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MEASURE AND DEMOCRACY IN THE AGE OF POLITICS OF FRIGHT

I will argue in the following pages that the current post-9/11 “politics of fright”—the rising politics of Christian neo-conservatives in the West and particularly in the United States—reports a certain reactive feature of our age of accomplished metaphysics in that the politics of fright negates, in a certain way, the radical cultural plurality that accompanies the decline of the West as the “land of sunset” (*Abendland*). The contender (real or imaginary) of the politics of fright, terrorism, feeds the former with a threat that justifies such politics. As such, terrorism is an antagonistic way of resisting the paradoxical situation of our time in which as the world undergoes the processes of political and economic homogenization (globalization), it perpetually reemerges more pluralistic culturally and in terms of life-values, thereby becoming in many respects “unmanageable” (an administrator’s and a lawmaker’s nightmare). These arguments will lead to a discussion on the liberal democratic tradition and its measures and values.

Drawing on the philosophy of Gianni Vattimo, I will develop this argument through the following steps: first, I will offer an account of what I call the neo-conservative politics of fright while also offering reflections on other forms of fundamentalism. Next, I will elaborate on our current situation as a curious era in the history of metaphysics with emphasis on secularism as the destiny of the West. Thirdly, I will revisit the politics of fright from the viewpoint of the historical weakening as secularization. Next, I will look at the interplay of the exercise of sovereignty and the democratic measures. Finally, I will invite the readers to a preliminary project for a substantive democratic measure that, theoretically speaking, challenges the rise of politics of fright.

Politics of Fright in the Age of Accomplished Metaphysics

The politics of fright originates, as we know, with the late Cold-War era, when in the 1980s the world witnessed two concurrent processes: the decline of the “really existing socialism” with all its later ramifications, on the one hand, and

rise of neo-conservative revival of a certain fundamentalist Christian discourse along with emphasis on “fiscal responsibility” (targeting the Keynesian welfare state), removal of trade barriers (FTA, NAFTA, WTO), and unrestrained militarization (the Star Wars program), on the other. Epitomized by Ronald Reagan’s description of the Soviet Union and its allies as the “evil empire,” the politics of fright invites a return to the security of Evangelical-millenarian haven in the face of threat by *civilizational* enemies. Soon, however, the “evil empire” evaporated as the Eastern European regimes eventually collapsed, one after another, due to the internal socioeconomic crises that repressive state-socialism had managed to defer for decades. Frances Fukuyama’s influential Hegelian thesis about the “end of history” should be viewed in the context of such transformation. A decade later, with the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States—coincidental with a neo-conservative administration that had opted to compensate for the shortcomings of former Republican governments (and well expressed in the Project for the New American Century) in maintaining the global hegemony of the United States—a new civilizational enemy emerged. The timing could not have been more opportune: militant, fundamentalist Muslims had now replaced communism. So, there returned the familiar discourse of the politics of fright with new watchwords such as the “axis of evil.”

With respect to the rise of politics of fright—the entry of a certain discourse centering on a seemingly biblical notion of “evil,” and the view of the *other as enemy*, and therefore the attempt at global political homogenization, achieved through unilateralism and military occupation if necessary—a general, sociological observation is in order. This observation pertains the emergence of irreducible cultural diversity worldwide, but perhaps more visibly in the West in the context of our late modern era, situated in the history of Being. An indication of our late modern destiny, a vast plurality without a centre can be observed to encroach upon every normative aspect of life—from culture to sexuality and identity, from protest movements to self-help groups or New Age religions, from food consumption to democratic governance and fair trade. The *facticity* of such diversity can be adequately appreciated in the context of the decline of metaphysics as stable ground. No longer can such colonial ideals as progress or security justify cultural homogenization. No longer can science’s normative social effect be taken as the ultimate measure for the quality of life. No longer can pre-given religious or moral codes conveniently determine the way we conduct our lives and make our choices, pleasures, or responsibilities. Viewed from the standpoint of the destiny of Being, postcolonial knowledge, feminism and women’s movements, issues of sexual preference, the rise of aboriginal and indigenous peoples, or the creative resistances of the poor (as in Porto Alegre or Chiapas) all attest to the changing course of our societies.

The plurality that defines our time is almost unthinkable without the history of secularization in that it is due to secularization that the presence of religious edicts—as universal laws—in every aspect of life is weakening. As ebbs the presence of an omnipotent and overwhelming God in various realms of social

life, there arises the necessity for finding the particular laws (or gods) in each field of human activity—a painstaking feat indeed. Hence the new, postmetaphysical experience of God in the sense that the way we regulate our various life activities can no longer be directly derived from, or dogmatically attributed to, religious edicts. Therefore, seeking out the laws that define our social fields becomes a matter of agonistic consensus, public debate, and social activism. This leads to the unavoidable interpretive endeavor upon which our decisions will be based. Consequently, a late modern democracy that acknowledges the irreducible plurality of citizens is founded upon *consensus* and *interpretation*—both of which by definition provisional. At the heart of such democratic process, as Vattimo argues, is the move toward the reduction of violence in its many manifestations.¹

The politics of fright is the politics of continuing with the violent, colonial project of reducing the irreducible plurality of human civilization to the mandates of certain cultural beliefs and values—namely, fundamentalist religiosity (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism). I call it “fundamentalist” *stricto sensu*: the politics of fright dwells in a monolithic and unchanging reading of religious edicts as “fundaments.” It intends to retrieve and salvage what is deemed as essential and foundational out of the later, modern, and baffling mishmash of diversity and plurality of moral codes—prevalent in liberal democracies—that have in recent decades covered over those elemental moral codes associated with religion. As such, while fundamentalism itself involves an inescapable interpretive act, it steps away and condemns the *interpretive acts* that arise out of the recognition of today’s cultural plurality that permeates every society on earth. The politics of fright, accordingly, amounts to a politics against *consensus* and *public debate* and instead asserts itself through unilateralism. All that is different, the *other*, is thus posited categorically according to the preconceived hierarchy of the other’s potential for confrontation. In the post-communist era, the number one place is awarded to an overblown and unifying image of small fringes of Islamic fundamentalisms that in most cases have nothing to do with each other except for their opposition to Western global hegemony, since world history has favored, however contingently, the West in the past five century, taking it to the status of the First World, and in the case of post-WWII United States, a superior and mighty military machine and the world’s only superpower in the post-Soviet era.

Before further reflections, though, let us pause and establish the theoretical framework that will inform the analyses of this paper.

¹ See: Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala, “‘Weak Thought’ and the Reduction of Violence: A Dialogue with Gianni Vattimo.” *Common Knowledge* 8: 3 (2002). 452-463; see also: Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics and Law*, ed. Santiago Zabala, tr. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 57-58, 98-99, 146-49.

Secularism: the Destiny and Decline of the West

Let us consider as our theoretical point of departure, and thus treat as a given, the post-Heideggerian argument—cogently advanced by Gianni Vattimo in several occasions—that the history of Being in the West is indeed the history of secularization of Christianity. We know that Heidegger showed that with the technological Enframing (*Ge-stell*) the West has reached its fate as planetary domination at the end of metaphysics.² As the oblivion of Being in the face of beings (entities) readily at-hand, as the forgetfulness about the ontological difference, metaphysics is not a human handicraft or error but the history of Being itself. Thus Being has a “nihilistic vocation”³ in the sense that all grandiose and seemingly timeless gestures toward positing foundations that would ensure the stability of Being as full presence impoverish. This impoverishment, also, is not a human handiwork, of philosophers or thinkers, but the destiny (*Geschick*) of Being. Therefore, philosophy can no longer assume the role of searching for and positing foundational principles. As such, the end of metaphysics also announces the end of philosophy precisely due to the “nihilistic vocation” of Being. This amounts to stating that the end of metaphysics reveals in Being an inclination to assert its truth through weakening⁴—hence Vattimo’s advocacy of *il pensiero debole*, the “weak thought” or non-foundational thinking,⁵ a mode of thinking proper to our late modern or postmodern (or, cautiously, post-metaphysical) age. Hence also, Vattimo’s rethinking of philosophy in terms of “sociological impressionism”⁶ (to which I shall return).

The history of Being in the West is connected with both modernity and Christianity, indeed with an interesting relationship between the two. The end of metaphysics has brought about the dissolution of philosophies that claim to do away with religion, since it has unmistakable religious (Christian) overtone.⁷ In other words:

As in the forgetting of Being of which Heidegger spoke, here too ... it is less a case of recollecting the forgotten origin by making it present again than of recollecting that we have always already forgotten it, and that the recollection of this forgetfulness and this distance constitutes the sole authentic religious experience.⁸

The theological (Christian) allusions that one encounters in the works of diverse

² Martin Heidegger, “Overcoming Metaphysics,” in *The End of Philosophy*, tr. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003), 90.

³ Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, tr. by Luca D’Isanto and David Webb (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 35.

⁴ Ibid., 39.

⁵ See, for example, Vattimo and Zabala, “‘Weak Thought’ and the Reduction of Violence” (op. cit.).

⁶ Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 3, 87.

⁷ Vattimo, *Belief*, 28, 43; Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, tr. Luca D’Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 15.

⁸ Vattimo, *Belief*, 22.

philosophers—Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, arguably even Walter Benjamin, to name a few—attest to an *attempted* departure from the “onto-theological constitution of metaphysics... which keeps Being as the ground, and beings as what is grounded.”⁹ But such “attempts”—which in the works of Derrida, Vattimo, Werner Marx, or Reiner Schürmann appear in the form of postmetaphysical rethinking—also indicate that we cannot simply abandon metaphysics or wish religion away. The works of these philosophers, and many others, validates Vattimo’s point: the history of Being is the history of secularization in the Christian West. The parallel between Christianity and modernity marks the parallel processes of weakening both realms have presently undergone.

Following Heidegger, there cannot be an overcoming (*Überwindung*, in the sense of *überwunden*, to be overcame or defeated and left behind¹⁰) of metaphysics as a marked break in the history of Being, but rather distortion, healing and incorporation (*Verwindung*, in the sense of *verwunden*, to be incorporated¹¹). Secularism weakens Christian sacrality, while weak, postmetaphysical, and antifoundational thought dethrones the gestures of Reason and the *ego cogito* that reign over modernity by positing stable presence and transparent rationality of phenomena. Taking the *Überwindung* of metaphysics as *Verwindung*—intended by Heidegger—means that we should incorporate metaphysics in both its accomplishment of foundational representations (from the Greek *cosmos*, to the Latin *natura*, to the medieval God, to the modern *ego cogito*) and its ultimate impoverishment in sustaining these representations in a stable fashion. Here the notion of “representation” deserves a closer attention: we should understand the impoverishments of representations in terms of the “nihilistic vocation” of Being instead of viewing it as a consequence of application of critique. In other words, the presumed identity of Being with beings (entities)—an identity that can only be maintained due to their difference—and the hegemony of such identity is broken. Hence, our contemporary shared experience of a “time out of joint,” commonly but eloquently characterized by our parents as “things falling apart.” In our time of *diremption*, a stealthy *pull* toward the event of Appropriation, *Ereignis*, marks the withering of the hegemonization of particulars by universals as such hegemonies deplete in favor of beings “unified” in their irreducible singularity. A pull toward *Ereignis* can be cautiously sought in the rethinking of political life that prepares for singularities and their manifestations, an epochal “pull” that one may cautiously observe in the multiplication of contemporary social movements.¹² The diremption is experienced more intensely by those of us

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, tr. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002), 71.

¹⁰ See: Heidegger, “Overcoming Metaphysics,” 84, n. 1.

¹¹ See: *ibid*; see also: Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, tr. John R. Snyder (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1988), 172-3.

¹² For my modest attempts at locating the sociological “evidence” and arguing for the increased common impression of the lack of a unifying epochal experience in: Peyman Vahabzadeh, *Articulated Experiences: Toward A Radical Phenomenology of Contemporary Social Movements* (Albany:

who find ourselves increasingly having to rethink our social and political lives in the face of inescapable impoverishment in providing the (hoped-for) everlasting representations of mysteriously founded ultimate grounds, finding workable references to the “sociological facts” that would guide us through weakening foundations necessitates acumen and attunement to the process of secularization. For, with the abandonment of the idea of “overcoming,” it is secularization that captures, fairly accurately, our changing relationship with religion as well as our historical standing in an age of withering, late modernity. Stated differently, secularism is situated between Christianity and modernity.¹³ It reveals itself as our destiny (*Geschick*) in the history (*Geschichte*) of Being through weakening: the era of modernity is therefore situated in the history of salvation.¹⁴

In *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber developed the fascinating thesis, although factually not without errors, that the Protestant values of predestination, the calling, and individualization (of interpretations of religious principles) gave rise to the formation of the earliest entrepreneurial impulse. Weber’s sociological work draws on comparative analysis of Protestant and Catholic communities in terms of developing capitalist enterprises. Vattimo refers to Weber’s study to point out that secularization is an interpretive application of the Biblical message beyond the sacral.¹⁵

Specifically, the history of secularization in Christianity should be read through the concept of *kenosis*—that is, “God’s abasement to the level of humanity,” marked in the incipient moment of Christianity’s history by the Christ’s incarnation,¹⁶ that is the event in which the divine can assume corporeal representation. To us at this age, *kenosis* suggests a non-violent and not-absolute God of post-metaphysical epoch.¹⁷ In this way, then, secularization indicates “the constitutive trait of an authentic religious experience.”¹⁸ Furthermore, secularization leads to the inevitably diminishing influence of one body of laws—in the form of jurisprudence—over all spheres of life. The process of weakening, expressed through secularization, therefore involves the recognition of “the establishment of laws proper to each of many different fields and domains of experiences”—a recognition that at the same time undermines the modern notion (indeed: value) of progress.¹⁹

Now let us reflect on the present politics of fright through the lens of theory of

State University of New York Press, 2003); Peyman Vahabzadeh, “Technological Liberalism and the Anarchic Actor,” in Ian Angus (ed.), *Anarcho-Modernism: Toward A New Critical Theory, in Honour of Jerry Zaslove* (Vancouver: Talon Books, 2001), 341-350.

¹³ Vattimo, *Belief*, 41.

¹⁴ Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 42, 98.

¹⁵ Ibid., 45.

¹⁶ Ibid., 67.

¹⁷ Vattimo, *Belief*, 39.

¹⁸ Ibid., 21.

¹⁹ Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, 102-3.

secularization as the history of Being.

Secularization and the Politics of Fright

Back to the question of politics of fright, this time from the point of view of our age of accomplished metaphysics and in the sociological context of cultural plurality of our time (discussed above) two observations seem to be immediately in order.

First, the politics of fright in the West mistakes the metaphysical decline of fundaments and their representation for a threat to its historical hegemony. Many share this mistake because, if one looks at the "greater picture," one is likely to see a certain "correlation" between the impoverishment of metaphysics and the expansion of global influence of the West due to its technological superiority (among other things). Be it as it may, what complicates the situation is that those superior countries happen to be the ones with long traditions of liberal democracy, which somehow by default seems to render any threat against them a threat to democracy. But, for example, in the fundamentalist view of American neo-Conservatives, democratic decision-making does not stem from public debate of informed citizens—which reports the recognition of plurality—but from the principle of sovereignty. In the formalist understanding of the politics of fright, democracy is simply an achievement of western, Christian civilization, not a response to the plurality that is now inevitable at the age of accomplished metaphysics when all forms of representation of ultimacies are in disarray. The politics of fright remains entangled in the metaphysical ambit as a desperate response to the decline of fundaments and their retrieval.

The second, political, observation holds that the politics of fright reports an insecure religious interpretation (fundamentalism) and its acknowledgement of our changing, diverse world. The increased secularization of major and dominant religions—more visible in the Christian West and its civilizational expanse, but also breaking new grounds in the shape of democratic social movements and identity politics in the Islamic civilization—poses a threat against fundamentalist interpretations of religious edicts. Politically, such interpretations tend to foreclose on public debate on such issues as abortion, gay marriage, multi-lingual public education, or immigration laws. In so doing, fundamentalists—Christian, Islamic, Jewish, or Hindu—show their emphasis on the metaphysical separation of rhetoric from philosophy manifested in the withering of genuine public debate.²⁰ Consequently, instead of debating with, and persuading, their opponents, fundamentalists issue fiats of various forms,

²⁰ In this respect see: Peyman Vahabzadeh, "Of Hegemonies Yet to Be Broken: Rhetoric and Philosophy in the Age of Accomplished Metaphysics." *The European Legacy* 10:4 (August 2005), 375-388.

from unilateral military occupation on the pretext of existence of the weapons of mass destruction “over there” (while they are really “right here”) to the presumptuous summoning to Jihad on an enemy by individuals not even nearly qualified jurisprudentially to make such calls. Since persuasion is not of any concern to the politics of fright, we are left with exercise of force: instead of the “dialogue of civilizations” (to quote former half-hearted Iranian reformist President Khatami) we have a “clash of civilizations” (Huntington).

Thus, the politics of fright presents a socially and politically disastrous type of “politics of immanence” in that such politics, first, is inseparable from contending claims of sovereignty through adamant appeal to what Giorgio Agamben calls the “state of exception,” and second, it involves the exteriorization of the interior insecurity, which reports that foundations are in fact shaky, thereby, turning the other into an enemy—that is, an absolutization of the other. On closer look, the clash of civilizations and the dialogue of civilizations are both based on similar assumptions of sovereignty, as both clash or dialogue—without trying to trivialize their different consequences—are poisoned with the conceit that there is a presumed “civilizational will,” which each sovereign apparently represents. The history of Being as weakening and diremption, of course, debases such arrogance.

As an attempt for social and political re-foundation, fundamentalism cannot but move against the historical grain of weakening as the destiny of Being. The increased legal-administrative secularization of not only the West but also the rest of the world—or the predominance of rational-legal authority, to use Weber’s term—leaves fundamentalist interpretations of religious edicts without much practical authority. To simplify the matter, in the pre-modern world the laws were derived from moral (religious) principles, but nowadays the laws decide public moral principles despite individual or communal non-adherence. Evidence abound: we are expected to be politically correct to avoid, say, being implicated in “hate crimes” (an extreme case); the ruling of the State of Oregon on assisted euthanasia shapes up, despite opposition, the public’s attitude toward the issue; Canadian recognition of abortion and gay marriage as rights will change public perception in a generation’s time. These examples (on par with Vattimo’s sociological impressionism) report how the process of weakening and the slackened grip of stable foundations have caused our laws to shift away from representing presumably more fundamental moral principles to reflecting the emerging, myriad forms of communal life and identity politics (the best example of which is the recognition of gay marriage in Canada). Laws become a reflection of our changing *practical values* which in turn shape our moral codes.

In our age, measure cannot be extracted from ultimate foundations. The politics of fright and the rise of fundamentalist readings of religion resist this tendency by trying to reinstate and rewrite the foundations of our laws. Measure, in fundamentalist views, can only be extracted from unshakable fundaments. An

effective strategy to achieve this is to transform the “other” into the “enemy,” which amounts to simultaneous the reduction of the plurality of the other “out there” and as well as “in here”: project the inner insecurity into an external threat and create fear to attract and unify the undecided populace.

Whence arises the escalated violence in all its manifestations—terrorist, military, or juridical. The reassertion of representation of secure fundaments by the politics of fright—when, following our epochal-sociological facticity, Being can no longer sustain the selfsameness of a ground with presence—can only be “remedied” through force and the reassertion of sovereignty through the “state of exception” (Agamben). The politics of fright therefore involves increased violence instead of reducing it (Vattimo) due to the “nihilistic vocation” of Being. But before attending to such issues further, let me offer two points, one by way of summary, the next by way of keeping the record straight.

The first, summary, point: if secularization is strictly a Western-Christian experience, and if the decline of the West as the “land of the sunset” shows itself best in the irreducible plurality of cultures, values, and traditions, then the politics of fright is the politics of counter-current in our age through a *certain* Western-Christian universalizing discourse. Moreover, if Islam—situated geopolitically in the oil-rich Middle East and is thus of inexhaustible interest to the Western military-industrial complex—represents in the present context a religion without the experience of secularization properly speaking, then it is only expected that *politicized* Islam takes the form of universalizing counter discourse (counter to the West), that is simultaneously partly combative (the militant cells and networks) and partly reconciliatory (Iran’s former President Khatami). This indicates that on the planetary level, the defense of the world-historical centrality of the West, its universality and legitimacy, decreases in the face of growing cultural plurality, while the West reaches, ironically, unparalleled global hegemony through technology, media, and free-trade capitalism. It also indicates that at the present junction, competing fundamentalist claims—Islamic ones, namely—also vehemently search for a sovereign interpretation, one which they are constantly denied in the face of growing secular interpretations of Islam.

Which brings us to our second point about the “secularization” of Islam. Before attending to it, however, I need to exclaim a caveat. Heidegger has explicitly warned against applying the European concepts to non-Western civilizations, because such concepts relate to Being through European languages.²¹ As such, the reference to Islam cannot in any way be derived from the phenomenology of epochs. Furthermore, while secularism presents an internal interpretive movement within Christian theology, it remains external to the history and theology of Islam and the emergence of debates on secularism within Islamic tradition must be viewed as a response to the exigency of time. Finally, I can only

²¹ See: Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, tr. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper Collins, 1971), 2-5.

remain helplessly apologetic about the brief (and thus reductive) nature of my summaries of the following elegant interpretations.

Two selected arguments in the Islamic philosophy of history fairly summarize the point of departure of considering secularization in Islam. The first comes from the foremost Islamic thinker from India and, and posthumously a founding intellectual father of Pakistan, Sir Mohammad Iqbal Lahori (1877-1938). Pertaining to the Sunni tradition in general, Iqbal's argument arises from the principle of the "Seal of the Prophet," or *khatamiyyat*, one of the main tenets of Islam. The Arabic *khatam* (from verb root *khatm*, "to terminate") means the "last," but it also implies the "seal," and the principle of *khatamiyyat* refers to the permanent closure of the line of Abrahamic prophets with the Prophet Mohammad. This closure has a significant civilizational meaning for Iqbal, as he interprets the "Seal" as an indication of the emergence of inductive reasoning in humanity. With the intellectual maturity of humanity, the sending of prophets for guidance and authority would no longer be necessary. Inductive and critical thinking allows humanity to make decisions—based on an interpretation of the principles left for them by the Abrahamic prophets—about their contemporary affairs. As a result, it is no longer necessary to subsume all human affairs under pre-given jurisprudential fields and scholastic debates within these fields, but to allow the multiplication of fields of human praxis and the fields of knowledge that necessitate that humans rely on their reasoning to pursue a favorable outcome in a given condition. One can see that in Iqbal's interpretation, secularization, as the multiplication of the fields of human praxis and knowledge, is rooted in the principle of the "Seal of the Prophet." Stated differently, the process of secularization is indeed enabled by the "Seal" which in turn gave rise to an epochal-interpretive turn.²² The "age of reason," in this interpretation, emerged in the Islamic tradition almost a millennium before the Christian Europe, although, one must add, without the latter's technological-scientific turn and thus without epoch-making civilizational consequences. This acclaimed turn to reason, however, did not substantively constitute, despite Iqbal's claim and with the exception of the early and short-lived school called the *Mo'tazeleh* (influenced by Greek philosophy), a formative interpretive scheme.

The messianic principle of *Mahdaviyyat*, the apocalyptic return of the Occult Imam Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism (dominant in Iran) challenges Iqbal's interpretation, as it leaves open—both conceptually and historically—the principle of guidance by the Infallible line of descent traced back to the Prophet Mohammad. Whence arises a different approach to the secular dilemma in the work of contemporary Shi'i philosopher, Abdolkarim Soroush. The point of departure for Soroush's uneasy advocacy of a secularized Shi'ism is the assertion that all Abrahamic religions have appeared in order to teach humanity about how to live justly and in accordance to human dignity. As such, for Soroush it is

²² See: Sir Mohammed Iqbal, *The Reconstruction Religious Thought in Islam* (Dehli: Kitab Publishing House, 1974 [orig. 1932]).

justice—not religion—that is indeed universal. All religions are expressions, bound by their temporal and cultural contexts, of the “primordial” impulse of justice. Soroush, therefore, views religion as a knowledge system that enables humanity to struggle with issues pertaining to justice. Religious understanding is always inevitably epochal and just like all other forms of knowledge (science included) it moves forward along its evolutionary path—a path paved by epochal interpretations. One understands religion in each given historical period according to the questions of that period. Consequently, first, no question can exhaust the problem of religious knowledge, and second, no knowledge-claim is definitive because it only reflects simply a specific historical-interpretive attempt that can be refuted, expanded, or contracted. Inductive reasoning finds its significance in religious thought because it shows the exigencies of the age and directs our interpretations toward attending the questions thus revealed.²³ The issue of religious knowledge, therefore, goes beyond the terms of *Shari'a* or Islamic jurisprudence. As such, Soroush bypasses the messianic impulse of Shi'ism perceived by many as an impediment to a secularized Shi'ism, since messianism itself is also open to interpretation in this model. In the end, though, Soroush remains apathetic toward the rationalization of religious principles and as such falls significantly short in advocating a secularized interpretation of Shi'ism and succumbs, more or less, to Islamic mysticism of sorts. One would, as I do, wonder about how much of Soroush's work is in fact the impact of contemporary clash in the country: if anything, the expansion of an invincible undertow of secular culture and movements in Iran by secular intellectuals, many notable moderate Muslims, urban women and youth—despite the setbacks constantly imposed by a repressive regime—marks Iran as the a unique country in the Islamic world in that a social movement, grassroots as well as intellectual, toward the secularization of life strives to outlive a theocratic state. In this respect, the country is headed toward the reinvigoration of the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-11, which led to the country's secular Constitution where the *Shari'a* edicts were transformed into the legal discourse, and thus toned down, to fit the exigencies of mundane life.

The process of “secularization” of Islam, precariously under way today despite resistances and pains, of course does not conform, as mentioned, to the history of Being as weakening and cannot, should not, be thus analyzed. However, it witnesses the “fact”—as an expression of our epochal *facticity*—that our time is indeed one of weakening of foundations, a time in which, sociologically, the emergence of the new can no longer be effectively hindered by cultural or religious traditions. If we agree on this point, then we must also agree that in our global context today the term “secularism” should be taken in a broader fashion than its originally Christian roots. By all accounts, such a broadening of the

²³ See: Abdolkarim Soroush, *Qabz va bast-e te'orik-e shari'at: nazariyyeh takamol-e ma'refat-e dini* [The Theoretical Constriction and Expansion of Shari'a: An Evolutionary Theory of Religious Knowledge] (Tehran: Sarat Cultural Institute, 1992). See also my hasty summary of Soroush in: Peyman Vahabzadeh, “Democratizing Shi'ism: The Theoretical Foundations of Iran's Reform Movement.” *Humanitas* 3 (2004). 51-55.

concept of secularization, which is indeed a weakening, hints at the global reach of Western metaphysics. Precisely because I believe that Vattimo's characterization secularization as weakening still holds in the global reach, I must also acknowledge that in much of the Islamic traditions today "secularism" is taken as a loaded term, much ideologized, meant by its opponents to provoke the rejection of religious traditions and taken oftentimes as equivalent to laicism, a term that is more of a legal status, than an intellectual-interpretive one.

The politics of fright, characterized by the "clash of civilizations" between the neo-Conservatives in the West and radical wings of Islamic fundamentalism, is a reaction against the process of weakening as secularization and a push toward undoing the achievements or impeding the prospects of secularization. The oblique relationship of politics of fright and secularization in the West and its democratic traditions, however, deserves a closer look, for it is at this juncture that the weakening of measures creates a paradox: while it accommodates the multiplication of new voices and cultures, it also leaves us unguarded against the rise of neo-Conservatism.

The Principle of Sovereignty and the Democratic Dilemma

The politics of fright cannot be properly thought outside the existing political system of state sovereignty. If the politics of fright, the politics of fundamentalist interpretation(s) of religious principles, is an attempt at resisting and annulling the late modern pluralistic interpretations launched by various identities and social movements, then it must by definition involve a claim to sovereignty. No wonder, therefore, that the capturing of the state as *the* institution of modern sovereign power, through national elections or by other means, tops the agenda list of any religious fundamentalism in our world. The issue of sovereignty assumes, in our time, the ruse of "security." In the West, it is the security of the state (often guised as the "security of the people) in the face of the other as the enemy that grows into the hegemonic discourse. For Islamic fundamentalism, what is at stake is the security of a unique, "civilizational" culture—always posed as homogeneous (which it is not) in order to be represented by a self-acclaimed sovereign (counter-)power—that has been under attack by so-called west-toxicating international media and corrupting messages of secular modernity.

Shifting our focus to the western states, the politics of fright therefore represents the politics of the time when the threat to security, which is ultimately the security of the sovereign, is transposed as the potential cause of violation against the very laws that bestow rights and legitimize the sovereign. *But this much-coveted security in fact reflects the insecurity of the inside* (an ultimacy, no longer able to create representational figurations—not without resistance anyway), *not the*

security of the outside (which, in principle, should require from the sovereign to uphold the fair treatment of the *other* as a universal political principle). So the planned and implemented securization of the outside (through preemptive strikes, regime changes, and unilateralism) in fact conceals the inner insecurity of an interpretation whose claim to ultimacy of representation of certain fundamental grounds can only be maintained through force. One recalls Giorgio Agamben, who wrote about another, but not dissimilar, context: "Exteriority—the law of nature and the principle of the preservation of one's own life—is truly the innermost center of the political system, and the political system lives off it in the same way that the rule... lives off the exception."²⁴

As argued, the politics of fright indicates the retrieval of an ultimate representation. Thus, we witness today that sovereign exertions are confronted with the weakening of Being in beings (the loss of representation). Hence the ever more urgency of exercise of force by the sovereign. This exercise, however, can only take place within the paradoxical state of exception (Agamben): *in order for the sovereign to assert itself as the law it has to stand outside the law.* "The paradox of sovereignty consists in the fact the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order.... This means that the paradox can also be formulated this way: 'the law is outside itself,' or 'I, the sovereign, who am outside the law, declare that there is nothing outside the law'."²⁵ The hype about the weapons of mass destruction "over there" (while it is mostly stored "right here"), unilateral and preemptive wars, the Guantanamo Bay camp, regime changes, and various homeland security measures against immigrants or foreigners only manifest the state of exception which the sovereign grants itself under the overarching hegemonic inculcation of the masses through the politics of fright.

This argument urges us to consider the conditions under which democratic secularism in the West meets the politics of fright. Neo-Conservative politics in our time generally aims at the political refoundation of liberal democracy. What evidence better than recent decisions of the current United States administration such as the outright prohibition of gay marriage and containment of the right to abortion within certain limits (only the tip of the iceberg)? Liberal democracy is based on a secularized proceduralism in which, to shift to the terminology of Max Weber, a rational-legal authority is derived from the "leveling" effect of democracy on the governed.²⁶

A proper understanding of origins of the law will enable us to observe precisely how liberal democracy is used and manipulated by neo-Conservative fundamentalism in the West. Reiner Schürmann argues that every law comes

²⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 36.

²⁵ Ibid., 15.

²⁶ Max Weber, "Bureaucracy," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 226.

from the maximization of an original experience. Schürmann characterizes this maximization as “fantasmic,” showing through her massive interpretation of Western philosophy in *Broken Hegemonies* that although every law claims to embody an original move toward justice, by virtue of the law’s thrust for foundations, there will inevitably remain a widening gap between law and justice. The law, stated differently, is a decontextualized-universalized foundation of an original experience of justice that remains context-bound and thus “unfoundable.” Hence the law’s appeal to violence as the means of upholding itself and protecting its foundations. The violence every law embodies is exercised by virtue of assigning a common ground to the plurality of masses within the territory over which the law has jurisdiction. Consequently, “the law always *enforces isomorphism*” just as “it is impossible to demand any kind of extra-territoriality in relation to its *integrative violence*.²⁷ The discord between law and justice is also at the core of Vattimo’s position with respect to the law.²⁸

One can observe that our laws reflect the secular experiences of their originators. As such, the constitutionalism that stands at the heart of secular rational-legal authority of liberal democracies indeed represents the universalization of a specific, historically bound experience of governance that is tied to the notion of humans’ inalienable rights. The fact that our political systems attest to “theologico-political” foundations, as Claude Lefort rightly maintains,²⁹ does not undermine our argument. On the contrary, it reinforces the point that secularization is the movement of weakening of religious experience and its political figurations like the king—an experience that we have inherited in the form of secularism that contextualizes our everyday lives within the late-modern era of postcolonial pluralism and unyielding postmetaphysical awareness of the violent nature of foundations.

It would not be farfetched, therefore, to observe that secularization has *practically* sent the religious experience of political life into historical memory. Two recent incidents, both in France, the birthplace of *laïcité*, remind us of that fact. The first was the 2003 French government’s ban on religious apparel in public institutions (especially schools and universities) under the rubric of the protection of French laic institutions from religious manifestations that, it was argued, led to dangerous religious and cultural divisions in society. The second incident, capturing the world’s attention, was the (alas, aimless) autumn of 2005 uprisings and riots of the vast many marginalized and ghettoized, the French underworld that was systematically and violently excluded from participation in the French *laïcité*. The prospect of integration that the first incident offered—through force, ironically—was exposed through the second incident. Finding their experiences

²⁷ Reiner Schürmann, *Broken Hegemonies*, tr. Reginald Lilly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 48.

²⁸ See: Vattimo, “Doing the Law Justice,” in *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 133-51.

²⁹ Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, tr. David Macey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 213-55.

totally excluded from the French polity, the rioting minorities—virtually all of whom from the Middle East, North Africa, or Eastern Europe—showed their frustration by setting ablaze the material symbols of French citizenship proper.

The politics of fright can be interpreted as a movement that aims at pushing back the limits of secular democracies for the retrieval of religious experience that has been excluded from political modernity. Bound by the proceduralism of a rational-legal political system, the neo-Conservative attempt at political refoundation must inevitably undergo the time consuming process of redefining laws according to the neo-Conservative values that tend to gain urgency in the face of an absolute enemy and galvanized discourses of fright. As such, the secular experience of the law as the embodiment of the protection of the rights of citizens—an experience which remains forever open to reinterpretation and thus inevitably leads to multiplication (Canada exemplifies such secular experience)—is gradually replaced by an experience of the law as the measure of absolute values of an uncompromising and fundamentalist, and thus violent, religious interpretations. In this process of refoundation, fundamentalism is paradoxically aided by a founding feature of liberal democracy—that is, its rational-legal proceduralism (to which I shall return shortly). But neo-Conservatives can only achieve such refoundation, one might call it “*de-secularization*,” through the transformation of the *other* into an enemy and the treatment of the *outside as threat to inner security*, on the one hand, and the imposition of unilatralism through the *state of exception*, on the other. The latter cannot be understood without the place of the sovereign in modern political life.

As mentioned, the rational-legal proceduralism that characterizes liberal democracy lends an opportunity to fundamentalism in its de-secularization encroachment. No wonder the three major totalitarian states of the twentieth-century—Bolshevik Russia, Nazi Germany, and Fascist Italy—have all arose from (shaky) liberal democracies. Elsewhere, I have already reflected on the institutionally reductive character of liberal democracy—which I call “technological liberalism”—to connect liberal democracy with Heidegger’s technological *Ge-stell* as the order of “standing-reserve.” In addition to Weber’s characterization of modern state as “a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory,”³⁰ I have argued that liberal democratic states of today have moved away, thanks to the successful hegemonic institution of Western societies, to a great extent from the embodiment of force and can indeed be characterized as the having monopoly over the legitimate distribution of rights.³¹ But the bestowal of rights upon citizens can only be realized when the actors are reduced to the specific hegemonized subjects that accord with liberal democratic polity. To achieve such reduction, the rights must be codified through legal-administrative proceduralism. This point is key, because by detaching the struggles for civil or

³⁰ Max Weber, “Politics as Vocation,” in *From Max Weber* (op. cit.), 78.

³¹ Vahabzadeh, *Articulated Experiences*, 122-3.

individual rights (which are eventually realized in the laws) from the original experience of injustice that instigated the struggle, such proceduralism replaces all forms of experience (religious experience included) with a certain secular experience that is highly technical. This proceduralism—that is, technical codification of grievances and rights—replaces the question of measures, of the substantive political language games that could protect secularism from religious (and other) forms of backlash. The French solution to this problem, *laïcité*, is no solution at all (evidently), because it involves the protection of sovereignty embodied by the state (that has become discriminately Franco-centric in the face of massive immigration) instead of targeting institutional proceduralism.

The rise of neo-Conservative politics of fright can be viewed in this context as a reaction against and a clever exploitation of the cold proceduralism concomitant with secular societies. The neo-Conservatives of the current administration in the United States are clearly testing the grounds to see if the liberal proceduralism can withstand the ideological impositions and transformations brought about by radical, Christian Right. It is true that by virtue of its deeply rooted institutionalization, more often than not secular proceduralism does slow down and contain the extent of neo-Conservative de-secularization. Nonetheless, as my earlier reference to totalitarian regimes witness, proceduralism stands no chance against substantive refoundation. The danger lies in the fact that since the proceduralism that characterizes liberal democracy is sustained by the principle of sovereignty and the sovereign's unique prerogative to grant itself the state of exception, the neo-Conservative refoundation necessitates a politics of fright to justify its transformation of secular proceduralism. We have now come the full circle.

One last point with respect to the issue of proceduralism: in his astute analysis of politics at the perceived end of modernity, Vattimo dwells in a certain conception of proceduralism as characterizing modernity. Situating the problem of proceduralism in the context of the secular weakening of foundations, he posits proceduralism as lacking metaphysical foundations. The “overcoming” (*Überwindung*) of metaphysics which can only be possible through distortion and recovery (*Verwindung*) “necessitate” the increased proceduralism as an act of interpretation, in western democracies. With the decline of colonialism and increased cultural heterogeneity, the substantive language games that provide foundations for modern polity are now weakening. This argument leads him to his apology (defense) of proceduralism.³² Vattimo's point is well taken. My only objection, however, is that proceduralism leaves us vulnerable to the assaults of radical foundationalisms that, as I hope I have shown earlier, have found in proceduralism the Achilles' Heel of secular political edifice. Not heeding this subtle but key problem will leave the advocate of secular democracies—however problematic they may be—defenseless against substantive political refoundation of the religious Right.

³² See: Vattimo, “An Apology for Proceduralism,” in *Nihilism and Emancipation*, 152-62.

I have advanced in this paper, in a modest way, the idea that politics of fright can be properly understood when it is situated in the “end of metaphysics” analytical context. However, while advocating such analysis, I find it dangerously simplistic to adhere to politics without “normative” measures. Among post-Heideggerian philosophers, this has always been an issue: Werner Marx, to whom I am indebted for my concept of “measure,” advocated a “postmetaphysical ethics” in terms of “poetic measure.”³³ Reiner Schürmann attended to the question of unrestrained singularity of postmetaphysical *Ereignis* in the face of various universalizing forces of technicity.³⁴ Gianni Vattimo advocates the reduction of violence, in its various manifestations, especially the juridical ones, as a measure of postmetaphysical politics.³⁵

Here, to conclude this paper with a remark of hope and under the shroud of these epochal thinkers, I would like to propose the measure of *alterity* (or otherness) as the substantive language game that could enable secular democracies to resist fundamentalist interpretations and neo-Conservative political refoundation. In the following section, I will starkly contrast and briefly outline two modes of politics which I call “politics of immanence” and “politics of transcendence.” While invoking certain continuities with past philosophical traditions, the usage of these terms is (in a heretical way) phenomenological. I do not use the term “transcendence,” for instance, in a dialectical way and thus without reference to *Aufhebung* (sublation). Rather, I use it to signify the act of reaching beyond one’s constitutive conditions in search of the measures that would guide one’s inner quest for a new political life in this time of confusion and fright.

Politics of Immanence, Politics of Transcendence

Granting myself the luxury of succinctness, I would like to keep a simplistic dualism in the rest of this text. When asked what *kind* of political ethics leads to democracy, we often tend to list such virtues as tolerance, respect of rights, non-violence, and so on, not knowing that these are nothing but the traits of a certain ontogeny of politics. Put simply, we have a tendency to see the ethics that informs the “democratic conduct” as the latter’s conditions. What I suggest here briefly is that democratic or undemocratic conducts do not really stem from certain ethical principles; rather, such conducts and their ethical principles are nothing but expressions of two different constitutive acts—each giving rise to

³³ See: Werner Marx, *Is There A Measure on Earth? Foundations for A Nonmetaphysical Ethics*, tr. Thomas J. Nenon and Reginald Lilly (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

³⁴ See: Reiner Schürmann, *Heidegger On Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy*, tr. Christine-Marie Gros (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); see also: Schürmann, *Broken Hegemonies*.

³⁵ See: Vattimo and Zabala, “‘Weak Thought’ and the Reduction of Violence.” See also: Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation* (op. cit.).

one or the other political conduct. Let me call one the “politics of immanence”—that which makes undemocratic conduct possible—and the other the “politics of transcendence”—to whom democratic conduct owes its manifestation.

The *politics of immanence* is a politics of ultimate principles, in which the entire political edifice is (re-)instituted around a certain referential point—race, history, ethics, or religion—that functions, in first glance, not only as the *raison d'être* of the existing regime, but also, more significantly, as the historical necessity for its emergence. The ultimate principles of such politics thus attain the status of uncontested knowledge to which the public subscribes en masse. But like any other principle claiming ultimacy, it is nothing but a phantasm—a mere assumption, an assertion, a claim—one which reigns supreme simply due to its success in excluding other, competing claims. Thus, the monopoly of truth-claims gives this type of politics its “immanence”: the principles upon which this politics is founded are never left out in the open where it can be contested. Rather, it is vehemently guarded with paranoia, lest contact with a foreign agent undermine its self-acclaimed purity. The Institution of an external “other” is first on the agenda of such politics. The resistance against a perceived “other” is the highest justification for the regime’s policies. In the politics of immanence the borders are totally fixed, not only to guard the sovereign referent from the other outside, but more significantly, from the other inside.

The political regime thus edified creates the illusion of a grandiose “inside” that must not in any case be compromised. Sovereignty is achieved through the maximization of the perceived ultimate principles to most any area of social life. That is why politics of immanence cannot survive without the presence of an outside threat or a foreign agent (inside)—call it as you wish, no shortage of terms in this case—that apparently has sworn to undermine this phantasmic principle. How ironic that a regime based on a unique, immanent referent will cease to exist in the absence of a perceived threat from afar. The ultimacy of such principles now functions as the organizing truth by making a series of loose and unwarranted conceptual equations—and their identical social practices—with the supreme referent. Maximalist interpretations of the ultimate principles make these equations possible. At its heart, the politics of immanence involves the state of exception and preemptive politics. It also involves a protectionist-sovereignist attitude toward the self, as the representation of an apparently unshakable fundament. The politics of immanence is one of foundationally sanctioned normative activities and institutionally expected responses to new situations which are usually expressed in various forms of denial of the new or the other.

Intellectually, the principles of such political regimes can effortlessly be challenged (although in general not without considerable human cost). One simply needs to refuse the supreme referent and the regime will conceptually collapse. That explains why a regime of immanence has to be delivered with the forceps of a revolutionary fervor and needs to replace education, reflection,

information and analysis with propaganda. The maximized principle that governs this politics necessitates a majoritarian support based on the “legitimacy” of greater numbers. But whether the conceptual collapse of the regime, which can be delivered by any concerned and informed citizen, translates into social and political action—that indeed is a different question, although oftentimes such translation does take place.

The *politics of transcendence* should now be easy to sketch, since we can already tell what it is *not* (however sketchy this may seem!). Such politics receives its principles from the treatment of an arrivant, a foreigner, lost stranger, the immigrant, or an “other.” What is to be guarded is the process of receiving the arrivant, of recognizing the “other” as other, without trying to deny otherness. Thus the politics of transcendence is a politics that receives its legitimacy from the gaze of the outsider—no matter here or there. The success of such politics is measured by the treatment of minorities, immigrants, the invisible, impoverished, injured and voiceless. The politics of transcendence is the field of genuine, *an-anarchic* praxis as it seeks to bring opening, and the new, to the institutionally sanctioned normative activity in a manner that refuses (*an-*) a founding gesture (*archē*).³⁶

Precisely because the boundaries across which transcendence are measured are never fixed (unlike immanent politics), the politics of transcendence involve the perpetual, and thus inevitably transient, fixing of the terms of agreement between the self and the other, the host and the arrivant. In other words, such politics necessitates the perpetual redefinition of what constitutes the self in the face of the other. Offering the boundaries and constitutive elements of the self and the other necessitate a democratic politics that refuses to essentialize either this or that side of the boundary. As such, the politics of transcendence is the politics directed at the foreigner standing at the border as well as the foreigner native to this land—both awaiting entry. The politics of transcendence always retains the discord between the arrivant and the host, which takes the form of criticism, genuine articulation of experiences, and social antagonism. Such politics, therefore, remains, strictly speaking, “political.” But since it does not involve exclusionary practices, the politics of transcendence must be a democratic politics—one that perpetually attempts at submitting the sovereign to the needs of the other. It is on par with Vattimo’s advocacy of reduction of violence.

This is how the politics of transcendence is based on the principle of inalienable rights. These rights require well-defined procedural thoroughfare accessible equally to both governing and governed. Thus the procedural legality of decisions remains highly at stake in such politics, lest a wrong turn undermine or reprimand the principle of transcendence—that is, the recognition of the

³⁶ I have specifically discussed these issues in my *Articulated Experiences* (Ch. 6) and “Technological Liberalism and the Anarchic Actor” (op. cit.)

"other"—upon which the entire political edifice based. Political life under such conditions necessitates the direct involvement of informed citizens, their continuous sobriety, unlearning discrimination and uncalled-for judgments, and finally, the neighborly treatment of each "other" and one another.

Two caveats are in order: first, the measure against which a politics of transcendence gauges the absolute arrivant is based on the arrivant's commitment to politics of transcendence. Thus, this proposed politics could not be attributed to the blind faith in the messianism that is always "to-come." Nor is such politics relativistic. The measure of such politics, the respect for transcendence and the care for the other is "normatively" the reciprocal respect and care of the arrivant. This will allow, as much as practically possible, for a safeguard against the hijacking of such transcendent and inclusive politics by immanent and exclusive politics—particularly in the time of fright!

Second, the two contrary principles of "immanence"—closure—and "transcendence"—openness—are not in actual cases mutually exclusive. Democratic or despotic societies retain both principles to varying degrees. That is why there is always the possibility that a despotic state may meet its own demise in the shadow of a rising democratic movement. It is, contrariwise, also possible that a democratic state will degenerate into despotic reaction. Still, there are many cases in which democratic states advocate one or another despotic policy: the fanatical interpretation of secularism in France, referred to earlier, led to the enforced removal of religious apparel in arenas of public education (which in fact hides French nationalism—an ideology no less disturbing than any religious public manifestation). This short reflection had the luxury of keeping them as neat binary terms—which is never the case. Thus, the two *types* of politics, do not originate in two seemingly opposing places. Contrary as they are, they have their origins in what is one and the same, which bears the stamp of our epochal insertedness at this specific junction in the history of Being.

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