RADICAL HINDUISM AND MODERNITY[1]

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On 6 December 1992 two closely linked radical Hindu movements organized a rally in the North Indian pilgrimage centre Ayodhya. One of these movements was the major opposition party in India, the Indian People's Party (BJP); it had won the 1991 state elections of Uttar Pradesh, a state of a hundred million people in which Ayodhya is located. The other movement, the World Hindu Council (VHP), has a leadership of Hindu monks and is Hinduism's largest transnational movement with branches in the US, Britain and Holland. The publicly announced aim of the rally was to destroy a 16th century mosque in Ayodhya which had allegedly been built on the birthplace of Rama, one of the major gods in the Hindu pantheon. Despite this public announcement the rally was allowed by the authorities and under the eyes of the gathered press and without much hindrance by the huge paramilitary police force present in Ayodhya activists started to demolish the old structure till, after a day of hard work, only rubble remained; and a question: Why didn't the police intervene?

A high ranking police officer told the press that the police could easily have intervened and prevented the demolition. However, they had not received orders to do so. Naturally, they did not get any orders from the state officials of Uttar Pradesh, since Uttar Pradesh was at that time governed by the Indian People's Party which was behind the demolition. The paramilitary forces, however, were under the direct command of what in India is called 'the Centre', that is the Union government in Delhi. Why did the Centre not act? Well, the story goes that India's Prime Minister, Narasimha Rao, was just taking a nap and, since he is a very old man, nobody would want to disturb him. When he woke up, the demolition had already proceeded too far. I do not relate this story to show up a certain indecisiveness on the part of the Indian Government, since on the next day the Union government did act very decisively by dismissing the state governments of four states in which the opposition party BJP ruled. It put the leadership of the two movements in jail for a few days and banned a few radical movements, both on the Hindu side and on the Muslim side. Narasimha Rao's nap had been a strategic one which allowed the Union government to re-establish the supremacy of the Congress Party which had been seriously challenged by the Indian People's Party. Nevertheless, all these political actions did not prevent that civil war broke out in many parts of the country, in which thousands (mostly Muslims) were killed, nor did it anything to prevent that the relations between Hindus and Muslims reached their lowest point since Partition. Very significantly, many Muslims had by now totally lost their confidence in the state and

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its institutions, since politicians seemed not to be willing to protect the rights and lives of the Muslim minority.

This story is in many ways simple and straightforward. It shows the extent to which the so-called secularist Congress Party and the institutions of the Indian secular state were complicit in the destruction of a Muslim sacred place by Hindu radicals. Clearly, the Congress Party stood to gain when the demolition of the mosque enabled it to dismantle the political power of its opponent. A story told in this way gives a narrative of demystification. It shows from the standpoint of the cynical, well-informed observer that what seems a religious conflict is in fact a political game. It is very important to tell such stories, since they show the political dynamics of conflictuous situations, but it does not answer the question why this mosque could become an issue in the first place. To answer that more complex question the game-theory is often replaced by a story that is perhaps even simpler or, at least, more gratifying to a Western audience. That story has it that the forces of secular modernity are up against the forces of religious obscurantism (otherwise called fundamentalism). Nehru and the successive leadership of the Congress Party upto Mr. Narasimha Rao who want to bring India into the world of modern progress are opposed by Muslim, Hindu or Sikh extremists who dream of religious nation-states. That second story, dignified by forms of Weberian modernization-theory, is so much part of Western mythology (otherwise known as common sense) that it is constantly broadcast by the mass media when they report about world events in Egypt, Iran, Algeria, India, Sri Lanka and other places. It is a story that is hard to question, since any alternative story is often felt to be a relativist attack on Equality, Liberty and Fraternity.[2]

Nevertheless, it might be interesting for an academic meeting to come to an alternative reading of the events in Ayodhya as a step towards an understanding of what I would - provisionally - call 'post-colonial modernity'. The Hindu activists who destroyed the mosque, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao who took a nap when these activists exerted themselves, the millions who watched the events in Ayodhya on CNN, all of them are obviously fully modern, that is they all live under the material conditions of the modern world-system of nation-states and participate fully in its discursive practices. There is no reason to say that any of them is caught in a time-warp, 'medieval or backward' as compared to others who are the bearers of Reason and Progress. However, their positions are different, because they are the product of different histories. I would argue that a singular, universal history of modernity does not exist, although I do accept that Western history since the 19th century has had an overriding importance in the making of the modern world. Since the 19th century, then, religion has been the site of difference on which the struggle for alternatives to Western modernity in many parts of the colonial world took place. In that very struggle new religious discourses and practices have emerged which - in a highly complex and unsatisfying move - have been placed in the category of fundamentalism - a term derived from USA Protestantism -, precisely because they are different from the dominant secularized, privatized religious forms of the late twentieth century West.[3] I prefer for at least some of these new discourses the term religious nationa-

lism, since they articulate discourse on the religious community and discourse on the nation.

The role that religion plays in nationalisms in many parts of the world is often felt to be an embarrassing anomaly by those who, like Ernest Gellner, adhere to a Weberian modernization theory. Nationalism has to be connected to secularism to be truly modern and enlightened. 'Politicized religions' threaten both reason and liberty. The Post-Enlightenment urge to define religion as an autonomous sphere, separate from politics and economy is, of course, at the same time also a liberal political demand that religion should be separate from politics. In that sense Weber's theory and Nehru's political program share the same premises. However, it is precisely the effect of the normalizing and disciplining project of secular modernity that religion becomes so important as source of resistance. What is often forgotten in theories of nationalism is that the very forces of centralization and homogenization which are integral to nationalism always create centrifugal forces and resistances based on assumed difference.

Whatever the success of the political demand that religion should be a-political in Western societies (and this is in fact an open issue), it is unwise to try to understand religious nationalism as a flawed and hybrid modernity. Rather, one should try to understand it, as one does with the nationalisms of Europe, as a product of a particular history of at least one century. That particular history is in this case one of Western colonial domination and to say this is not to blame colonialism for producing a flawed religious nationalism, since there is nothing flawed here, but to say that the post-colonial predicament can only be understood in relation to the colonial transformation of the societies I am talking about.

In the brief span of time I have here I want to exemplify the specificities of Hindu nationalism by looking at the appropriation of the Rama cult by the two movements with which I started my presentation. The cover of my recent book on Hindu nationalism shows Mr. Advani, the leader of the Indian People's Party, with bow and arrow in the hand, vermillion on his forehead.[4] His posture, immediately recognizable to all Hindus, imitates that of the icon of Rama with bow and arrows. It was part of Mr. Advani's electoral campaign for Hindutva, that is India for the Hindus. The major issue in that campaign was the demand that the mosque on the birthplace of Rama should be removed and replaced by a Hindu temple. If one wants to understand why this campaign received widespread support from Hindus in India and all over the world one has to decode the symbolic messages sent by this appropriation of the Rama cult by Hindu nationalists. In my view the key messages here concern the state, the family and territory.

Many commentators seem to be certain about at least one element, namely that the Rama cult is about the divinization of the Hindu king, that it is a royal cult and that this message is revived in the political idea of the Ramraj ('the rule of Rama') in the campaign of the Indian People's Party. Much of this is indeed acceptable as a reading of the appropriation of the Rama cult by the Hindu nationalists. However, one has to realize that the Indian People's Party does not want to introduce Hindu kingship; indeed it is a People's Party. It was Mahatma Gandhi who began to

use the concept of Ramraj, the rule of Rama. He used it interchangeably with the term for 'self-rule' or independence (svaraj). In his view, "Ramraj was not only the political Home Rule but also dharmaraj ... which was something higher than ordinary political emancipation" and, distancing himself from notions of Hindu kingship, "Ramraj means rule of the people. A person like Ram would never wish to rule".[5] Gandhi emancipates in a democratic move the notion of 'the rule of Rama' from its 'royal' aspects and, further, relates it to a 'higher' utopian goal, namely the transformation of society by religious reform. Surely, it is not kings politicians are interested in, but a Hindu public of voters. The demand of the Indian People's Party for Ramraj is a demand for rule by what is called 'the Hindu majority'. It is opposed to alleged privileges given to minorities and specifically against pampering the Muslims. Ramraj certainly also has a utopian aspect, a demand for clean, uncorrupted politics, jobs and prosperity for every Hindu. In practical politics this means that the Indian People's Party is against the wide-spread reservation policies for so-called backward castes which are intended to change access to education and government employment. These policies have often provided Congress politicians with electoral support form the communities which stood to gain from them. In themselves reservation policies should not affect Hindu-Muslim relations, but both in the Ahmedabad riots of 1985 and in the violence of 1990, following the report of the Mandal commission on reservation, the discomfort of the higher castes about these policies was rapidly transformed by Hindu politicians into anti-Muslim rioting, since reservation is felt as a threat to Hindu unity. Much of this is obviously very similar to the messages of political movements in most parts of the world, while the minority complex of the majority is also not an exceptional phenomenon.[6] Both the secular state, as controlled by the Congress party, and the Muslims are seen as 'foreign' to Hindu India.

The nationalization of the state is thus one of the elements in the appropriation of the Rama cult by the Hindu radicals. Another element is the Family Romance of the Hindu nation. Much of that Family Romance has been written in the 19th century by appropriating the central storyline in the story of Rama, the holy marriage of Rama and Sita. The relationship between Rama and Sita is often taken to be the paradigm of married love. Rama is the ideal, detached husband who puts the socio-religious order (dharma) even above his love for his wife. He is the Lord of Propriety (Maryada Purushottam). Sita, on the other hand, is the ideal submissive wife who shows unquestioning loyalty to her husband (pativrata). The concept of pativrata (and the related one of sati) implies a special form of holiness for women that lies in selfless surrender to the husband-god. There is a Hindu belief that the wife is responsible for the well-being of the husband. If he dies before her, she "has eaten her husband", as the Hindi expression goes. But the husband can only survive when he resists the attractions of the female body through detachment. It is his duty to love his wife with detachment and to preserve order in the family by his male authority.

The story of Rama and Sita was made into the Family Romance of the Hindu Nation by the 19th century reformer Vivekananda and his Ramakrishna Mission. The

new, national devotionalism of Vivekananda was inserted into the middle-class discussion of modern domesticity and the place of women in that. The Western ideal of companiate marriage was rejected with a nationalist definition of the 'truly Indian, truly modest woman' in terms of the older, patriarchal ideal of the submissive Sita. Female modesty now became a sign of national pride.[7] I would suggest that we have here a re-inscription of an old model of patriarchy in the newly emerging bourgeois form of Hindu family life. However, it was not only the bourgeoisie which became the bearer of a gendered view of the Hindu nation. The first Hindu nationalist mass movement also took place in the last decades of the 20th century. This was the so-called Cow Protection Movement which mobilized Hindus to protect the divinized Mother Cow, the mother of all Hindus, against the barbarians, British and Muslim, who ate her flesh. Again, gender is the issue here. The Brotherhood of Hindu men imagined that it had to protect the Mother against the Outsider and by that very imagination constituted itself. Again, we see that both the state and the Muslim community were seen as foreign and illegitimate.

It was the genius of Vivekananda to systematize a disparate set of Hindu traditions and make the result intellectually available for a partly westernized bourgeois audience and defensible against Western (Christian) criticism, and incorporate it into an essentializing notion of 'Hindu spirituality'. This spirituality was borne by the Indian (Hindu) nation and it was superior to 'Western materialism', brought to India by an aggressive and arrogant 'British nation'. Vivekananda developed this ideology not in India, but in the United States, when he visited the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 and stayed for a period in Boston where he had a sizeable audience. In my view this transnational formulation of the essence of Hinduism - in the English language - had a profound impact on the project to link Hinduism and nationalism. Vivekananda saw his project very much in terms of a revitalization of the Hindu nation. National self-determination, social reform, and spiritual awakening were all linked in his perception. He founded the Ramakrishna Mission to enable monks to dedicate all their energies to Hindu nationalism. Vivekananda's ideology made it possible for monks to become politically active in ways they had not been before. This is why in current Hindu nationalism the World Hindu Council (VHP), led by an assembly of monks, has been able to take a leading role. The same shift in the role of monks has occurred in Sri Lanka, where Budddhist monks play a leading role in Sinhala nationalism.

Finally, the appropriation of the Rama cult signifies the articulation of sacred space and national territory. Communal violence in India has to be understood in the context of the politics of sacred space. Riots and rituals have come to be linked in the construction of communal identities in public arenas. Ritual processions through sensitive areas often end in full-scale riots. Often one is confronted here with 'rituals of provocation'. A symbolic repertoire, derived from the ritual realm of animal sacrifice, is often used to start a riot: a slaughtered cow in a Hindu sacred space or a slaughtered pig in a Muslim sacred space. Riots often contest boundaries between communities whose notions of public space are related to personhood and community. Irving Goffman speaks of 'territories of the self' which can be invaded by

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specific rituals of violation. Therefore, the form of killings, the mutilation of bodies, the murder of adult men in front of their wives and children is so important not only in the creation of maximum terror, but also in violating the physical and moral integrity of the victimized community. Public space itself is, to an important extent, constructed through ritual and rioting: one ends up having Muslim areas, Hindu areas and mixed areas.

Local level politics is often crucial in the dynamics of communal violence. However, one should not forget that nationalism is by definition a supra-local affair and that the spatial notion of national territory is crucial in it. This is a public space which is symbolic of the sovereignty of the Indian citizens. The Kashmir problem and the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965 as well as the Bangladesh war of 1971 have kept the question of the loyalty of Muslim citizens to national sovereignty alive. This question is constantly revived by the Indo-Pakistan cricket matches and by the repeated demand by Hindu communalists that Indian Muslims better go to Pakistan. While this is of course well-known, what is less understood is the connection made between religious notions of sacred space and nationalist notions of territory. Hindu nationa-lists claim that there is an eternal unity of India, ritually constituted by pilgrimage networks. That motherland of all 'sons of the soil' is a sacred space demarcated by Hindu shrines and sacred rivers and mountains. The ritual processions and the Ayodhya campaign of the VHP and BJP throughout India were precisely aimed at ritually constructing that notion of territory. Most of these processions, using an elaborate ritual repertoire, symbolically excluded Muslims from Hindu-Indian territory and were accompanied by widespread rioting, the massacre of Bhagalpur in Bihar in 1990 being the best known.

In this campaign the mosque in Ayodhya was portrayed as a sign of the long suppression of the Hindus by a succession of 'foreigners', first Muslim dynasties from the 12th century, second British Christians from the 19th century and, finally, westernized and secularized Indians who use the minorities as vote-banks to sustain their anti-Hindu politics. The erasure of the mosque thus meant an erasure of a history of Hindu emasculation. I do not have the space here to explore the extent to which this narrative depends on the orientalist construction of India's past, but let me observe that this is a powerful story to support the portrayal of the secular state as an alien invention, a continuation of colonial rule and of the age-long subjection of 'the Hindu people'.[8]

A fascinating aspect of the Hindu nationalist discourse on the 'foreignness' of others is that it is strongly endorsed by the middle class at a time that members of that class increasingly participate in transnational migration. One would perhaps not expect connections between nation and migration to exist, since nationalist ideology seems so opposed to the fact of migration. Nationalism stresses Blut und Boden, 'the sons of the soil' (bhumiputra) and as such the soil, the territory. It appears to deny the idea of migration and the mixing and mingling of populations in the metaphor of 'roots' and the emphasis on the boundedness of populations in time and space. The fact is, however, that transnational migrants are among the most ardent supporters of nationalism 'at home'. The World Hindu Council (VHP) is indeed a transnationalist

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movement, supporting Hindu nationalism. The reasons for this phenomenon are complex and I have not the space here to go into them. Let me just mention that the migratory experience can lead to more embracing identifications on the margin of the 'host' society. Those who do not think of themselves as 'Indians' before migration become 'Indians' in the diaspora. The element of 'romanticization' which is present in every nationalism is even stronger among nostalgic migrants who often form a very rosy picture of the country they have left and are able to imagine the nation where it did not exist before.[9]

The political use of the Rama cult by the BJP and the VHP is not a 'logical outcome' of a continuous, cultural narrative. It is the result of a series of particular, historical processes over the last century. The countryside has been demilitarized in the 18th and early 19th century with the result that militant sadhus and fakirs do not play a significant role in political violence anymore.[10] At the most general level, the great shift in the 19th century is the laicization of institutionalized religion. A lay Hindu and Muslim public had come to occupy a sphere which was previously the domain of sacred specialists. To put it very crudely, warfare between religious specialists was replaced by civil warfare between lay communities. To understand this shift one has to look at the creation of a public sphere in which communal representation, the politics of numbers and voting-blocs has resulted not in a 'politicization' of religion, but in a change in religious power and the nature of violence related to it.

Conclusion

The analysis of contemporary politics in many parts of the post-colonial world in terms of 'politicization' and 'depoliticization' of a separate sphere, called 'religion' is precisely the result of the Enlightenment discourse of modernity which assigns religious faith to the private domain as a matter of personal beliefs without political consequences in the public sphere. Religious discourse and practice in the political arena has come to be seen in the West as a transgression of what religion is supposed to be. There is a strong feeling that violent conflict between religious communities is a violation of the 'original intent' of the founders of the religions involved or of god himself. Real religion produces harmony and tolerance and can thus be sharply distinguished from 'politicized religion', politics in religious disguise. In important ways, this entire mode of thinking is the result of a specific historical development in Europe in the wake of the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries.

These interpretations of religion cannot account for the central role of power and violence in colonial and post-colonial modernity in many parts of the world, including India. This is partly the result of the construction of the religious as a space of difference, from which the colonial state could be resisted. Vivekananda, Gandhi and others defined a Hindu spirituality as different from Western materialism. By that very move they also defined Hinduism as different from Islam. However, this space of resistance is not only discursively constituted, but also institutionally. Neither the

colonial nor the post-colonial state has been able to dismantle the very real institutional power of monastic orders, temples, holy places, etcetera which continue to be sites which compete with the institutions of the state. The result is that the modernity of the ex-colonized looks different than the modernity of the ex-colonizer.

Not too different, though. A claim of difference always runs the risk to produce essentialized Otherness. Much of religious nationalism, however, is the sordid story of modernity: the production of majorities and minorities, the genocidal rewriting of both territory and history. The forms this story takes and the possibilities and impossibilities that are created by it are historically produced and, since these histories are different, the results are also different. I have no romantic attachment to that difference; indeed, radical Hinduism, like other violent political phenomena, is an unpleasant phenomenon. Like Narasimha Rao one sometimes would like to close one's eyes and take a nap, but, as we have seen, even taking a nap can be a political act.

Notes

1. This is the slightly emended text of an oral presentation at the Erasmus Ascension Symposium on 'The Limits of Pluralism: Neo-absolutisms and Relativism', 11-15 May 1994. I wish to thank my colleague Professor Maarten Brands and the Foundation Praemium Erasmianum for the invitation to participate in what was often a very lively exchange of ideas.

2. For some outrageous (or hilarious) comments on anthropological relativism, see Ernest Gellner's pamphlet: *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*, London, Routledge, 1992.

3. See, for example, the multi-volume project on Fundamentalism, published by the University of Chicago Press. I should mention that I have also participated in this project and have received a great deal of intellectual stimulus from it, but have a different perspective. See my 'Hindu Nationalism and the Discourse of Modernity: the Vishwa Hindu Parishad' in M. Marty and S. Appleby (ed) *Accounting for Fundamentalisms*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994.

4. Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism. Hindus and Muslims in India*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994.

5. See for a discussion of <u>Ramraj</u>, Philip Lutgendorf, *The Life of a Text. Performing the Ramcaritmanas of Tulsidas*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991.

6. S.J. Tambiah, *Sri Lanka. Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986.

7. See Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993.

8. For a discussion of the role of orientalism in constructions of India's past, see Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (eds), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament. Perspectives on South Asia*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993.

9. See for an analysis of this phenomenon in different parts of the world, Peter van der Veer (ed), *Nation and Migration. The Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995.

10. See Peter van der Veer, *Gods on Earth. The management of Religious Experience and Identity in a North Indian Pilgrimage Centre*. London, Athlone (LSE Monographs on Social Anthropology, 59), 1988.

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