Political theology, religious fundamentalism and modern politics

Marilena Chauí

In order to define a single and indivisible sovereign political power, Western modernity needed to separate itself from the ecclesiastical power that impeded this unity and indivisibility. Consequently, public expressions of religion were placed under the control of rulers and intimate expressions were relegated to the private realm. This task was broadly supported by the Protestant Reformation, which combated the exteriority and automatism of rites, as well as priests' mediatory presence between God and the faithful, situating religiosity within the individual conscience. Religion was displaced from public space to private space. From the Enlightenment onward, and the defence of civil and religious liberty (or tolerance), religion began to be seen as an archaic tradition that would be overcome by the march of reason or science.

The belief that the light of reason would immediately suppress religion has meant that modernity has been unable to account for the religious avalanche that smothers contemporary societies. The return to religion is akin to what psychoanalysis refers to as 'the return of the repressed', because, society not having known how to deal with it, this suppressed object simply prepared for its return. In *The Revenge of God*, Gilles Kepel notes that between 1960 and 1976, the so-called 'three religions of the Book' – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – were forced to deal with the effects of the Second World War and the Cold War: on the one hand, the political spheres' decisive conquest of autonomy, and, on the other, the construction of socialism in the East, and the welfare state and the society of consumption in the West. Political autonomy discredited the idea that religion organizes social life, leaving little space to seek from the divine an explanation of the social order. The Cold War in turn imposed an alternative beyond which there could be no salvation; everyone was obliged to struggle for the victory of their side, and faith was gradually subordinated to the realization of earthly ideas. This led to the emergence of Marxist and socialist tendencies in Latin America, the Caribbean, and countries in the Middle East that were linked to Soviet interests.

In the face of this new situation a new religious militancy emerged. Its members did not come from the popular classes or the rural world; they were young university students, science and technology graduates, who fought against the absence of a common project to which they could adhere. In Europe, they began to question society and its secular foundations. In the United States and in Muslim countries they started to challenge the organization of society and its secular itinerary. They appropriated the language of the social sciences and of Marxism to invent a conceptual syntax that reaffirmed religion as the foundation of the social system. These militants sought a return to Christianity, Judaism and Islam, acting *from below*. In other words, they sought to make religion intervene powerfully in private life and in customs, creating believers (through community and aid organizations) and producing profound cultural transformations.

At the end of the 1970s, these militants began to enter the political field. Blaming dominant classes and leaders for economic, social and political failures, they sought to reinvigorate religion *from above*, either by symbolic acts of terror or by taking over the state (through elections or coups). These actions from above intended to change the nature of the state by reclaiming its religious foundations. Christianity began to speak of 're-evangelizing Europe' and 'saving America'; Judaism dismissed the legal state of Israel and emphasized instead the biblical notion of the *land* of Israel (justifying the occupation of Palestinian territories); Islam no longer referred to modernizing Islam but to 'Islamicizing modernity'.

There are some emblematic dates that mark religion's passage from private to public space: 1977, when for the first time in its history the Workers' Party of Israel – largely lay and socialist – lost the legislative elections and Menahem Begin became prime minister; 1978, when the Polish Cardinal Karol Woytila was elected Pope John Paul II, with the support of conservative North Americans who cornered the Catholic Left; 1979, when Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran and the Islamic republic was proclaimed, at the same time that an armed group attacked the Grand Mosque in Mecca as a protest against the Saudi dynasty's control of religious places; 1979, when North American evangelists formed the politico-religious organization the Moral Majority, which aimed to save the United States by restoring moral Christian values (ranging from including prayer at schools to outlawing abortion) and helped to elect Ronald Reagan the following year; the early 1980s, with the start of the civil war in Lebanon, a conflict that involved Maronite Christians, Lebanese and Palestinian Muslims, and Israel; the mid-1980s, when the Iran–Iraq war erupted, involving Sunni and Shiite Muslims, along with the socialist Ba'ath Party and religious leaders; the civil war in Afghanistan also started then, with the Taliban and local powers subordinated to the Soviet Union.

However, these events cannot be attributed solely to local and regional history, especially in the context of internationalization and globalization. Indeed, it is important to remember that the end of the 1980s were marked by the fiscal crisis of the state, the erosion of the welfare state and the fall of the Soviet Union. These years constituted the beginnings of neoliberal capitalism and its state. The welfare state channelled public funds in two directions simultaneously: on the one hand, financing the accumulation of capital; on the other, financing the reproduction of the workforce, which encompassed the entire population by means of social spending achieved through indirect wages. The latter increased social classes' consumption, especially the middle and working classes; in other words, it led to mass consumption. This process of guaranteeing the accumulation and reproduction of capital and the workforce threw the state into debt, beginning a process of public debt known as fiscal deficit or the 'fiscal crisis of the state'. This crisis worsened with the internationalization of production, since multinational oligopolies do not send overseas profits to their own country, and consequently do not nurture the nation's public funds, which continue to finance capital and the workforce.

Neoliberalism is by no means simply a belief in the rationality of the market, the decline of the state and the disappearance of public funds. It is a decision to stop using public funds to finance indirect wages, or public services and social rights, and to employ them instead in investments demanded by capital, whose profits cannot cover all the technological possibilities it has created. Neoliberalism, therefore, operates through two distinct forms of privatization: first, it uses public funds for the private interests of capital (or the market); second, it transforms social rights (education, health, housing, etc.) into private services that are acquired by the market. Neoliberalism increases private space and decreases public space. It operates through fast and continuous turnover at the level of the labour force, producing on the one hand structural unemployment and on the other the fragmentation of the working class. Instability, fear and despair are its main social and psychological effects.

The economic and social aspects of this new form of capital are inseparable from an unprecedented transformation in the experience of time and space, described by David Harvey as 'time–space compression.' Fragmentation and the globalization of economic production have created two contradictory and simultaneous phenomena: the diffusion and fragmentation of time and space, and, conversely, the compression of space (everything takes place here, there are no distances, differences or frontiers) and time (everything takes place now, there is no past and no future, thanks to electronic and information technologies). In reality, however, fragmented and diffused space and time are reunited in an undifferentiated and ephemeral space, a space that is reduced to a superficial plane of images, in which time loses its profundity to become a movement of rapid and fleeting images.

Against fragmentation, instability and despair, the religious imaginary of a *sacred space* renounces the compression of space. Against the homogenous space of the state (territory) and the atopic space of satellite, missile and Internet (virtual) technology defended by the topological space of guerrilla and resistance movements (deterritorialization), *sacred space* offers itself up as the holy land, a symbolic, absolute and communitarian space, the creator of a complete identity. The religious imaginary, therefore, renounces the ephemeral, and the here-and-now, the perception of a fleeting present that has no ties with the past or the future. This renunciation goes hand in hand with the reappearance of *sacred time* – the idea of the holy war as a collective mission (in Muslim faith), the return to a promised land as the realization of a messianic

promise (in Judaism), as well as charismatic enthusiasm and celestial apparitions (especially those of the Virgin Mary) that condemn the present and call upon individuals to become one with a sacred time in order to find the road to salvation (in Christianity). These ideas express an attempt to capture time and infuse it with transcendent meaning and provide us with some useful insights for understanding the reappearance of religious fundamentalism, not just as a personal expression but also as an interpretation of political action – that is, a return of *political theology*.

The key feature of politics that manifests itself in democracy is the legitimacy of conflict, realized through actions. These actions are social counter-powers that create the political powers and rights to legitimize and guarantee them. Are the great monotheistic religions capable of coexisting with conflict, of working with it, and providing it with a legitimate form of expression? The three great monotheistic religions of the book – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – as religions that produce theologies or explanations about God and the world from divine revelation are religions that from the point of view of knowledge must deal with philosophical and scientific explanations of reality. They must also deal with the plurality of rival religions and secular morality as determined by a profane state. This means that each of these religions views philosophy, science and other religions through the prism of rivalry and reciprocal exclusion. This is a peculiar opposition that cannot be expressed in a democratic public space, since there can be no debate, confrontation or reciprocal transformation among religions whose truth resides in divine revelation and whose divine precepts are dogmas. Because they imagine themselves to be in immediate contact with the absolute, and because they believe themselves to be bearers of an eternal and universal truth, these religions exclude conflict and difference and they produce the Other as demonic and heretic, impious and impure, depraved and ignorant, bad and false.

Strictly speaking, the problem of political theology cannot be limited to the fact of its reappearance at a time when politics appears to have become a rational activity dominated by specialists. Rather, it forces us to ask how a *political* theology is possible, since the modern invention of politics took place precisely because of its separation from the sacred and from religion. The problem, then, is not the existence of a religious authority and a theological power. The problem emerges only when this authority and this power are deemed *political*. Let us examine two opposite views of a theological political power.

The threat of plurality

Leo Strauss's works on the Greeks and Romans, Machiavelli, Hobbes and Spinoza, or his writings on natural right, political philosophy and North American philosophy, are grounded in his critique of modernity, the French Revolution, liberalism, liberal democracy, Marxism and communism and his emphasis on the disasters of the Weimar Republic as proof of the correctness of his political ideas. Strauss claims that in every society public orthodoxy must define good and evil, just and unjust, noble and ignoble, true and false. The unity and cohesion of society depend on the internalization of this orthodoxy by all of its members, which can be achieved only if mediated by an official religion. Why religion? Because religion links the political order to truth or an ultimate reality, providing this order with a sacredness or sanctity that citizens will then fight, kill or die for. Religion thus imbues politics with something that is absolutely necessary: transcendence of the origin of power. *The theologization of power is the only possible alternative to modernity*. For Strauss, the foundation of politics is always the work of a great ruler whose genius lies in providing people with a myth of origin, one that is capable of inspiring respect, devotion and fear. Hence Strauss's critique of modernity, and especially his critique of Machiavelli, Hobbes and Spinoza.

Why, for Strauss, are religion and myth necessary for the foundation and preservation of politics? Because there is an overwhelming conflict between individual interest and common good. Neither reason and institutions nor laws and power are able to overcome this conflict, which can be resolved only by the majesty and transcendence attributed to the origin of power. This means that each society and each state must have just one religion – *the plurality of religions is a political threat*.

Strauss develops the idea that only populism, or the figure of a strong and charismatic leader, can liberate politics from the threat of modernity. This theory is linked to the idea of the formation or political education of an elite in charge of an antimodernist mission (which is anti-rationalist, anti-secularist and not nihilist). The starting point consists in separating a small elite and educating its members so that they may rule society indirectly on behalf of those who rule it directly. What this points to is the establishment of a body of counsellors. To this elite are opened the secrets of power and the knowledge of the terrible and sombre features of reality, on the condition that this is kept secret even from rulers. Indeed, this elite group must make society (including its future rulers) aware

of the destructive effects of modern education, one that is open to the light of reason in its social and political critiques, and replace it by another form of education that is capable of producing the internalization of social values as absolute and inviolable. Ignorant of the secrets of power and reality, educated to defend the sacred values of his society and imbued with the majesty of a power that stems from his forefathers (which for him is real and not mythical), the ruler will be a strong and convincing leader, while his counsellors will secretly exercise politics both as an absolute power of decision and as war.

Leo Strauss dedicated his academic career to this task. Between 1950 and 1970, he produced more than a hundred intellectuals at the University of Chicago. These intellectuals became allies of the Christian Right and they saw Ronald Reagan and then George W. Bush as leaders who could take the United States in the correct political direction. This elite gave the enemy a religious identity and defined war as the struggle of good against evil. It produced the theological-political charade of the geopolitical war in the Middle East. Hence, Leo Strauss's refusal of Spinoza's radical critique of political theology.

Fear of bad things

At the start of this article, I outlined some of the social, political and psychological effects produced by the contemporary experience of contingency, the aleatory and the ephemeral: insecurity, solitude, exclusion and violence. It is precisely the experience of contingency and fear that are key to Spinozan political thought and its attempt to understand the origin and form of political-theological power. At the start of *Theological Political Treatise* Spinoza writes:

> Men would never be superstitious, if they could govern all their circumstances by set rules, or if they were always favoured by Fortune. But being frequently driven into straits where rules are use-less, and being often kept fluctuating pitiably between hope and fear by the uncertainty of fortune's greedily coveted favours, they are consequently, for the most part, very prone to credulity.… They it is, who (especially when they are in danger, and cannot help themselves) are wont with Prayers and womanish tears to implore help from God: upbraiding Reason as blind because she cannot show a sure path to the shadows they pursue, and rejecting human wisdom as vain; but believing the phantoms of imagination, dreams, and other childish absurdities, to be the very oracles of Heaven. As though God had turned away from the wise, and written His decrees, not in the mind of man but in the entrails of beasts, or left them to be proclaimed by the inspiration and instinct of fools, mad-men, and birds. Such is the unreason to which terror can drive mankind! Superstition, then, is engendered, preserved, and fostered by fear, … only while under the dominion of fear do men fall a prey to superstition; and lastly, that prophets have most power among the people, and are most formidable to rulers, precisely at those times when the state is in most peril.
>
> Fear is the cause that gives rise to and feeds superstition and men allow themselves to be dominated by superstition only when they are afraid. But where does this fear come from?

If men had control of their lives, says Spinoza, they would not be at the mercy of fortune or chance – that is, an order of the world imagined as a series of fortuitous encounters between things, people and events. Subject to the whims of fortune because they have no power over the conditions of their lives and are motivated by desires for independently existing goods, men are naturally assailed by two passions: fear and hope. They fear that bad things will happen to them and that good things will not happen to them; they hope that good things will happen to them and that bad things will not. Since these good and bad things are entirely dependent on fortune or chance rather than men themselves, and since events are ephemeral, men's fear and hope are permanent. Indeed, just as good and bad things occur without men knowing why or how, they also disappear without men knowing the reasons for their disappearance.

Superstition, therefore, has its origins in the experience of contingency and chance. The imponderable relationship with a time whose trajectory is uncertain, in which the present seems to have no continuity with the past or the future, generates a sense of discontinuity, of the uncertain and unforeseeable nature of all things. All of this produces a desire to overcome uncertainty and insecurity by seeking signs of the predictability of things and events, signs that may allow men to foresee good and bad things happening to them. This generates a belief in and a search for premonitions. It leads to a belief in supernatural powers that can inexplicably produce good and bad things for men.

Religion is born from this belief in mysterious transcendent powers. Because they are uncertain of the real causes of events, and because they are uncertain of the necessary order and connection of all things and the real cause of their feelings and actions, human beings imagine that everything depends on an omnipotent will that creates and governs everything according to designs beyond the reach of human reason. However, Spinoza continues: if fear is the source of superstition, then three conclusions can be drawn from this. The

first is that all men are naturally subject to superstition, not because they have a confused idea of the deity, but on the contrary because they have such an idea because they are superstitious – superstition is the source not the effect of ignorance. The second is that superstition must be extremely variable and inconstant. If the circumstances that cause fear or hope change, the reactions of each individual to these circumstances will also change, and so will the contents of what is feared or hoped for. The third is that superstition can be maintained or can persist only if a stronger passion allows it to exist, such as hatred, anger or deceit. Men easily fall prey to all kinds of superstition. And they rarely persist with only one.

Spinoza notes that the most effective means of controlling men is to maintain their fear and hope. However, the most effective means of making men seditious and inconstant is to change the source of their fear and hope. Consequently, those who strive to control men must stabilize the sources, forms, and contents of fear and hope. This stabilization is performed by religion. Cult officials, masters of the morality of believers and of rulers, and authorized interpreters of divine revelations set out to fix the fleeting forms and uncertain contents of the images of good and bad things and the passions of fear and hope. This act of fixing forms and contents is most effective if followers believe that God's will is revealed to a few men through decrees, commandments and laws. In other words, it is easier to control superstition if the content of fear and hope is seen as emanating from revelations of the will and the power of a transcendent deity. This means that revealed religions are more potent and stabilizing than others. The most powerful religions are those that unite the different powers that govern the world in a single omnipotent figure – so that monotheistic religions are more powerful than polytheistic religions. Religions are powerful too if followers believe that theirs is the only true god and that they have been chosen to carry out his will. In other words, a monotheistic religion is more powerful if its followers believe they have been elected by the true god, who promised them earthly goods, revenge against their enemies, and salvation in another eternal life. And, finally, these religions will have even greater power if their followers believe that their god reveals himself – that is, if he speaks to the faithful, telling them of his will; the monotheistic religion of an elect people and a revealed god is, therefore, the most powerful religion of all.

Nevertheless, even though divine revelations are consigned to inviolable sacred texts, the fact that these texts are the source of theocratic power transforms them into an object of constant dispute and war. These disputes and wars are pursued according to the interpretation of the sacred text, in keeping either with the person who has the right to interpret them or with the contents of the text itself. It is during these disputes and wars of interpretations that the figure of the theologian emerges. Theology, therefore, is not a theoretical or speculative knowledge about the essence of god, the world and man. It is *the power to interpret the power of god*, consigned to texts.

The stabilization of superstition through rites and doctrines alone cannot guarantee the permanence of political power. Indeed, the visibility of politics seems to place it in the realm of men and within their reach, whereas religion is more distant as it seems to exist in the realm of the gods, aspiring to invisibility. This is why those who seek to dominate the masses through superstition deify politics, inducing the multitude 'under a cloak of piety to adore kings as gods or to abhor them as the plague of mankind'. This deification of political power is carried out by theology, which contains the secrets of politics. Captivated by the seduction of theology, rulers adhere to the deification of political authority, using ceremonies, secret laws and censorship, armies and fortresses, and the torture and murder of objectors.

So, in order to be free from the vicissitudes of fortune, men subject themselves to the mercy of powers whose form, content and action provide them with

security if they and their representatives are directly obeyed. Religion rationalizes (in the psychoanalytic sense) fear and hope; the submission to political power, as the power of a secret sovereign will situated above the individual will of rulers, rationalizes the lawful and the unlawful. This double rationalization is extremely marked in revealed monotheistic religions that are directed to people who believe they were elected by God. The power of this political-religious rationalization is even greater if experts or specialists claim the exclusive right and power to interpret revelations (and, therefore, divine will), deciding the content of what is good and evil, just and unjust, true and false, permitted and prohibited, possible and impossible, as well as who has the right to political power in terms of legal forms of civil obedience. This domination is religious and political – it is *theologico-political*.

Born of and through fear, superstition delegates to religion, which in turn delegates to theology, the delirious task of finding an imaginary unity, capable of recovering and reconciling a reality that is perceived as fragmented in time and space, made of multiple and contradictory forms, a unity that appears to provide events with continuity and that seems to control an irascible nature, pacify irate leaders, offer hope and conjure up terror. This unity cannot, of course, belong to the same dimension as the fragmented and disjointed world; it must transcend it, in order to provide its isolated and contradictory forms with some sense of cohesion. This cohesion can be obtained only by the extraordinary power of a desire and a gaze capable of sweeping away the totality of time and space, the visible and invisible. The distressing experience of fragmentation flows into the imaginary unity of the providential will of a divine sovereign. Thanks to his power, which transcends the fragmentation of nature and the divisions of society, the trajectory of the world seems secure and the destiny of each individual is safeguarded. Could anyone but Spinoza have better described and understood our present world?

The Spinozan critique of theological-political power aims to untie the knot that binds contingency, fear and the imaginary of a transcendent power to a single fabric. Politics is the immanent activity of the society that has established itself by the action of the *multitudo* in specific natural and historic conditions. While the imaginary of transcendence asserts theocracy as a regime of power established outside and beyond society by divine will, the rational knowledge of immanence conceives democracy as established by human desire and the superior form of politics.