

The Paradox of “Civilization” and Liberation
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UCV

When I was in university forty years ago, it was pretty much taken for granted that most nations around the world and their peoples were entering or had already crossed the threshold into a secular age. Across the board, leading thinkers of academic disciplines in the social sciences, history and religious studies pointed to the decreasing influence of religion, the gradual waning of the role of religion in public life, and the increasing confinement of religious belief and practice to the private, personal arena as signs that a new secular age had arrived. With reams of studies to back them up, they asserted that globally, people had lost or were losing confidence in otherworldly or supernatural accounts of the cosmos, the world, of us and our destiny. And it was confidently assumed, as well, that this process was going in one direction and was probably unstoppable.

Think about it: glancing back, we could point to four hundred years of discoveries and advances in the sciences, the global export of markets and patterns of consumption, mass political and ideological movements toward democracy or aggressively secular totalitarian regimes accompanied by the downfall of age-old hierarchies both political and religious, and we have massive movements of peoples from rural to cosmopolitan urban life. To top it off, hadn't religions discredited themselves due to centuries of religious wars, inquisitions, dogmatism, and clerical abuses of all kinds of power? This was certainly the narrative elites in education, politics, bureaucracies, finance, and even religion were embracing; with the conclusion that this was a one way street, a universal trend—and it was leading to a secular age beyond the death of the gods.

In the mid 1940s, Jawaharlal Nehru—who became India’s first Prime Minister—wrote that “decline was the destiny of all religions....Some Hindus dream of going back to the Vedas, some Muslims dream of an Islamic theocracy. *Idle fancies*, for there is no going back to the past...There is only-one-way traffic in Time.” Traditional religious belief “will vanish at the touch of reality.” In 1983, the theologian, Don Cupitt, put it like this: “The sacred is being methodically stripped and in the end [displaced] by a confident, well-organised and self-conscious secular power....The shift is from myths to maths, from animism to mechanism, and from explanation down from above to explanation up from below.” . (Nehru quote from Michael Walzer, *The Paradox of Liberation: Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions*, p. 15; Hereafter Walzer and page number; Cupitt quote from *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, p.871)

Nearly all signs indicated a dawning secular age: from Ataturk’s stridently 20th century post Islamic Turkey, to the Soviet Union and Mao’s China with their programmatic desacralization of society, from Israel—whose leading Zionist cadres were mostly non-religious socialists, to the huge and dizzying decline of public religion in Europe; secularizing nationalists had seized power across the Arab and Persian speaking world and they governed a newly independent India. In the middle decades of the 20th century, even Unitarians, whose ethos and worldview had become largely humanist in orientation, thought themselves in the vanguard of a post-theistic, rationalist and therapeutic new age in North America.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the secular world; religion most emphatically did not go away. The sacred canopy of gods and spirits old and new, beneficent and terrible did not wither or collapse; and religion, we discovered, served far more than some anachronistic, declining niche market. Rather than holding a one-way ticket to oblivion, it came roaring back such that now, everywhere I read, we’ve entered a *post-secular age*.

What on earth happened? I look at what's going on in Turkey and Poland, India, Israel, Lebanon, and Iran, the astonishing rise of religion in China and Russia; of new religious movements in Latin America; the enduring and reanimated strength of Islam and of churches in Africa, and even what's happened in the States going back to the 1970s—the supposed lock step of nations and cultures hurtling inexorably toward a secular age seems almost everywhere to be going off the rails. Western Europe and Scandinavia, here and there in North America—they're emerging as exceptions, not the rule.

A post-secular age? Of course, the explanations are as complex and varied as are nations and their peoples. But in a remarkable number of cases, I think it has a lot to do with *paternalism*—the deep-rooted, unconscious conviction that you know what's best for others and that you're going to act, legislate and regulate accordingly; and it's paternalism that's often given rise to the paradox of the civilization and liberation—and of our post-secular age.

A definition of paradox is “a phenomenon that exhibits contradiction or conflict with preconceived notions of what is true, reasonable or possible.” What happened out there was that a select number of people—along with the movements and institutions they represented—set about to liberate peoples from colonial European powers and from deeply entrenched traditional cultures, religions and customary elites. They established new, independent secular states in places like Israel, Algeria and India—it was an extraordinary achievement. But then, within a couple of generations, these secular liberationists found themselves at war with the very people whose interests they claimed to advance—people possessed with a profoundly unsecular politics and program—from settler Zionism to Hindu nationalism to militant Islam. And the liberationist generation found itself surprisingly weak in defending and strengthening all it had hoped to achieve.

That's the paradox—secular and national liberation, which made possible the creation of openly contested democratic space, also mobilized previously passive, inarticulate and unorganized religious groups of people into a force for counter-liberation bent on turning back the clock on secularity, democracy, and social and gender equality—in sum to create religious nation states.

Think about what happened in the 1940s-60s. You have western educated, anti-colonial militants absolutely sure of themselves, who sought to liberate their people from colonial rule and fatalistic deference to alien authority. They offered freedom from what they considered backward, customary religious, cultural and economic belief and practice. They knew what was best; what they thought was true, reasonable, possible and necessary. They were the children of light bringing to their benighted citizens what they believed were universal principles of individual freedom, human rights, the promise of democratic government, scientific education, economic advancement, freedom from religion, and the franchise for women.

For example, emancipation was central to the program of Indian national liberation which required a direct attack on the religious culture and social practices of both Hindus and Muslims. When a new constitution was being debated Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, one of the founders of the All India Women's Conference, and minister of health in Nehru's first cabinet, urged the drafting committee to make sure the religious liberty clause allowed of the "wiping out" of religiously sanctified "evils" like purdah, child marriage, polygamy, the ban on intercaste marriage, and the dedication of girls to temples." (Walzer, 15)

Those in the vanguard of secular liberation believed they offered their oppressed people a new beginning, a new politics and culture, indeed the vision of a new kind of man and woman. In the late 50s, Algeria's liberationist thinker Frantz Fanon asserted "there is a new kind of

Algerian. The power of our Revolution...resides in the radical overhaul that the Algerian has undergone in his psyche” and will to freedom from the dead hand of the past and his oppressor. David Ben-Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel proclaimed “that the worker in the land of Israel differs from the Jewish worker elsewhere in exile. He is not a new branch grafted to an old tradition, but a new tree altogether.” (Walzer, 8)

The political philosopher Michael Walzer observes that the leaders of these movements appealed especially to young people (he reminds us they were almost all remarkably young themselves) and often urged a “radical break with family and friends...from all forms of established authority.” They demanded “total commitment to the movement.” In sum, the old ways must be repudiated and overcome. (Walzer, 19)

As I thought about these kinds of statements and the history of secular nationalist projects with their disdain for religion and tradition, the absence of consultation, the imposition of foreign categories and practices, what came to mind was the freeway fight in Vancouver in the late 1960s and early 70s. What to engineers, bureaucrats and some politicians seemed a pre-ordained assumption that entailed levelling neighbourhoods for the sake of “modernity” and in order to build a freeway system through the heart of this city, looked and felt to the people who lived here like a sentence for blighted neighbourhoods and the destruction of a landscape, of memory and of ways of life we held dear. And residents organized, pushed back and prevailed. Unique among major North American cities, Vancouver rejected in-city freeways, opting instead to have them end at its doorstep.

Similarly, while secular modernizers imposed bans on the veil, bypassed traditional leaders, overhauled education, opened the floodgates to global pop culture and fashion, and laid down massive industrialization five and ten year economic plans, ordinary people sustained the

old ways in temples, synagogues and mosques, and more importantly, in interpersonal relations, in families and in life-cycle celebrations—behaviours all-but invisible to secular militants busily at work on big projects of modernization. The coming revivals of religio-political movements that perplex, astound and worry us today were fueled by the resentment that ordinary people, pursuing their customary ways, felt toward those secularizing and modernizing elites, with their foreign ideas, their patronizing attitudes and paternalistic politics.

What's heartbreaking, and I may be totally wrong, is that it didn't have to turn out this way. In all the examples where post-colonial, secular movements attempted to bootstrap nations into modernity, remarkably few attempts were ever made by liberation leaders to engage in dialogue with religious and traditional communities and their leaders. Few, if any, attempts were made to consult about what kind of nation and culture they could envision and build together. They failed to do what Gandhi believed had to take place: in order to overcome the colonial past, it was necessary to train both the secular and the traditional in mutual self-consciousness and the joint attainment of power—a constructive program of producing women and men fit for independence and capable of managing their own affairs over the long haul of history.

It was a task that should have preceded and then carried throughout the work of national liberation. But that requires, among other things, paying intelligent attention to the depth and breadth of the genuine religious inheritance of cultures. “Many religious traditions,” writes the Indian feminist scholar Uma Narayan, “are in fact more capacious than fundamentalist adherents [and modernists] allow. Insisting on humane and inclusive interpretations of religious traditions might in many contexts be crucial in countering the deployment of militant religious discourses and their problematic nationalist ends.” (Walzer, 119-20) The consequence of not taking that path has meant multiple tragedies around the globe.

Worldviews can't be negated, abolished or banned; they have to be engaged; for liberation, enlightenment, and justice is a process: it doesn't happen all at once for everyone; it must take place again and again.

I have to admit that all this time, I've had Canada in the back of my mind. Our story is so different, as all stories and people are; and yet, the paradox of so-called civilization and liberation is something we've experienced as well. Remember that a definition of paradox is “a phenomenon that exhibits contradiction or conflict with preconceived notions of what is true, reasonable or possible.” I do think it's uncontroversial for me to assert that preconceived notions about the presumed truth and superiority of Christianity and Euro-Canadian civilization led churches, governments and settlers to carry out, in both ad hoc and systematic ways, the displacement, negation and near destruction of Indigenous peoples in this country. I hold up the scandal of residential schools as Exhibit A in making this claim. There are so many others we could bring forward.

The paradox, though built on a tragedy almost beyond imagining, is that in spite or because of this assault, evidence is now daily at hand of the successful resistance, the renaissance, or what John Ralston Saul calls the “Comeback” of Aboriginal peoples to a growing position of power, influence and creativity in our country. When I talk to people in the States about what excites me about Canada and its future, I point to our commitment to multiculturalism, but especially to the extraordinary renewal and growing strength of Indigenous peoples, and to our Constitution—something beyond imagining in the States—where, in Section 35 “aboriginal and treaty rights of the aboriginal peoples of Canada are recognized and affirmed.”

Since 1982, in one case after another, it has been affirmed that any time our governments interact with Aboriginal people, the “honour of the crown” is said to be at stake. Flowing from the honour principle is a duty on the Crown to consult. And since “Haida Nation v. British Columbia (Minister of Forests),” it has been affirmed that the duty to consult is engaged “when the Province has knowledge, real or constructive, of the potential existence of Aboriginal right or title and contemplates conduct that might adversely affect them.”

Consultation, not decree, dialogue not monologue, reciprocity and respect, not paternalism. This is a way toward reconciliation; a commitment and process to overcome our colonial past and mind set; a way for the secular and the traditional, the immigrant and aboriginal to build mutual self-consciousness and a joint and just exercise of power.

It’s not going to be easy; true dialogue and consultation based on mutual respect and reciprocity never is, especially when one side is so accustomed to its truth, its power, its vested interests and its privilege. Just last week, Alberta Premier Rachel Notley said that no matter what a new government in BC or opposition does, "Mark my words, that pipeline will be built, the decisions have been made." To which Grand Chief Stewart Phillip responded, "Mark MY words, Kinder Morgan’s Trans Mountain pipeline expansion project will never see the light of day."

“The decisions have been made.” Bruce McIvor, a member of this congregation, recently wrote in the journal *First Peoples Law*:

“Denying Indigenous rights rests on colonialism’s inertia. Its strength is fear and self-interest. Its weakness is a growing awareness that while Canada preaches the rule of law, justice and fairness abroad, the country’s wealth and privilege [nevertheless] originates with an overarching historical wrong.” He continues: “As the Supreme Court has stated, the duty to consult and accommodate is a constitutional imperative....Too often governments and the courts lose sight of the special place of the duty to consult in Canadian law....This demanding standard is necessary.”

It's not "simply an administrative requirement—it is a constitutional imperative. The more often government and decision-makers recognize this higher obligation, and the courts enforce it, the closer we will [all] come to recognizing and respecting Indigenous People's central legal, historical and future place in Canadian society." (*First Peoples Law*, 2016)

June is Aboriginal History Month—an opportunity not only to recognize the historical contribution of Aboriginal peoples to the development of Canada, but also the strength of present-day Aboriginal communities and their promise for the future. And today, is the official National Day of Healing and Reconciliation. Through these remarks, it's been my hope that in spite of the tragedies of colonialism and post-colonial, paternalistic modernization—nay, even more—because of them—we will move toward and be committed to respectful engagement and reciprocity with the Other, with our Aboriginal sisters and brothers, with our neighbours, with those with whom we deeply disagree, and even with ourselves, so that *together* we will yet build a nation that will be just, and fair and generous for all of us who are so fortunate to live here, *a mari usque ad mare*—from sea to sea to sea.