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GOD'S LAW OR MAN'S LAW?

LAINA FARHAT-HOLZMAN

Church and State

Under an oak in stormy weather
I joined this rogue and whore together;
And none but he who rules the thunder
Can put this rogue and whore asunder.

—Anonymous

As a professor of World History, I looked at religion in the same way that I regarded any other historic institution—as something linear. Looking back over the 5,000 years of recorded history, it seemed as if human values evolved, if not in a straight line, at least in an upward-moving spiral. And yes, it seemed upward (hence better) to me.

Just as we have seen a political trajectory from the ancient God-Kings to universal suffrage, we have also seen the religious transformation from human sacrifice and fear-based superstition to a benign spirituality as exemplified by the scientifically perceived ecology movement and the spiritually based United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

I assumed that with education, everyone in the world would enter that enlightened realm of benign religion. It was just a matter of time.

When the gates of hell clanged shut, said one wag in the 19th century, the gates of heaven also closed. He assumed that one could not cherry-pick in religion without killing it. Gone were human sacrifice, divination by “reading” the entrails of sacrificed animals, the wild-eyed prophets leading people into death and destruction, the notion that people could be possessed by demons, and the evil eye, I thought.

Although I had thought these things were gone, my daily ventures into newspapers and the popular media have disabused this belief. None of these ancient curses are gone; nor are they just living in the still unenlightened parts of this planet. They are next door, down the street, and on some PTAs in this country, as well as armed and dangerous in other places around the world. We even have the return of religiously-provoked suicide/murder, in the horrifying terrorist attack on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001. This batch of killers had some sort of western education.

What is alarming is that western education has not accomplished
the desired end of bringing reason and enlightenment. Until now, I have assumed that the cure for irrational religious beliefs rests in education. Apparently it does not—or perhaps education is not doing the job of teaching people how to think rationally. Could it be possible for one's mind to be divided into the rational and the irrational at the same time? The Arab hijackers are not alone in this.

Many of us watched with disbelief as the very educated president of South Africa, Mr. Mbeke, stubbornly dismissed modern science in his pronouncement that AIDS does not come from the HIV virus. Then when I saw an article about persecution of “witches” in South Africa (December 2000), I began to suspect another dynamic going on here.

The modern South African government has put a stop to what was nothing less than annual pogroms against women accused of witchcraft in rural South Africa. The locals believed that lightning strikes that set thatched roofs afire were the work of witches. I am not surprised at such ignorance from peasants with long, bad traditions, but was shocked to learn that a local medical doctor who was trained in England supported the witchcraft thesis, as did the chief of the regional police, a university-educated and multi-lingual intellectual. Could it be that President Mbeke, as educated as he is, also believes in witchcraft? Perhaps witchcraft, not HIV, produces AIDS? [Christian Science Monitor, 12/6/00]

At the point that I was ready to cast South Africa into the nether lands of incurable ignorance, another article caught my eye. The people in a county in Kentucky that one could only call backwoods (high rate of illiteracy and its corresponding poverty) protested the building of a new library offered by the state. The people did not see the need for a library which would be of no use to anybody. “We have the Bible,” said their spokesman, “and that is good enough for us.”

The fanatics being trained in “Islamic Schools” in Pakistan have no more in their education than memorizing the Koran in a language they cannot understand. Like their counterparts in Kentucky, the Koran is good enough for them. Yet they happily embrace the idea of using advanced nuclear technology to blow away their enemies (as well as themselves). The bomb is a gift of Allah and it should be used in their jihad, the young students say. [Goldberg, 36]

The Iranian Revolution seemed an exotic issue in 1979, the first howl of medieval religion fighting back against the modern secular world. Since then, however, many other medieval throwbacks have climbed out of their marginalized cupboards and have challenged the hard-won values that we all thought were finally mainstream. And they
challenge us with the fruits of our own scientific and technological achievements.

The late Ayatollah Khomeini, who professed the belief that the modern world was a satanic abomination, nonetheless sought out the latest weapons of war when his country was threatened by Iraq. He also employed an Austrian heart surgeon when he was ailing, rather than depending upon prayer or talismans.

Today, the medieval Shiite clerics, who have kept Iran in thrall since their 1979 revolution, are as two-minded as their late leader. They still want the latest weapons of mass destruction and modern medicine for their own power elite, yet they debate such spiritual issues as: if the state cuts off the hand of a thief, does the hand belong to the thief or to the state? The answer they came up with was that the hand belongs to the state, because the thief might run to a hospital and have it reattached.

The problem is that when these religious reactionaries prevail, as they have in Iran, Afghanistan, and increasingly Pakistan, the fruits of the modern world die with them. Modern science depends upon free thought and open investigation. All the answers are not found in one book.

The following are some serious quarrels between the secular and religious worlds and their effects can be devastating:

- The secular world believes in freedom of thought and conscience; ultra-orthodox (or fundamentalist) religions believe all truth is already known and is housed in their holy texts.
- Scientific skepticism and questioning conventional truths are key to modern life; fundamentalism attacks such processes as irreverent and war against God.
- The rights of people to equality under secular law, regardless of class, or ethnicity, are the hallmark of modern life and law. To fundamentalists, separation of peoples is mandated on these very bases. Caste is alive and well.
- Under secular law, women have achieved citizenship in all ways equal with men. With all fundamentalists, women are either lesser or subordinated, as in the recent ruling of the Southern Baptists, or are totally segregated, as with Islamists and Ultra-Orthodox Jews. To all the ultra-pious, women are only vessels of new life and should have no say over how their bodies are used.
- Homosexuality is increasingly regarded as genetically determined in modern society, not an issue of “lifestyle” or “choice.”
To all religious fundamentalists, it is a sin and for some punishable by death.

Around the world, formerly marginalized religions are making war against the secular world, and it is increasingly clear that the battles of the future will not be between nation states but rather within them, particularly in those vulnerable states that are in the process of modernizing. In such places, the gap between the educated elite and the masses of ignorant or illiterate is enormous, and that presents a great danger. Nor are the elite necessarily secure in their belief in modern values.

Pakistan, now 50-plus years old, began as a secular state modeled after British parliamentary governance, intended as a safe homeland for Muslim Indians. Today it is a state falling apart, and the secular nature of the country is shrinking daily. There are now battles to the death between and among Muslim sects. Education for the masses is nonexistent; freedom of thought earns death threats and assassinations, and the population explosion threatens survival altogether.

Israel, also 50-plus years old, began as did Pakistan: as a safe homeland for Jews, both secular and religious. Today the secular Israelis who have been reluctant to challenge the benefits enjoyed by the religious factions are now chafing under ultra-orthodox bullying. Former Prime Minister Barak, in exasperation, raised the issue that now is the time to reclaim freedom and secular governance before it is lost altogether.

India, whose beginnings were like Pakistan's and whose founding fathers were the secular, British-educated Nehru and the universalist, British-educated Gandhi (who once said that he was Hindu, Muslim, Jew, and Christian), is now having serious problems with fundamentalist Hinduism and a revolt of the untouchables.

These fundamentalist sects all over the world are not just reactionary, they also breed murder. Both Egypt and Israel lost leaders to fundamentalist fanatics. Even in the West, abortion clinics have been assaulted and doctors and nurses murdered by fanatics who think they have a monopoly on truth.

But even among the educated and seemingly modern sector, strange sorts of religion can take over. How has education helped to protect young people from the irrational and positively brainless following of gurus who lure university students into cults? For a hair-raising tour down death-and-disaster lane, you might read Robert J. Lifton's *Destroying the World to Save It*, a book about the Aum Shinrikyo cult.
that used sarin nerve gas in a Tokyo subway. He charts a number of apocalyptic cults that will comprise the new global terrorism. These groups are mostly peopled by educated engineers, scientists, and other university graduates who believe their duty is to destroy the world so that our souls can be saved.

Why are so many educated people suspicious of science but not suspicious of snake oil salesmen? Let us admit that many middle-class, educated Americans and British are superstitious and are supporting astrology, numerology, psychics, faith healers, herbalists, and tarot readers with their money. Millions of dollars are being made by televangelists and fundamentalist sects around the world. A fool and his money are soon parted, I have heard.

Where have we in the West gone wrong?

There is a left wing of religious fundamentalism, too, that should cause us concern. Some Animal Rights people and militant vegetarians and ecologists are looking cult-like and are attacking enemies of their value system. How much longer before killing will be on their agendas?

In eastern Long Island NY, an upscale subdivision being built on old farmland was torched. Three nearly completed houses were set on fire deliberately and messages were spray painted on another house: “Stop Urban Sprawl,” “If You Build It We Will Burn It,” and “Burn the Rich.” The group doing it is called E. L. F., well known in the Pacific northwest. Extreme environmental activism, or eco-terrorism. ELF stands for Earth Liberation Front.

There is a fellow organization: ALF, Animal Liberation Front. Their actions are growing more violent all the time. So far there has been multi-million dollar damage from arson in a new ski resort in Vail, Colorado and $1 million damage to a lumber company's office in Monmouth, Oregon.

Initially western, they have now moved east. The FBI cannot find them, and does not know who they are. Their actions are growing more violent, including razor-laced letters sent to people in the fur business.

What appears to be the next battlefield around the world is the struggle which pits the autonomy of men and women in democratic societies against those persons who take their orders from their perception of God and convince the gullible to fall in line. Although one can fall in line voluntarily, one cannot fall out of line where the forces of divine authority prevail. In non-secular societies, defection brings with it a death sentence. In secular societies, cults must resort to murder to keep their members in line. Only in the secular modern world do peo-
people have the right to choose their own leaders, their own path, and their own kind of spirituality.

It is a modern concept that spirituality is most authentic when it is voluntary. Reason without the spiritual dimension leads to empty materialism, but religion without reason leads to superstition and can turn murderous. The trick for the healthy secular society is to have both reason and spirit working together. But reason must lead.

Sources to study this issue are found readily in the popular media. Daily newspapers, television and radio, and cinema trends have provided pictures that taken daily seem to be oddities, but cumulatively show a trend.

Several scholarly works are essential to this study. Karen Armstrong's latest work, *The Battle For God*, provides historic perspective on the resurgence of militant religion in its battle against the modern world. She is far more sympathetic to their wounded feelings than I am, and her conclusion that we must dialogue with these groups poses the question: how does one argue with someone whose marching orders come directly from God?

V. S. Naipal's two works: *Among the Believers* and *Beyond Belief* represent his pilgrimage into the world of resurgent Islam. The first journey was taken in 1981, immediately after the Iranian Revolution, and the second 15 years later, revisiting some of the people he had interviewed the first time. As always with male pilgrims to the Islamic world, none of his informants were women. Yet this sharp-eyed traveler does not miss much.

Robert J. Lifton's *Destroying the World to Save It* is a book previously mentioned about the Aum Shinrikyo cult that used sarin nerve gas in a Tokyo subway. He takes a hard look at how people educated in a thoroughly western discipline—often science—can totally surrender all critical thought and become slaves of a guru with death and destruction as his agenda. He explores such cults around the developed world.

Another book that may give one pause is David Keys' *Catastrophe*, which tracks a worldwide collapse of old civilizations to the years following 535-37 CE, which launched a period of ecological and climatological catastrophes created by some as yet unknown event--possibly an enormous volcanic eruption or a comet crash. He leads the reader through the records, region by region (including the New World), with the consequences of little sunlight, droughts, floods, untimely hail and snow, and the famines and plagues and religious hysteria and political chaos that followed.

This issue is important. We could have had a nuclear winter had
nuclear war taken place between the US and USSR that could have given us a similar scenario. We still could have a serious event of this sort if India and Pakistan go at each other or if some crazy cultist launches an attack on Israel.

Jacques Barzun's final master opus, *From Dawn to Decadence*, provided a 500 year survey of western culture. One gets perspective from such a work. Our half-millennium began in violence and ended in even worse violence—with an end to empires and the large nation-state, and the internal security that they provide.

Another book that has given me some unquiet is Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, in which he reminds us that the evolutionary trajectory is not always upward. Some societies have retreated from the agricultural revolution due to environmental circumstances and now have only a hunting/gathering society. Afghanistan and central Africa look that way.

Democratic societies could lose everything if they are not vigilant. I, for one, have no desire to return to any period of human history before our own. The past has been much worse for the majority of human beings living on this planet, and if you doubt this, visit central Africa, Afghanistan, or the rural Andes in Peru. These places give one a good picture of the past.

And perhaps most important to those who are sincerely spiritual, religion must be free and voluntary—both to join and to leave. As the ancient Jewish scholar Hillel said: the Lord has Many Mansions.

No one faith fits all spirits. Indeed, there should also be freedom to profess no faith at all, but to live decently and honorably with all other human beings on earth.

This paper is derived from the Introduction to the author's book, *God's Law or Man's Law: Fundamentalist Challenges to Secular Governance*, currently being reviewed for publication and written before the September 11, 2001, fundamentalist terror attack in New York and Washington.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


