ETHNO-RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS CHALLENGING THE SECULAR STATE*

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Resumo: *Os movimentos fundamentalistas religiosos agem em nome e em defesa de uma verdade transcendental. Eles consideram o Estado secular como seu principal inimigo, porque este afirma legitimar seu poder independentemente da legitimação religiosa. Tais movimentos, ao contrário, consideram sua religião como o repositório da verdade absoluta e fonte última de legitimidade das leis humanas. Daí o paradoxo de suas formas de pensar e agir socialmente: são pós-seculares, mas, ao mesmo tempo, lutam para transformar seus princípios religiosos em categorias políticas. Depois de examinar dois casos empíricos de movimentos fundamentalistas étnico-religiosos (a Buddhist Power Force-BBS no Sri Lanka e o movimento Hindutva na Índia), podemos fazer algumas observações conclusivas sobre os desafios teóricos e metodológicos que esses movimentos trazem para a sociologia da religião. Pensamos que, em ambos os casos, estamos lidando com movimentos coletivos que parecem ser capazes de desafiar e minar o modelo do estado secular.*

Palavras-chave: *Fundamentalismo Religioso. Política. Religião. Nacionalismo. Estado Secular.*

The religious fundamentalist movements act on behalf and in defense of a truth absolutely transcendent. They regard the secular state as their main enemy, because it claims to legitimate its power *etsi Deus non daretur[1]*, independently

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on religious legitimation. They regard instead their religion as the repository of absolute truth, ultimate source of legitimacy of human laws. Hence the paradox of their ways of thinking and acting socially: they are post-secular, but, at the same time, they are fighting to transform the religious principles in political categories. Indeed, in some cases, the militants act according to the political schemes to assert the primacy of their own faith over all others. In this sense, the fundamentalist movements are post-secular (in the sense of overcoming of the secular state), but also they *secularize* religious ideas in political categories. In a word, it seems to me that they move in the name of a radical political theology in contemporary societies. If, according to Carl Schmitt (1927, 1929), the modern political sphere is constituted as the field of human action whose meaning is determined by the polarity *Freund* (friend) and *Feind* (enemy), fundamentalist movements share this radically perspective right from the very premises of their religious beliefs. By doing so, in the beginning of their act it is already the germ of secularization. Politics is the tool that allows bringing up to the extreme socio-logical necessity of war between friend and foe, nourished by a literalist approach to the sacred texts. It is a communicative action that represents the dramaturgical battle between truth and falsehood, between good and evil in the political stage. The eschatological *polemos,* which is narrated in a sacred text, becomes the linguistic and communicative code that translates without particular cultural mediations and without any particular modesty and moral scruples the language of faith in the redeeming virtue of politics. The fundamentalist movements have so far interpreted the task of staging the crisis of a certain form of secular state, it was stated first in modern history in the West and, later, especially after the Second World War, the post-colonial countries. What was the project of Gandhi and Nehru? Certainly not to build a nation of Hindū people based on the complex system of religious beliefs, which we in the West have come to call Hinduism. The choice of the fathers of modern India was for a secular democratic state, non-denominational, then[2]. However, they recognized that the Indian society was multi-religious, and a peaceful coexistence between different faiths would have benefited the same democratic life. Secular, therefore, in their view, it did not mean anti-religious; indeed, the religions in their diversity were, or might be the salt of democracy, a way to recognize each other without making war (CHAKARABARTY, 2006; SEN, 2006).

I would like to argue the topic, as outlined above, in three steps. The first of a theoretical nature, the other two, empirical. In the first part, I will underline briefly the characteristics of a type of socio-religious action conventionally call fundamentalism[3]. In the following paragraphs, I am focusing on two case studies. On the one hand, the emergence of a fundamentalist movement in Sinhalese Buddhism, and, second, the occurrence of similar movement in Hindu environ-

ment in India. These two case studies are the counter-intuitive demonstration to what extend the fundamentalist trend has taken hold not only in the monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), but also in those that we classify as polytheistic systems of beliefs or that, in principle, does not necessarily presuppose the existence of one God. In addition, the case of Buddhism helps to resize the current stereotype about this religion as a worldview inherently opposed to violence. It is not true if we take into account the aggressive attitudes by some groups of Buddhist monks, both in Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Against the neutral secular state, though not hostile to the various religious faiths, Hindus or Buddhists radical movements *secularize* principles and rituals, transforming them into direct political struggle, in a set of functional practices to the conquest of power. The fundamentalist approach thus becomes a means of effective communication to select new elite for a ethno-nationalist policy.

THE FUNDAMENTALISM'S IDEAL-TYPE AND THE ETHNO-RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

Fundamentalism is a controversial issue. The social scientists who accept the concept and take a global, comparative approach are divided: some interpret the phenomenon as an expression (or the quintessence) of modernity; others see it as a reaction to modernity. To sum up, there are three main points of view. According to one approach, fundamentalism is a clear reaction to modernity, a defensive action against the individualization of belief and socio-religious identity (MEYER, 1989). A second orientation, well represented by Lawrence (1989) and Eisenstadt (1999), among others, is based on the idea that fundamentalism is a modern phenomenon, a direct consequence of modernity, characterized by the rejection of modernism. While exploiting the advantages of modernity (the techniques of propaganda, the logic of social mobilization, lobbying in the public and political arena, and so on), fundamentalists are driven, according to Eisenstadt, by a modern-day Jacobin idea of utopia in antithesis to modernity. Lawrence sees the disjunction between modernity and modernism as enabling fundamentalism to become a transnational movement that claims to provide the new, absolute foundation for social action and human knowledge to the social order and political power. A third approach stresses the relationship between fundamentalism and secularization (KEPEL, 1991), the former bearing witness to a countertendency to the gradual eclipse of the sacred that many scholars predicted two decades ago.

Fundamentalism and terrorism differ in principle, but the latter sometimes becomes a sort of senile disease of the former. The violent radicalization of some fundamentalist groups very often occurs when their fundamentalist project to gain

political power or impose their cultural hegemony over society fails. The holistic worldview very often degenerates into cleansing schemes to eliminate religious minorities or ethnic groups. Religious violence intensifies when those in power suppress such groups by violent means, prompting them to go underground, take up arms, and fight the political establishment by means of terrorist attacks. This is partly due to an asymmetry in the military forces deployed in the field. Fundamental terrorists often have to compete with technologically sophisticated armies. They tend to choose terrorist methods to wage their war, hitting civilian targets to create a widespread sense of alarm and social insecurity. Fundamental terrorists justify suicide bombers or the kidnapping or killing of unarmed civilians as actions taken in God's name, manipulating the interpretation of sacred texts and religious jurisprudence. As Juergensmeyer (2003) emphasized, they represent themselves as the true believers, defenders of the faith, claiming to interpret God's will. In discussing the violent radicalization of groups and movements in the contemporary Muslim world, the Franco-Iranian scholar Farhad Khosrokhavar (2002) spoke of their *martyropathy*, with particular reference to the Shiʿa environment.

To conclude, roughly speaking, fundamentalism is a label applied to a modern tendency to claim the inerrancy of a sacred text and use it to model a rational strategy for instrumental social action. The ultimate goal is the utopia of the regime of the truth (PACE, 1998; 2007), the conquest of political power, and the reconstruction of an organic solidarity threatened by relativism, secularism, and a weakening of the role of religion in promoting social integration. Fundamentalist tendencies have emerged in various socio-religious settings: in Protestantism, Catholicism, Islam, Jewish communities in diaspora and in Israel (after the Six Day war of 1967), contemporary Hinduism, Buddhism, and, in some aspects, a certain faction of Sikh (MARTY; APPLEBY, 1991, 1993a, 1993b, 1994, 1995). The common features of fundamentalist movements are: restoring a mythical sacred order; direct engagement in the political field; supporting politics of identity, in many cases evoking a purity of the origins of a people or religious group; developing intolerant attitudes to religious diversity present in a society; imagining a coherent project to re-establishing a virtuous economic sphere religious solidarity complaining.

Firstly, fundamentalists aim to adopt the sacred text as inerrant and use it to legitimize a new social order, a pure and integral order mirror of God's or Dharma Law. It is the only way to affirm and preserve a pure collective identity. They come up with a sacred language that inspires a discipline of the body and mind. It implants shared habits in people's hearts and an idea of organic solidarity among individuals. Going against the modern concept of atomized individuals, this sense of solidarity gives rise to a mystical brotherhood. The second charac-

teristic element is the direct political struggle despite furious and intensive references to religious motives. For instance, when the Iranian change began in 1977–1978, Islam was perceived as providing the means for promoting the country's liberation from dictatorship under the Pahlavi dynasty and its subsequent modernization. What began as an Islamic liberation theology later, when the *ayatollah* Khomeini came to power, became a political project to shape an integral Islamic state. In the process, with the increasingly centralized power of the state, came a shift in the traditional role of the Shiʿite clerical institution. Up until the revolution, they had been the interpreters of the sacred text, but had made no attempt to impose a particular model of society and political order. But once they had gained power, the *ayatollah* started to offer a sort of state hermeneutics of the sacred text. Despite the traditional pluralism within the Shiʿa on matters relating to the interpretation of canon law, Khomeini's regime imposed an unbearably tight straitjacket on a society with a relatively ample social differentiation. The third feature refers to the attitude by the fundamentalists to move toward a mythical past contained in a sacred text, the shrine containing the secret of social order, from where the functional language of the social action, the *socio-logos* of the community, is carefully distilled. The fourth element concerns the attitude and the need for an enemy. Fundamentalism relies on a sense of threat to one's identity, territory, and survival from an imaginary or real enemy. When Yigal Amir killed Israel's President Rabin in 1995, he was convinced that he was doing the right thing because Rabin, by making peace with Arafat, was transferring territories to the Palestinians that were parts of the Promised Land given by God to His people. The fifth feature of fundamentalism represents a simple corollary of the previous assumptions. In other words, it indicates the intensity of the militants' psychological conviction that they are "in the right." They are certain that they have been called directly by a god to take radical and determined action against the enemy, thus their symbolic and physical violence is legitimized. The sacred violence comes as a logical consequence of the missionary calling that fundamentalists feel they have received from God or from Transcendental Cosmic Order. Finally, the holistic worldview, that insolubly links religion with politics, shapes the economic sphere too. A fundamentalist wants to save the world by converting people and is adamant that every aspect of everyday life and the social system must be changed. The project focuses on the idea that we have to become pious, populist, and pragmatic: the redemptive action thus embraces religion, politics, and economics. Taking a broad approach to the relationship between fundamentalism and economics, Iannaccone (1997) concluded that the success of fundamentalist movements is due not to the theological vision that they present, but to the fact that they act as providers and suppliers of so-

cial services and economic benefits. Where governments and economies function poorly, fundamentalist movements often develop welfare organizations with a greater power of attraction than their religious radicalism (HEILMAN; FRIEDMAN, 2010). Another important link between fundamentalism and economics lies in the communications market where fundamentalism is more and more a *brand* that circulates freely – particularly in the new media systems (cyber-religion) (MARTENSON; RINGROSE; BAILEY, 2011). Exploiting the old and new media, fundamentalism tends to provide a strong narrative against any form of tolerance or intercultural and inter-religious dialogue, also reinforcing ethnocentrism and homo-negativity (hostility toward people who are gay, lesbian, or transgender) according to many studies (WRENCH; COR-RIGAN; MCCROSKY; PUNYANUN-CARTER, 2006).

DHARMA WAR IN SRI LANKA

In 2012 a new Sinhala Buddhist movement, the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS, the *Buddhist Power Force*) was founded in Sri Lanka by two monks, three year after the end of a civil war (1983-2009)[4] that has torn the post-colonial Sinhalese State apart. The interest in this case study lies in the emergence in contemporary Buddhism of some movements that have some fundamentalist traits. In addition to Sri Lanka, there is a similar Buddhist movement in Myanmar, led by the monk Ashin Wirathu. What these movements have in common is the social construction of the image of the other as the enemy. In the Sinhala case, the Tamils are the main enemy, but since the defeat of the Tiger Tamil Army in April 2009, the Muslims are becoming a target.

 The BBS's social construction works along three lines:

(a) the identification a text *par excellence* from among the large corpus of texts of the Buddhist school of Theravāda (lit.: the Elder Monks), and electing it as the sacred text, to be regarded also as the source of an inerrant narrative of the history of Sinhala Buddhism, a mythopoiesis of the pure identity of the people that became a nation;

(b) the mobilization of symbols, signs and rituals pertaining to the monastic tradition as moral resources for a collective action in the political and social spheres, transforming rituals into public performances to be held also in the political arena; and

(c) the identification of the other (Tamil, Muslim or Christian) as a potential threat, a dangerous source of contamination and corruption of the moral virtues of Buddhism, considered as the foundations of the social bond, the legitimacy of political power, the ultimate source of the organic solidarity of the Nation (Silva, 1988).

All three elements converge to delineate the BBS as a fundamentalist movement: the interpretation of a sacred text monopolized by the monks is functional to the claim of the pure national identity of the Sinhalese people, so the religious discourse is immediately connected with the political *polemos*. The inerrancy of the sacred text is the primary code by means of which the BBS monks aim to develop a model of society and the ultimate principle of legitimacy of the State. A well-educated generation of Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka re-invented a repertoire of symbols and signs belonging to Theravāda Sinhala Buddhism with a view to reasserting the centrality of the monks' *sacred* mediation in the nation-building process. In this sense, the leaders of the fundamentalist movement are successfully outsourcing religious rituals from the monastic communities (*sangha*) to the public squares in revolt. The communication strategy (and agency) focuses on the image of the other as an enemy, based on four narrative arguments: a) choosing among non-canonical texts one and transforming it in sacred, supreme, absolute text; b) reading this text as a source and pattern of the organic, primordial, moral solidarity of Sinhala People; c) interpreting the national identity's defense as a dramatic eschatological trial for saving Sihnala People against its enemies (internal and external); d) asserting the moral and political authority of Buddhist monks as undisputed custodians of collective (sacred) memory, language (shaped by sacred text), individual and social virtues

By exploring these four narratives, I would like to reframe Tambiah's theory on the *fetishization of Buddhism* (TAMBIAH, 1976, 1992), particularly in modern-day Sri Lanka. According to Tambiah and other scholars (LING, 1973; BECHERT, 1978; SMITH, 1966, 1973), this term describes the transformation of a system of belief with open boundaries – the Buddha Dharma –into a closed one. From the historical standpoint, Buddhism is a differentiated system of belief that allows for the free movement of beliefs and practices with intensely creative languages, rituals, images, signs and symbols – or, simply put, with a prodigious production of an *excess of meanings* that are broader than the texts, symbols, and rituals encoded by the various Buddhist schools. In a nutshell, the fetishization of Buddhism that has occurred in recent times is similar to the process of *biblification and scripturalism* (SENEVIRATNE, 1999) characterizing Evangelical fundamentalism. As a consequence, the traditional status of the monk began to change in the 19th century. The monks became specialists in the sacred who monopolized the interpretation of some of the texts belonging to the non-canonical Theravāda tradition, coming up with a religion cum nationalist ideology consistent with the idea of an ethical State, i.e. a Buddhist State. Insofar as this religious-nationalist ideology has become the language of the ruling class building the new, post-colonial State, Tambiah

sees a dramatic confrontation underway between two kinds of Buddhism in Sri Lanka: one compassionate and ethically oriented towards universal values, the other with a dark and potentially violent side that betrays the former's goals. The *religious* violence expressed by a group of monks and, more recently, echoed more radically by BBS represents a socio-logical consequence of the political reification (or *biblification*) of the Buddha Dharma.

It is important to clarify that the communication strategy adopted by some neo-Buddhist movements in Sri Lanka is partially the result of a complex historical process that began in 1796 with the lengthy period of British colonial rule. The British arrived after a period of colonization first by the Portuguese (1505-1630), and then by the Dutch (1658-1796), meaning that the country experienced a long and intensive contact with various European cultures. Sri Lanka was the ancient kingdom[5] of Sēlām, so named when it was conquered by the Sinhala, an Indo-Aryan ethnic group from Northern India that began to invade the island in the 6th century BCE. The island was renamed Ceylon by the British[6], who established large tea plantations and imported many workers from Southern India, the majority of them Tamil. Independence for modern Sri Lanka was a gradual process that started in 1948, when it became a Dominion within the Commonwealth, and was only completed in 1972. The process leading to Sri Lanka's independence was therefore a peaceful political movement led by various politicians and activists The list includes leaders belonging to various cultures and religions (Hindu, Buddhist and Christian), and with different ideological orientations, but united by the ideal of independence for their country. The Sri Lanka Freedom Party came to power in 1956. It was founded by Solomon West Ridgeway Dias Bandaranaike in 1951, and it has been one of the two largest parties in the Sri Lankan political arena ever since. The new government immediately set about changing the country's political structure. With the Sinhala Only Bill, it made Sinhalese the sole official language, and Buddhism the pillar of the young nation's cultural identity. Solomon Bandaranaike was assassinated in 1959, and his widow was elected prime minister. The opposing political pole was occupied by the more conservative United National Party (UNP). From 1948 onwards, the country's political system succeeded in establishing a viable parliamentary democracy based on a two-party alternation. From a constitutional standpoint, Sri Lanka experimented successfully with a republican democracy and a unitary state under semi-presidential rule. The most dramatic crisis developed in 1980, when the Tamil minority - excluded from the political establishment and discriminated against by society (including the refusal to acknowledge Tamil as the second official language of the State) – laid claim to the political autonomy of the provinces inhabited by the Tamil people, particularly in the Northern part of the island. This was

the starting point of a long, cruel civil war, which ended in 2009 with the victory of the national army over the Tamil's organizations. In the 1970s, a new social actor appeared on the religious-political scene in Sri Lanka in the form of the Buddhist monks. This new generation of monks provided the Sinhalese citizens with a set of social norms based on religious principles: throughout their education, these monks were brought up as citizens who would put the Dharma (Buddha thought) into practice by assisting the laity with worldly problems, providing advice and leadership on matters of social welfare and economic developments in rural areas. The Buddhist sangha, the religious order of monks, had historically been a pillar of the State ever since the 5th century BCE. The monasteries scattered all over the island (there was actually one in every village) were not mere centers where monastic communities meditated and studied; as in the Catholic or Muslim traditions, they formed micro-social cells that provided the rural people with education and assistance. According to Seneviratne (1999, p. 17):

The monk/village nexus was local in the pre-colonial era, but as colonial rule advances, a supra-local Sangha came into being, enabled by colonial technologies, especially the print media [….] The supra-locality of the Sangha does not make it a power. It only confers on the Sangha a ceremonial and symbolic status. It can only be a handmaid of power. This is well understood by perceptive members of the culture who call the Sangha a tool of politics (despalana atakolu).

In the Sinhala tradition, one of the most important chronicles that the monks adopted as their fundamental sacred text is the *Mahavamsa*[7]. This book acquired a crucial ideological relevance in the modern Buddhist sangha: monks use it to support the indissoluble link between religion, language and land. In the land blessed by Buddhism, this sacred text was the first exercise and elaboration of the Sinhala language conducted by the monks. The island of Sri Lanka is thus regarded as the *Dharma-dipa* (the island of Dharma), and the monks as the guardians of its sacred territorial boundaries and of the moral unity of its people. In modern language, this means that the monks claim to be the defenders of the national identity. An extra-political authority, the *sangha*, is where the authorized (religious and political) language has continued to be produced. This mythopoietic reconstruction by the monks has distorted and partially concealed the history of kingship in ancient Ceylon because at least three kings (including the first, Vijaya) were Tamil. One might argue over the kings and then over the gods. The monks' new role came into being in the post-colonial era. It is the outcome of a process of modernization of Sinhala Buddhism[8] started already in colonial times, when Christianity became a sort

of competitive model for the renaissance of the local Buddhism. The founder of Buddhist modernism was Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933). His name became internationally familiar when he took part in the Parliament of the World's Religions held in Chicago in 1983. It was Dharmapala who invented the transformation of traditional Buddhist monks into caretakers and social workers, like the Christian priest ministering to his flock.

The birth of this new religious order of monks engaging in the social and political sphere coincided with the beginning of the Sinhalese nation-building process (1946-50). The most prominent actor was Walpola Rahula (1907-1997)[9], who inspired the publication of the *Declaration of the Vidyalankara[10] Pirivena* written by another monk, Yakkaduve Pragnasara. Briefly, this document represents the coherent implementation of the ideas developed by Dharmapala and Rahula for the nationalist agenda. The monastic elite supported the post-colonial politicians committed to a *Sinhala-only* policy that soon led to strong conflicts and divisions within the country, fueling ethnic riots and civil war. It is important to mention that not all politicians agreed with the ideological campaign launched by the modernist monks. Under the rule of President Premadasa (1989-1993) at least, the political establishment reacted negatively to the *Sinhala-only* campaign supported by the Sarvodaya Shramadana[11], regarded by researchers as a fundamentalist movement, and by the government as a political actor endangering national unity. The most relevant effect of the *Sinhala-only* policy was a sort of *mirror syndrome*: the non-Sinhala minorities (particularly the Tamil and Muslim) began to shape their own ideas of what it meant to be Tamils or Muslims living in a predominantly Sinhala area, and they started rethinking their own identities. Moving from religious assumptions to political commitment, the emergence of a quest for Muslim identity also spread among the Muslims who spoke Sinhala as well as Tamil – meaning that the term 'Muslim' no longer denotes an ethnic boundary and category.[12]

Taking into account the socio-religious and political background of modern Sri Lanka, I would like to argue that the fundamentalist discourse produced by the BBS (and other neo-traditionalist Buddhist monks) concerning the *enemy* of the religious and national identity of the Sinhalese people relies on two strategies:
a) it puts an end to the relatively *free* production of meanings attributable to a set of religious symbols and signs; and
b) it transforms rituals into public performances, forging representations in which people are urged to perceive certain meanings and accept them as *natural* and inevitable.

The actor – the BBS – competes in Sri Lanka's religious and political market with other religious subjects, investing socio-linguistic resources and expanding its religious rituality into the public space, using ritual as a code for generating con-

notative meanings of its socio-political performances. When BBS activists radicalize the assumption that it is *only* in the sacred texts of Sinhala Buddhism that we can find the roots of the Sinhalese language, their discursive strategy becomes more effective in social terms if they can use public performances (extra-ritual spaces) to demonstrate that the *sacred grammar* of the Sinhalese language is part of a coherent *theory of reality*[13].

Ritual is a means of communication[14] and it can be converted into an act of communication in which BBS monks can produce dominant signifiers (in semiotic terms), or a "sealed world" of words and gestures that lay claim to an imagined collective identity and a specular image of an enemy threatening said identity. It is useful to recall the notion of over-coding brought up by Umberto Eco (1976): over-coding is a process whereby secondary meanings are attached to messages generated by a basic primary code. In our case study, the basic code is a sacred text (*Mahavamsa*) from which monks are drawing secondary meanings to attach to their social action, presenting them as an extension of their ritual action[15].

Generally speaking, Buddhist monks abstain from eating beef more for symbolic reasons of purity than in compliance with a real taboo as in the Hindu tradition. In the radical Sinhala-Buddhist monks' collective imagination and public rhetoric, purity has to do with defending the sacred integrity of Sri Lanka, the island of Dharma. Buddhist monks are usually vegetarians, but this was not a prerequisite for militants joining the first nationalist groups, before the foundation of the BBS. Right from the start, in 2012, the BBS targeted the Muslims' religious diet, pointing a finger not only at their consumption of beef, but also at the way the animals were slaughtered (STEWART, 2014, 2015). According to Badone Jones (2015), the BBS supporters see cattle slaughter as evidence of Muslim cruelty, as proof of their deliberate infliction of pain on the animals.

This is clearly an example of over-coding: a secondary message (we are criticizing the Muslims' cruel treatment of animals) is attached to the one generated by the basic symbolic code (the Bo, or Bodhi, tree is the sacred fig tree under which Siddhartha Gautama is said to have attained his awakening, or nirvana). The campaign launched by the BBS against cattle slaughter had some political effects. In November 2015, the former Sri Lankan government minister Mervyn Silva inaugurated a signature campaign (supported by the BBS) calling for a ban on halal animal slaughtering methods: the blood of the animals killed by Muslims became a symbol of their contamination of the land of Dharma.

It is worth making the point that a similar process is underway regarding the female body. As Friedland put it[16], "nationalism is a way to mark the land, to defend or redefine a nation's boundaries […] then we might interpret religious nationalism's obsessive control of women's bodies as a parallel figuration, the

policy of a bodily frontier". The embodiment of a nation is a deeply gendered process. Controlling the purity of women's bodies is a way to preserve the nation against the risk of contamination. The methods range from disapproving intermarriage to repressing lesbian associations, from cursing fashions imported from the West to forbidding promiscuity in public places.

The BBS movement is drawing the sacred boundaries of the nation with its religious compass, cleansing it of all impurities deemed hazardous to the Sinhalese identity. The territory of Sri Lanka has transmigrated into the Land of Dharma, like the body of Buddha. According to Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition, when Buddha died in 543, his body was cremated, but his left canine tooth (Sri Dalada Maligawa) was retrieved from the funeral pyre by his disciple Khema and, after countless setbacks, the relic was carried to Sri Lanka in the 4th century by a princess who hid it in her hair. The relic came to be considered as a symbol of the living Buddha and, at the same time, the sign of a sacred land, blessed by Buddha, the island of Dharma.

THE POLITICS OF *HINDUTVA* IN THE POST-GANDHIAN INDIA

The case of Ayodhya[17] is emblematic and possibly the best-known story we can evoke moving from Sri Lanka to India. It was a public event that can be seen as fitting into a chain of disputes, revolts, protest marches and controversies about conversions that have repeatedly stained the most recent history of the Indian democracy, from 1990 up until the present day at least. It is worth briefly mentioning what game was played around the site where the great Babri Mosque stood before it was destroyed at the end of 1992, after another more imposing march on Ayodhya. This Muslim place of worship dated back to 1528; it was naturally not the only place of Muslim prayer in the city of Ayodhya or in the surrounding state of Uttar Pradesh, which has approximately 31 million Muslim residents amidst a total population of more than 166 million people. According to Hindu tradition, the hill where the mosque was built was once occupied by a temple dedicated to Rama, King of Ayodhya and seventh incarnation of the god Vishnu, or rather the place where Rama (Ramachandra in full) was apparently born 7000 years before our era. Nobody had claimed the site for the Hindus for centuries (ELST, 2001; SMITH, 2003). The mosque's destruction in 1992 symbolically marks a divide in contemporary Indian society, the transformation of some of the movements of Hindu cultural and religious reawakening, which had sprung up as of the second half of the 19th century, into political-religious movements that identified themselves with the ideology of *hindutva*, a neologism that translates as the *pure Hindu identity*. This neologism was coined by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1928) and has met with a fair

degree of fortune among the radical political neo-Hinduist movements of our times. Finally, to complete the picture of the historical references, we need to mention that Hinduism has been through a period of religious reawakening. It has had various souls, the most important of which (for its past and present influence on contemporary political and religious movements) is the reformation project developed by Dayananda Saraswati, who founded the Noble Society (*Arya Samaj*) in 1875. This project was a genuine hermeneutic effort to renew Hinduism and make it suitable for meeting the challenges of the modern world imposed by British colonial rule. There are interesting analogies here with the reawakening movement that developed around the same time in the American Protestant and the Sunnite Muslim environments, i.e. in very different parts of the world and in profoundly different settings, in the sense that Arya Samaj also proposed to redefine the fundamentals of the real Hindu faith. In order of importance, these are: faith in a single, supreme God, the source of all knowledge, an intelligent and merciful, right and universal presence, the only entity worthy of being venerated; the *Veda* (or scriptures) are the only source of truth and understanding, the infallible, unchangeable, holy word to which all Arya must conform; all human actions must comply with the cosmic law of the Dharma, and must consequently be inspired by principles of love, justice and rectitude; all this is achieved by promoting the well-being of all and being committed to promoting understanding and defeating ignorance.

Dayananda's thinking tends to redraw the universe of Hindu beliefs in monotheistic terms, bringing the foundations of the faith down to a simplified system of belief. I can sum up it in the following elements: a) believing in one supreme God: b) considering the Veda (Sacred Scriptures) an infallible source of truth; c) and a source of moral, social norms, and national identity. Arya Samaj thus stands at the crossroads between two powerful movements in Indian society at the end of the 19th century: on the one hand, there is the need to be free of the British colonial yoke; on the other, the hope of a cultural and spiritual redemption achieved by returning to the purified and revisited religious roots of Hinduism, from where to embark on a path of reawakening. One of Dayananda's closest collaborators within the Arya Samaj reinterpreted the ancient *shuddhi* ritual to adapt it to what we might define as a *reversion policy*. In fact, it literally means purification, but also reversion (or reverting after converting). Its origins can probably be traced back to the times when India was dominated by the Mogul empire and many Hindus converted to Islam. With the decline of Muslim rule, the *shuddhi* was subsequently perfected to facilitate the return of these converts to their original religion, taking on a form that the Arya Samaj leaders and militants revived to restore these converts to Hinduism. The ceremony is straightforward: it involves washing your feet and drinking a

little water from the holy river Ganges (*Gangajal*). Such a re-baptism in water symbolically cleanses the person who had been contaminated by another religion. In the language of the Arya Samaj, this means bringing "home" those who were lost, returning them to the fold. So, reversion presupposes not only a previous conversion, but also the idea that said conversion to another faith has tainted the individual with an infamous sin, making him a pervert, a traitor of the faith of his forbears.

The context in which the revisited *shuddhi* ritual takes place today is characterized by recurrent socio-religious disputes, more acute in some areas and less so in others, but generally arising in all the states where Hindu extremists are particularly active in accusing people who have converted to Islam and Christianity of being responsible for the Hindu people's loss of traditional values and identity, supporting the political rhetoric of movements like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a national voluntary organization founded in 1925 by a physician originally from Nagpur, or the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), or World Hindu Council, a branch of the RSS created in 1964. The *shuddhi* is part of a repertoire of collective activities that functionally rally political consent in favor of the Bharata Jamata Party[18], the political party that has succeeded in becoming the essence of, and an image for the above-mentioned movements.

The repertoire includes actions with variable degrees of violence, both symbolic and physical: from insistent efforts to persuade people who have converted to convert back to their original religion, to assaults on places of worship (as in a case of the mosque in Ayodhya), to acts of vandalism against religious confessional schools. In September 2006, for instance, a group of Hindu extremists stoned the Catholic school annexed to the Loreto convent in Lucknow, capital of Uttar Pradesh, where they claimed that Hindu girls were being forcibly converted to Catholicism in violation of the laws of the state (one of the few states in India with a rule prohibiting all forms of conversion). In August 2008 violent riots organized by the Vishva Hindu Parishad militants burn down a Catholic orphanage in the State of Orissa, after the murder of the their leader, Swami Saraswati. Then there is the political battle to extend the law that forbids any slaughtering of cows (animals Hindus traditionally consider as sacred), which is permitted to non-Hindus, and finally the action to convert back the so-called tribal communities or Dalits ("outcastes") who frequently, and hardly surprisingly, embrace another religion that preaches equality in the face of God and salvation as an individual opportunity (Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Bahá'i).

It is important to note how the controversies over conversions draw strength not only from tension between different systems of religious belief, but also from recurrent political and social issues concerning the position of the Dalits and the aborigines

(*Adivasi* in Sanskrit). The former account for around 167 million people, the latter another 70 million. Both continue to be relegated to the margins of the social scale, despite the abolition of the caste system and laws to promote affirmative action in favor of these outcasts and the many ethnic minorities dotted all over India, but mainly in the states of Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. Ever since the 19th century, when Catholic and Protestant missionaries began to arrive, and up until the present day, there have been massive conversions to Christianity and increasingly, these days, to Buddhism too. In the city of Nagpur, in central India, for instance, a ceremony was held in September 2006 to celebrate the conversion of approximately 100,000 people to Buddhism. This movement began by Bhrimao Ramji Ambedkar, who became a Buddhist in 1956 and encouraged other people to follow him. The symbolism of the reversion rituals is much the same in the case of the aborigines who converted to Christianity: they are invited to take back the name they abandoned when they were baptized, they are given new clothes and they have a ritual purifying bathe.

It is not easy to distinguish clearly between the different dimensions of these conflicts, where religion ends and politics or economics begin, and vice versa. There was certainly an increase in the number of such conflicts between 1980 and 1990, a decade in which Indian society underwent profound economic changes that altered the social stratification founded on the survival of the caste system. The most evident sign of these changes is the growth of the Dalit movement, which is pressing to overcome the cultural and socio-economic obstacles that currently prevent 16.2% of the Indian population from fully accessing the rights of citizenship. There is often a very close link between their expectations of social justice and economic reinstatement on the one hand, and a propensity to abandon the mainly-Hindu religion of their birth and opt for other religions on the other (FERNANDES, 1981).

The case study on conversions in the Indian subcontinent is an interesting test bench for analyzing the conversion phenomenon as a battle, taking place along the symbolic boundaries between systems of belief in a society that has historically been pluralist from the religious standpoint. Therefore, this battle concerns not only the religious field. Actually the ideological assumption is purely political. Defending the boundaries of a religious system means the affirmation of the supremacy of an ethnic group (Hindu) on the others, and, at the same time, to preside over their territories and their national boundaries. The others are considered enemy of the true religion and a treat for the cultural integrity of a people. Purity and danger, according to the seminal theory by Mary Douglas (1966). The conversion-reversion movement stands between religion and politics. Defending the religious truth means also supporting a nationalist ideology, the *Hindutva*, that means India only for Hindus or Hindus before all[19].

CONCLUSION

From the two examined empirical cases, we can draw some concluding remarks on the theoretical and methodological challenges for the sociology of religion. In both cases we are dealing with collective movements that seem to be able to challenge and undermine the secular state model. Against the idea of a secular state, that, for this reason, claims to be able to neutralize the conflicts or to manage religious pluralism, fundamentalist movements have imposed a counter-policy narrative. Before the state, in the beginning, there is only one people, who admits only one religion, which uses a language that is rooted in the sacred texts, who lives in a sanctified earth, thus inviolable in its symbolic and territorial boundaries. In Europe there is much discussion among scholars and opinion makers, on neo-populism. David Trump also appeared as an anti-establishment leader. Outside Europe, such as in India and Sri Lanka, the political substance of populism is more precisely. We are facing, in fact, with collectives movements that mobilize symbolic resources from the religious field and investing that in the political sphere. If we could sum up in a formula, it is the emergence of ethno-religious nationalism. Fundamentalism in this case is a password to enter the religious code, appropriating the secrets of symbols, doctrines and rituals and to translate this into a repertoire for the social action and, above all, political. Without excluding the use of violence, sanctified also by those who believe that the end justifies the means, when they need to defend their faith and the fatherland.

Sociology of religion is going through a period of self-reflection (POULSON; CAMPBELL, 2010). On one hand, the old paradigm of secularization has been criticized, on the other, new paradigms are coming (rational choice; systems theory; post-secular literature; every-day or lived religion). In many case scholars are questioning the basic concepts used in the past, because they are discovering that the traditional tools are not sufficient to analyze the social and cultural change occurring in many contemporary societies. One of the most relevant effect of this deconstruction process of concepts and methodologies One of the most interesting effects of this process of deconstruction of concepts and methods, is the assumption that what we call religion is returned to occupy different areas of the society. Sociology of religion, therefore, strives to get out of its disciplinary boundaries and look at the relevance of the R (Religious) factor not so much and not only in the churches or in enclosed spaces of the sacred, but in the political sphere as well as in the economic one, in the media (especially in the digital religion[20]) as well as in advertising. In short, sociology of religion is more and more on the edge (BENDER; CADGE; LEVITT; SMILDE, 2011) and, as you become aware of this, you have to learn

to de-centering for granted concepts especially in the European and North American culture and re-center the basics one, including the word religion, in the light of post-colonial studies. Studying the *magnificent and progressive* destiny of the secular state in the younger nations entered the limelight of the contemporary history in post-colonial era, we can understand the limits of Eurocentric approaches to religion-politics relationship as well as the idea that religion is destined to privatize, eclipsed by public sphere. The two cases on which we have focused, show how unstable are the conceptual tools of the old paradigm of secularization. It shows also how urgent is to adopt a new toolbox for understanding (in the Weberian sense) how and why collective actors tend to attribute religious meanings to their action for justice or for the conquest of political power, or for the selection and circulation of the elite. Fundamentalisms are perhaps the political form of a religious narrative that fills the void left by the great ideologies of the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries.

MOVIMENTOS ÉTNICO-RELIGIOSOS DESAFIAM O ESTADO SECULAR

Abstract: *The religious fundamentalist movements act on behalf and in defense of a transcendental truth. They regard the secular state as their main enemy, because it claims to legitimate its power independently on religious legitimation. They regard instead their religion as the repository of absolute truth and ultimate source of legitimacy of human laws. Hence the paradox of their ways of thinking and acting socially: they are post-secular, but, at the same time, they are fighting to transform the religious principles in political categories. After examining two empirical cases of ethno-religious fundamentalist movements (the Buddhist Power Force-BBS in Sri Lanka and the Hindutva movement in India), we can draw some concluding remarks on the theoretical and methodological challenges that such movements bring for the sociology of religion. We think, in both cases we are dealing with collective movements that seem to be able to challenge and undermine the secular state model.*

Keywords*: Religious Fundamentalism. Politics. Religion. Nationalism. Secular State.*

Notas

1 "As if there was no God", it is a maxim used by Hugo Grotius in his important book *De iure belli ac pacis*, in 1625, Actually it refers to natural law and its validity despite the existence or not existence of God. But the maxim has been conventionally extrapolated both the Catholic Popes in their criticism against the secular state that refuse to legitimize its self by God or a religious principle, and by philosopher and politicians to argue in favor of the "laicité" since the Enlightenment onwards.

2   One of the father of the Indian Constitution was Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956). He was a politician, philosopher and anthropologist who fought against the *chaturvarna* system (the four castes' system). He chair the Parliament commission charged to edit the Constitution in 1947 (adopted two years later). Ambedkar, who studying the origins of the *shudra* e *dalit* social apartheid, based on Veda scriptures, embraced Buddhism and reinterpreted the core message of Gautama Shakyamuni. To him Buddhism becomes a liberation theology, a social religious manifesto for emancipating scheduled and tribes castes from the segregation in which they were condemned in the name of a religion (Hinduism). Writing the draft of the Constitution, Ambedkar took in consideration not only the European models but also some organizational rules applied in the Buddhist *sangha* (monk's monastery), i.e. procedures ordered for discussion of agendas, rules of precedence before taking any decision by vote. To understand the social Buddhism by this prominent Indian intellectual see Ambedkar (1987, 2011).

3   See Pace (2011).

4   The 25-year armed conflict between a Tamil insurrectionist movement claiming independence for the Northern and Eastern provinces of the island and the Sinhalese Government cost an estimated 80,000-100,000 lives, according to UN reports. Up against the much stronger national army, the Tamil forces - the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) organized suicide-bombing attacks, recruited at least 3,200 child soldiers (according to the Human Rights Watch [HRW] report: http://www.hrw.org/reports/2014/srilanka1104), and exiled many people from the villages inhabited by Muslims. For their part, the Sri Lankan Army implemented a violent repression that became increasingly brutal against civilians too, especially towards the end of the conflict. When the final battle for Kilinochchi (the most important Tamil town in the north) was launched on 19 February 2009, HRW reported that the Sri Lankan soldiers slaughtered civilians in indiscriminate artillery attacks. In response next day, on February 20, a Tamil brigade conducted a suicide mission, attacking the Army Headquarters in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo from the air. The list of atrocities committed by both sides is long and shocking for the cruelty and violence involved. On the civil war, see Johnson (2005); Swamy (2002) and Pace (2003).

5   The first legendary king was Vijaya, mentioned in the Pali Chronicles, which include the book *Mahavamsa* (the Great Chronicle); he ruled the island from the Lanka fortress from 543 BCE onwards. The Sinhala alphabet, a descendent of the Brahmi script, began to appear in Prakrit inscriptions during the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE. Both the alphabet and the language have changed considerably since. The earliest surviving literature in Sinhala dates from the 9th century AD. The Sinhala alphabet is also used to write Pali and Sanskrit in Sri Lanka.

6   Ceylon became a very famous type of aromatic black tea.

7   *The Mahavamsa, or the Great Chronicle of Ceylon*, London: The Pali Text Society, 1912, rpt. 1960 (trans. by Wilhelm Geiger). This book was composed in the late 5th or early 6th century AD, by the Ven. Mahanama Thera. The book is divided into 36 chapters and tells the story, in the form of an epic poem, of the kings of Sri Lanka from the first, Prince Vijaya (543 BCE), to the last, Mahasena Anuradhapura (277-304 AD). It is not a canonical text, but it became fundamental to Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

8   Called *Buddhist Modernism* by Seneviratne, (1999, p. 25) or *Protestant Buddhism* by Obeyesekere (1990) and by Holt (1991).

9   His most important book is *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu* (1946).

10 Vidyalankara is one of the largest monastic colleges in Sri Lanka, located in Peliyagoda

and founded in 1873 by the Ven. Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Thero.

11 Beginning in the late 1950s, a lay Buddhist association spread through the rural villages thanks to its charitable work for the poor peasantry. The movement was incubated in an important Buddhist college (Nalanda, in Colombo). The term *sarvodaya* means "progress for all" and has been referred to Ghandi, while the word *shramadana* means "gift of labor" (reflecting the idea of a compassionate and voluntary action). Under its leader, A.T. Aryaratne, the movement is active in more than 15,000 villages, providing funds from a financial reserve bank of 1.6 billion rupees.

12 See on this aspect De Silva (1986) and Tambiah (1986).

13 In this sense, I agree with a group of scholars who analyze language as ideology, particularly when we are dealing with the peculiar language of religion. See Whorf (1956), Kress; Hodge (1979), Hodge; Kress (1988) and Eagleton (1991).

14 On this idea, see Pace (2011).

15 Rite is the pillar of the religious system, according to a fundamental lecture by Durkheim, as Rosati reminds us in his book (2009).

16 See Friedland (2002) and also Deegalle (2013) and Abeyesekara (2001).

17 Ancient city of Uttar Pradeshwith a population of 55,000 inhabitans.

18 Founded in 1981, the Indian People's Party is the major conservative party that won election in 1998 and more recently in 2014 under the leadership of the the present Prime Minister, Narendra Modi.

19 Similar to "America first !" or "France to French People !".

20 For this notion see Cambell (2010) and Enstedt; Larsson; Pace (2015).

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