posed to a civil liberal order in India and elsewhere are less from disputes over religious beliefs and more from the conjunction of nationalism and religion. This makes religion a site of destructive passion. Third, in the contemporary era of globalization, marked by greater religious pluralism, all states have to operate with a regulative idea of religion; the boundaries within which it can operate are the function of state power.

This inevitable politicization of religion—of where it begins and ends and how it relates to state authority—suggests a way forward for the study of religion, globalization, and world politics. Rather than worrying about defining religion and politics as independent realms of activity, it might be better to focus on their effects. What are the circumstances in which they are invoked? Who invokes them, and for what purposes? For in the final analysis our concern over religion and politics cannot but reflect the profound dualism of modernity: we think religion is important enough that it should be given space, but at the same time it is a threat that needs to be contained. As an alternative to religion, we laid faith in a self-validating sphere of the political. But while the return of religion signifies the waning of the political, religion needs politics to shore up its authority as well. The return of religion to politics is at the same time an affirmation of the politicization of religion. Perhaps religion and politics are leaning on each other because it is the twilight of both. Will there be a new dawn?¹⁰

NOTES

1. Charles Taylor, "Foreword" to Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), xv.
2. Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* (On the nature of the gods), trans. Francis Brooks (London: Methuen, 1896), 2: 272.
3. Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*, trans. Sister Frances Mary McDonald (Washington, DC: The Catholic Press of America, 1964), 318–320.

4. After writing about the dispute between Cicero and Lactantius, I discovered a remarkable book: S. N. Balagangadhara, *"The Heathen in His Blindness . . .": Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1994). The following two paragraphs are deeply indebted to his work.

5. After all, as Eliot once said, someone can be religious because of the quality of his doubt; while conversely, as Wittgenstein suggested, someone can be irreligious because of the profession of his faith.

6. Amy Gutmann, "Religion and the State in the United States: A Defense of Two-Way Protection," in *Obligations of Citizenship and Demands of Faith: Religious Accommodation in Pluralist Societies*, ed. Nancy Rosenblum (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 127–164.

7. Charles Glass, "Cyber Jihad," *London Review of Books* 28, no. 5 (March 9, 2006), 12–16.

8. Niklas Luhmann, *Observations on Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); Pratap Mehta, "Cosmopolitanism and the Circle of Reason," *Political Theory* 28, no. 5 (October 2000): 619–639.

9. For my critique, see "Passion and Constraint," *Seminar* 521 (January 2003): 22–28.

10. I would like to acknowledge my deep debt to Tom Banchoff, not just for inviting me to write this paper, but for substantive editorial and intellectual suggestions that went way beyond his call of duty.

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- . "Passion and Constraint." *Seminar* 521 (January 2003), 22–28.