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Speaking of Religion *

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The desire, or perhaps the necessity, to speak about religion today is understandably hard to resist. We live in a world in which the story that had dominated global awareness for decades—the Cold War, which is to say the worldwide struggle between capitalism and communism—has been all but replaced in the last ten years by a far more complicated story about sectarian religious strife. This is not to say that grand religious conflicts were not just as important in earlier ages. Few would dispute that in the period before the rise of the nation-state, in an age of Crusades and Wars of Religion, and to a lesser extent throughout the history of nationalist struggle as well, religion played a powerful role in determining social and political reality. We need look no farther than the recurring phenomenon of anti-Semitism in the Christian West for an example of the articulation of political and religious reality that persisted into the 20th century. Beyond this, it is hard to ignore the role of religion in the last century's great anti-colonial struggles. Ireland, the Balkans, Turkey,

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India, Indonesia, Algeria, Poland, Afghanistan, all reveal the centrality of religious solidarity in opposition to imperial rule. But they also exemplify the horrific brutality of sectarian and communal religious violence in empire's wake.

The salient role of religion at the end of the Cold War and at the beginning of a new era of globalization should then perhaps be understood less as a sharp break with a putatively more secular past than as one more phase in a continuous historical narrative that shows no sign of winding down in the near future. The worsening Arab-Israeli conflict, the growing influence of Islamic fundamentalism around the world, and the potentially nuclear dispute between Hindus and Muslims over Kashmir and Jammu force us to examine once again the Enlightenment's confidence in a more or less universal evolution toward a secular public sphere. Not that such an evolution was ever without stunning counter-examples. The United States of America, widely seen as the prime example of rationalized capitalism, and now the dominant player in a global economy, is also the most religious Western nation by far. With approximately two thirds of the nation claiming some sort of church affiliation versus only about one fifth of its nearest Western competitor (the UK), the United States demonstrated between the mid-19th century and the mid-20th that the growth of participation in organized religion, the development of a rationalized economy, and the expansion of a secular state could occur simultaneously without serious contradiction (Kosmin and Lachman, 9). But sociologists of religion generally recognize the US as an interesting anomaly in an otherwise coherent evolution from the sacred to the profane in the industrializing world, where religious affiliation in Western Europe may be at all-time lows. By contrast, the resurgence

of global religious tensions in the last decades of the 20th century suggests that the anomaly could prove to be more like the rule in the 21st.

To see quickly how much things have changed in the West, we can compare the discussion of religion 40 years ago with what is immediately apparent to any browser in a bookstore after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Then, the fields of inquiry in which one encountered religion were on the whole neatly distinguished from one another. Sociology of religion focused almost exclusively on the Christian world, primarily on Western Europe and America. Anthropology, which arguably consolidated itself in the 19th century around the study of primitive religion, had branched out into the study of religion in the "third world," but generally as a way of highlighting the greater importance of tradition and ethnicity in those societies by comparison to an increasingly secular industrial world. Theology itself had assumed a rather abstract, often existential or "negative" approach to belief, and overtly religious issues were usually avoided altogether by the dominant strains of empirical psychology and analytical philosophy. Islam was a topic covered in religious studies and "area studies" programs, but had almost no visibility in the public sphere, and little shelf space in the bookstores. From the 1960s on, the humanities in general at the university level would become ever more focused on language, materialist accounts of culture, and psychoanalytic or cognitive accounts of mind. Beyond highly specialized coteries within semiotics or phenomenology, the study of religion seems to have had little overt role in the great transformations of Western humanities in the last generation.

Today, the shelves of mass-market bookstores devoted to religious

topics are expanding, and new primers in the ways of Islam are published almost weekly, most of them aimed at explaining fundamentalism, terrorism, and a somewhat less definable "hatred of the West" to a non-comprehending citizenry. But this is in fact only the most visible, populist and anxiety-driven tip of a much more substantial iceberg of discussion that has turned, on university campuses, in public policy, and throughout the global media, to matters of religion with an intensity not seen for several generations. A recent issue of *Time* magazine bears a 17th-century image of Abraham on the cover, and addresses both the "dueling Abrahamisms" of Judaism, Christianity and Islam as well as the embattled hope among interfaith groups for a reconciliation of the three religions on the grounds of a common paternity. Leaning heavily on a recent mass-market book by Bruce Feiler, *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*, the magazine piece by David van Biema opens with an account of his taxicab ride in New York to arrange the Jewish circumcision of his son (the corporeal sign of Abraham's Covenant with God both in the Torah and among Muslims). An Arabic song called "Ismail and Isaac" on the cab's radio includes a chorus that (in the driver's translation) pleads with the Israelis, "We have the same father. Why do you treat us this way?" (Biema, 66). Perhaps not by accident, the celebrated high priest of literary theory and continental philosophy, Jacques Derrida, explored much the same Abrahamic territory with a far more impenetrable prose in *Acts of Religion*, a collection of essays (some new and some old) published only last year.

In 1992, I considered a resurgence of scholarly interest in religion then evident in St. Petersburg, Russia, as no more than a local event prompted by the dissipation of 70 years of communist animus toward

religion. But it was clear within a few years that what was happening in the new Russia was a different manifestation of a renaissance in religious discourse that had occurred earlier in Poland in the 1980s in reaction to Soviet domination, and that this renaissance would not be confined to the Eastern Bloc. In America, new and robust forms of Christian fundamentalism had been steadily growing in reaction to the perceived godlessness (or at least, unorthodoxy) of the counter-culture of the Vietnam era, just as various modes of spiritual identity, many of them colored by (if not overtly identified with) organized religion, were taking root in a self-styled "multi-cultural" and "new age" nation. The revivification of religious speech in the US could thus hardly be a surprise. But it is fair to say that even in the US, the 1990s signaled a new level of interest among believers and non-believers alike in the question of religion, in its ability to shape civilization and its discontents, even if overt religious affiliation had ceased to expand. It was an interest made all the more salient by the potential for a millennial renewal of relatively dormant religious animosities in the wake of September 11.

It would also be fair to say that cultural criticism coming from the conservative pole of the political spectrum has found itself most at home in this situation. Francis Fukuyama's much-debated essay "The End of History?" began a discussion among conservatives about the role of non-economic social and cultural institutions once the economic primacy of capitalism had been assured (see Fukuyama). When Samuel P. Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* appeared, the deep rift over the question of religion that had always existed between left-wing and right-wing thinkers asserted itself once more in a grand overview of the struggle between Judeo-Christian and Islamic culture, updated to fit

the post-Cold-War period (see Huntington). In effect, the terms under which the Cold War ended, with the implosion of the Soviet Union, the sudden disappearance of communist hegemony, the religious aftermath of various proxy wars between Western and Eastern Blocs around the globe (in Afghanistan, between Iraq and Iran, between Pakistan and India, throughout Latin America and Africa, and most of all in the continuing Israeli-Palestinian conflict) meant that conservative cultural criticism would find itself very much in command of the heights, religiously speaking. Historical materialism had failed, religious "ideology" had survived all efforts to stamp it out, and Hegel's vision of history was once again credible, though with a muscularly Christian America rather than Prussia as its terminus.

What happened to left-wing cultural criticism in the same period, at least where religion is concerned, is a bit more ambiguous. But it reveals, I think, a certain difficulty in accounting for the force and significance of religion, one that is predicated on the idea that religious thinking must itself remain dependent for its force on the underlying, or more basic, conditions of material and economic life. From such a perspective, any reference to religion as a primary motivation for social action runs the risk of mistaking ideology for reality, and thus masking the true sources of human interest to be found in relations of wealth, class, and worldly power.

The problem for the left is that acknowledging religion as a primary human and social interest threatens more than the shibboleths of progressive, materialist thought. For many, it also threatens a deeper commitment to the Enlightenment ideal of historical progress toward universal solidarity—that is, a belief in the efficacy of "reason" and "science" to provide a universally acceptable account of human action,

desire, and need. Admitting that religious belief can be as strong as any response to material conditions need not void reason per se, but it clearly challenges an important Enlightenment corollary: that one version of reason can be made to prevail everywhere. In the oft-cited words of Matthew Arnold, culture is not simply the "endeavor to see things as they are, to draw towards a knowledge of the universal order," but also to make this endeavor "*prevail*" (5: 93; Arnold's italics), hence, "to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere" (5: 113). No better statement can be found in English of the Enlightenment's central project, with its grand campaign for a liberation of the mind from cant and superstition. But Arnold's language also harbors the kernel of a Napoleonic will to liberate even those who choose not to be liberated—or who at least demand to be allowed a self-determined Enlightenment suited to their own time and place. It is precisely the Enlightenment's expectation that it will "prevail" everywhere that has caused so many "postcolonial" students of Western imperialism to question its motives.

It has traditionally been much easier for the right to ignore this Enlightenment dream of universal progress than for the left to do so. Ever since radical Catholic Joseph de Maistre rejected the vision of secular social progress elaborated by Rousseau, Voltaire, and Condorcet, modern conservatives have questioned both the efficacy of reason and the natural goodness of humankind, and insisted upon the need for powerful voices of authority to maintain social order. But this is also why the right has more readily treated religion as a fundamental, determining, and quite variable component of social life than has the left. The great scholar of Islam Bernard Lewis, for example, has argued that the separation of church and state, of private

belief and public duty, so central to pluralist modern democracies in the West, is indeed unique to Christianity—"Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's" are the words of Christ he cites from Matthew 22:21—while such separation has been largely unknown in the Muslim world (Lewis, 96-97). Beyond the important, but separate, question of Lewis's cultural chauvinism, such a view is much more acceptable when one has no special commitment to the grander progressive dream of secular Enlightenment, which is predicated on more or less universal forces of material and political development. Assuming fundamental and not easily altered differences between contrasting "civilizations"—a perspective, one should remember, shared not only by Westerners like Lewis and Huntington, but by the great anti-colonial Indian leader Mohandas K. Gandhi as well—makes much more sense when one is not ideologically dedicated to the axioms of progressive, secular Enlightenment. By contrast, for those who are so dedicated, even those who would not locate themselves very far to the left, the Lewis-Huntington approach becomes almost unthinkable.

The increasing visibility of religious conflict in the last decade, especially between the dominant (and once happily imperial) Judeo-Christian Western powers and militant varieties of Islam, has put a new kind of pressure on those who would maintain a commitment to a progressive, secular, and universal Enlightenment built on the eventual disappearance of religious belief. Tariq Ali's recent book, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms*, displays this commitment in no uncertain terms. For Ali, the real global struggle that has emerged since September 11, 2001, has nothing to do with religious versus secular forms of "civilization." The "clash" is occurring between two

competing fundamentalisms: the Islamist and the Christian, the latter embodied in the figure of George W. Bush, for whom a newly militant Christianity has embarked once again on a religious crusade against evil. Ali thus rejects the West's claim to have achieved a level of Enlightenment rationality that has so far been unavailable to the Islamic world.

But unlike Gandhi, Ali is not at all interested in rejecting Enlightenment reason and the increasing control over the natural environment that have been the essential features of a secular Western view of historical progress. In fact, as a good Marxist, Ali embraces the Enlightenment along with its commitment to secularism and material development — the lack of which throughout much of the Islamic world, enforced by centuries of Western imperialism, he blames for the religious terrorism we see today. That there are good reasons to think that Marx's own utopian version of enlightened, secular, material progress — whatever one now thinks of it — would not have been possible without the Judeo-Christian religious tradition behind it is never discussed in the book. (Some would go so far as to claim that Marxian history is an inherently religious salvation narrative in its own right.) The problem is not that Ali's commitment to secular and socialist Enlightenment is untenable. The problem is that his version of this commitment is insufficiently willing to confront its own intellectual and religious roots. Worse, it is incapable, more or less by definition, of treating the problems of religious belief and religious violence on their own terms: religion becomes simply an ideological effect of either poverty and oppression (for Muslims) or the thirst for oil (for Americans). And yet, if religion is nothing more than the shadow thrown by more basic human interests, it is hard to understand

why someone like Ali believes it to be so entrenched and long lasting an error, and so demanding of our attention at this late date.

A more subtle approach to the problem of analyzing religious fervor and conflict from a secular Enlightenment position can be found in Talal Asad's *Genealogies of Religion*. An anthropologist by training, Asad knows that he must find ways of treating religious forms of thought and behavior on their own terms: religion cannot simply be treated as ideological error that will be swept away with clearer and less economically constrained reasoning. And yet, he too inevitably has difficulty confronting the incommensurability between the nominal object of his attention—the different constructions of "religion" in Christianity and in Islam—and his own dedication to a secular, Enlightenment perspective on culture and history. For while it is clear that one salient issue for Asad is the continuing worldly power of religious interests, it is also clear that he is primarily interested in the way that worldly power has shaped religious interests, East and West.

Thus, while he ends his book by reminding us of the Enlightenment's "ambiguous legacy" (Asad, 306), or what I have called the Napoleonic will to enlighten, even if by domination, in Matthew Arnold's prose, Asad nevertheless is himself deeply committed to what may be the Enlightenment's most basic principle where religion is concerned. When he addresses the widely acknowledged decrease in church attendance in industrialized Western Europe over the past 150 years, he also takes the opportunity to assert that "socioeconomic conditions in general will appear to be the independent variable and formal worship the dependent" (Asad, 33 n11). But putting the matter this reductively means that, in the final analysis, Asad will retreat to the position of secular, Enlightenment

(and Marxist) materialism in trying to understand both the nature and the appeal of religion, whether in Islam or in Christianity. Asad persuasively demonstrates how religion is imagined differently in different places, but only insofar as religion everywhere remains little more than an ideological effect of socioeconomic power. Asad knows that the Western Enlightenment has had ambiguous effects, especially regarding Islam, and perhaps Judaism as well, but his own deeper understanding of religion is itself very much a product of that same secular and materialist Enlightenment.

My point here is not to criticize Asad or Ali for contradictions, but to examine the nature of contradictions that may after all be inescapable. The very turn toward empirical forms of evidence and scientific modes of analysis that we commonly associate with the secular Enlightenment and with social progress is deeply entrenched in contemporary scholarly research. When the study of religion is pursued today by a scholar with a strong commitment to one particular religious perspective, that scholar's work will attain credibility to the extent that he or she does not claim access to a real world that is blatantly at odds with contemporary science. Ongoing debates about Darwin's account of evolution are a good example. Even fundamentalists who flatly deny Darwinian tenets now go to great lengths to display gaps or inconsistencies in the recorded data: they use science, however well or badly, against itself, but they cannot afford to ignore it. To speak, as so much of the liberal-left has, about religion from an Arnoldian perspective in which one version of reason can "prevail" on a universal scale—and along with it, one version of progress, justice, solidarity and (hence) peace—may determine our judgment about religion from the start if we assume that "reason" here

cannot properly be separated from secular Enlightenment notions of materialism and science. But to abandon the perspective of universal Enlightenment progress would potentially mean that whole civilizations, whole *Weltanschauungen*, really can "clash" in some grand historical *agon*, and can do so whether we view the situation in a relativistic, value-neutral sense (which is ultimately impossible) or from the point of view of chauvinistic moral and cultural superiority that is often found on the right.

Universal solidarity—if not perpetual progress—can certainly be pursued in another way: through the spread and eventual dominance of one particular religious confession. Despite the Reformation's break-up of Roman Catholic, and Papal, dominance in Europe, many still envisioned the possibility of a Christian world. Even the more thorough going challenge to religious unity posed by the Enlightenment left open certain paths. In his essay "Christendom or Europe," Novalis lamented the deleterious effects of the Reformation on a unified Christianity, but he also imagined the possibility of a more rationalized religious renaissance (see Novalis). Moreover, the grand imperial aspirations of the European powers in the 19th century were generally predicated on the idea that Empire spread both Enlightenment—that is, primarily science and material progress—as well as Christianity. The flame of empire that Joseph Conrad both celebrated and mocked was fed by Western science and religion in almost equal parts—a balance also struck by Matthew Arnold—no matter how much religious observance (at least in Western Europe, if not in America) was already beginning to wane by 1900.

But the 19th-century idea of a world unified by Christian imperialism was fatally compromised in the aftermath of World War I,

and has had little credibility outside missionary societies in the post-1945 age of global decolonization. The contemporary vision of a world unified by Islam that inspires some religious radicals may seem more irrational or violent to many in the West than did the old dream of Christian Empire, but it too is more than likely doomed to fail. However we imagine it, the great progressive ideal of global harmony now appears to have less chance of being achieved on any religious grounds than it did in the time of the Hapsburgs and Ottomans, and it is perhaps for that reason alone that progressive politics and secular thought seem so inseparable in the modern age. Religion, much Enlightenment-inspired thought still holds, is destined by its nature to breed conflict. Only a perspective that rises above religious commitment can rise above conflict as well.

At the extremes, contemporary debate pits an enlightened, secular left, which is nevertheless committed to the potentially religious ideal of universal solidarity as a world-historical goal, against a more chauvinistic (and at times religious) right, which has long dismissed the dream of universal progress and accommodated itself to the intractability of cultural difference, even the inescapability of cultural relativism. This debate was in fact encapsulated by the argument between Karl Löwith and Hans Blumenberg in the decades following the Jewish Holocaust of the Second World War, which had for many destroyed the liberal ideal of the moral progress of Western, Christian civilization. In *Meaning in History*, Löwith argued that the modern historian's notion of progress (derived primarily from the French *philosophes* and Marx) was simply a secularized version of a Judeo-Christian salvation narrative, a notion no longer legitimated by religious faith. It could not be reconciled (even by critical historians

like Toynebee) to a stoic and putatively more empirically justified view of the "tragic human comedy," with its endless cycles of triumph and ruin, in which nothing like progress could be found (Löwith, v). Moreover, Löwith noted, this pagan view of human history need have no effect on one's religious faith, which ideally should not require history as proof of theology in any case.

Summing up his opposing views in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Blumenberg rejected Löwith's reduction of all progressive history to a secularization of religious eschatology and observed instead that the expectation of theological redemption from outside the world could only have appeared "as a hindrance to the attitudes and activities that can secure for man the realization of his possibilities and the satisfaction of his needs" (31). Blumenberg argued for the more modest notion of human "self-assertion" (138) and the counter-intuitive claim that the idea of infinite (but not inevitable) progress is both "the only regulative principle that can make history humanly bearable," in that people do not thereby become mere means for a knowable end, and a heuristic method that "renders every absolute untenable" (35). At the same time, Blumenberg acknowledged that modern Western notions of secular reason did not arise in a vacuum, and were intimately shaped by the historical context of the religious traditions that gave rise to them. He simply resisted Lwith's reduction of the secular categories of historical progress to their religious precursors.

Whichever side one comes down on—and I tend to agree with Blumenberg—the Löwith-Blumenberg debate epitomizes something that is, I think, crucial to remember in the current discussions about religion, fundamentalism, terrorism, the West versus Islam, globalization versus cultural distinctness, and so forth. And that is the complication that

while, as most *bien pensant* and politically progressive thinkers argue, religious traditions are inescapably shaped by the forces of material development and political power, so too (as richer versions of social theory from Max Weber to Blumenberg have had to recognize) secularism is never fully separable from the religious traditions out of which it emerges (see Weber's classic *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*). Talal Asad is certainly right to insist that we recognize how differently the word "religion" can be defined in different cultures. But this difference is part of what could be called broader asymmetries in cross-cultural understanding that extend just as clearly to modes of secular reason. It may be that just as the 19th century had to theorize the meaning of distinct religious traditions—indeed, anthropology finds a good part of its origins in this task—so too the new globalization will need to theorize different varieties of secular life as well, different social rationalities, as it were, which are themselves the product of different Enlightenments. What is required is that we understand this sort of asymmetry to exist along a spectrum of modes of thought—certain kinds of hard science will remain the same, whether at Cal Tech or in Istanbul, while the logic (whether religious or secular) that addresses the relation of the individual to the collectivity, the determination of hierarchy and status, the role of a political state, the meaning of sexuality, the ways of calculating communal assent and dissent, and so forth, will remain shaped, as they most certainly are in America today, by the inculcated vestiges of a religious *habitus*.

To be sure, the question "What happens when this vestigial *habitus* finally withers away?" still remains, and one might argue that it only defers the difficulty raised by Karl Löwith about the religious categories of secular life rather than dissolving it. The posed question

also leads us to one other way of thinking about religion that weds religion to both progressive Enlightenment and progressive harmony of thought and feeling. In the earlier years of the 20th century, Emile Durkheim elaborated a theory of religion that on the one hand rooted it, in good positivist fashion, in the material reality of collective life: what we called "religion," he argued, should be understood as a hypostasized* representation of social solidarity. On the other hand, Durkheim made religion the logical fount — the first form, as it were — of all subsequent rational modes of classification and analysis, in a way that gave to religion a mental force and independence not normally granted by Enlightenment materialism (see Durkheim).

While there is a potentially disturbing side to Durkheim's theory — it would seem to promote mythology as a necessary component of social life, without giving us the tools to distinguish good from bad myths — Durkheim himself was very much a secular internationalist in his outlook, a good pan-European globalist before his time. He was confident that the historical rationalization of religious concepts would lead to increasingly precise sorts of knowledge (hence modern science)

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* Editor's note:

One of the previewers asked the author whether "hypostasized" was a typo of "hypostatized." The answer was no. Here is the author's explanation:

> "American usage dictates the latter, 'hypostatized,' as you suggest; this spelling seems to derive more from scientific (chemical) usage. The OED lists both versions, and the former 'hypostasized' is actually the older one, going back to Coleridge, and seems more related to religious usage. Neither of Durkheim's translators face the issue: One says 'personfied,' the other 'transfigured.' Both are inadequate. The word that Durkheim uses does not exist in French — He coins it. I will stay with the spelling I originally used 'hypostasized' — since it is acceptable to the OED. It is closer to religious usage, and it is more like Durkheim's coinage."

as well as increasingly universal forms of social solidarity, ending up finally in a sort of universal religion of society. Ironically, despite the contemporary fear of homogenizing globalization, much of what Durkheim predicted about the progress of universal solidarity at the opening of the 20th century looks far less likely at the start of the 21st. It is oddly harder now than in the years before the First World War to assume the more or less smooth evolution from religious particularity to secular universalism that Durkheim, along with many others, saw as historically inevitable.

Blumenberg may be right to insist upon a notion of perpetual, universal progress as a necessary hedge against both the totalizing impulse of a knowable "end of history" and the stoic cynicism of the eternal return of the same. But we also need to take seriously the more challenging assertion that the ideal of secular Enlightenment guiding progressive Western notions of rational social life, especially through philosophy, history, jurisprudence, and the political theory of the nation-state, has itself been powerfully (though hardly exclusively) shaped—as Nietzsche never tired of demonstrating—by the Christian traditions out of which it grew and against which it sharpened its critique. Speaking of religion today means that secularization will also need to be understood as a pluralistic, and far from transparent, process.

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Abstract

Since the end of the Cold War, debate about the grand struggle between capitalism and communism has been largely replaced by debate about religious sectarianism. Some have even referred to a "clash of civilizations" in the wake of the spread of Islamic fundamentalism. This is in fact an old debate, but it has been given new life by arguments about globalization and economic development

as envisioned by the West, and especially by the terrorist attacks in New York on September 11, 2001. While the political right has had little difficulty treating religious belief as a fundamental human and social interest, much of the political left has remained committed to secular Enlightenment, even when it criticizes the hegemony of the West. The dispute depends upon competing notions of history, secularism, and progress, and ultimately on the possibility or desirability of universal solidarity. While for many a world unified by one religion may no longer make sense, the old Enlightenment dream that a single version of secular and universal reason will eventually prevail over religious difference may also need to be reconsidered. The process that we call secularization is neither as singular, nor as transparent, as we might think.