

INTRODUCTION

Political Theology and Democracy: Perspectives from South Asia, West Asia, and North Africa

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Come together, speak together; together let your thoughts agree,
just as the gods of long ago, coming to an agreement together, reverently
approach their sacrificial portion.

Common to them all is the solemn utterance, common the assembly,
common their thought along with their perception.

I (hereby) utter an utterance common to you all on your behalf; with an
oblation common to you all I offer on your behalf.

Rigveda, 10.191.2-3, translated by Stephanie W. Jamison¹

How we think about politics; how we think about production, exchange, and consumption; and how we think about the divine, always mirror each other. In what ways shall we understand this *achintyabhedabheda*, unthinkable-difference-and-nondifference, between the political, the economic, and the theological? This forum collates some of the most exciting recent scholarship on South Asia, West Asia, and North Africa, revealing the explosive interpenetration of these three spheres in shaping democratic politics in these regions. In this Introduction, my argument will revolve around two models of Political Theology. Political Theology 1 (PT 1) centers domination and exploitation – where ancient theologies of top-down hegemony culminate in modern global rule of state and capital. Political Theology 2 (PT 2) centers democracy and wellbeing – these equally (if not more) ancient theologies, still resilient in many indigenous societies and cultures, offer vital resources for eroding state and capital, and for unshackling multispecies democracy. The essays in this forum clarify the conversations and contestations between PT 1 and PT 2 across large stretches of Afro-Eurasia.

Before delving into these discoveries and thinking about their radical public stakes, let us dwell a bit on the last hymn of the *Rigveda*. The hymn urges the people to assemble and create consensus in the way that the gods themselves assemble and agree. Sacrificial goods are also meant to be offered and partaken in common. We can interpret these lines in two ways. On the one hand, the lines can be read as an attempt to manufacture consensus, to impose homogeneity. The hymns of the *Rigveda* were composed in the second half of the

¹ Stephanie W. Jamison and Joel P. Brereton, trans. *The Rigveda: The Earliest Religious Poetry of India*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 1661.

second millennium BCE. By the early first millennium BCE, these hymns and associated rituals were integrated into a canon – some historians argue, at the instigation of the Kuru state.²

On the other hand, these lines are also proto-democratic. They create alliterative music by playing with the prefix *sam-* (together), the word *samana* (common), and the word *samiti* (assembly) – which are all cognate words. All three derive from a Proto-Indo-European root, reconstructed as *sem – “one, also adverbially “as one,” together with.” (This root has given birth to the English “same”, “similar”, and “assembly” as well.)³ From Vedic through classical Sanskrit to the modern Indian languages, this root has also bequeathed the word *samaj* (society, community) and *sama/samata/samya*, words that connote “equal/equality.” Indian democracy would be unimaginable without this semantic inheritance.

Is the Rigvedic hymn then a tool of monarchic centralization, a precursor of the homogenizing drives of Hindu nationalism? Or is it a hymn of equality and a call for commoning of resources – embodying the longue durée origins of Indian democracy? K. P. Jayaswal, the celebrated Indian historian who supported democratic devolution of power to Indians and whose work fuelled resistance to the British Empire, interpreted the hymn as signalling popular sovereignty in ancient India – where the *samiti*, as the assembly of the people, was sovereign.⁴

In European discussions on political theology, the first model, PT 1 – political theology as top-down hegemony – has generally occupied center-stage. This approach goes back to the German jurist (and Nazi-sympathizer) Carl Schmitt, who observed in his field-defining essay *Political Theology*: “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development – in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby, for example, the omnipotent God became the omnipotent law-giver – but also because of their systematic structure [...]”⁵ E. H. Kantorowicz, in *The King’s Two Bodies*, mustered the historical evidence to demonstrate how the modern state was born when rulers expropriated Christian theological ideas, particularly concerning an immortal body politic.⁶ He summarized: “when finally the Nation stepped into the pontifical shoes of the Prince, the modern ABSOLUTE STATE, even without a Prince, was enabled to make claims like a Church.”⁷

Given historical contexts of Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and Soviet authoritarianism, it is evident why this authoritarian interpretation of political theology – omnipotent God

² Ibid.

³ Calvert Watkins, ed. *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985, 57.

⁴ K. P. Jayaswal, *Hindu Polity: A Constitutional History of India in Hindu Times*, Calcutta: Butterworth and Co., 1924, Part I, 11-16.

⁵ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985 (1922, 1934), 36.

⁶ Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957.

⁷ Ernst H. Kantorowicz, “Mysteries of State: An Absolutist Concept and its Late Mediaeval Origins”, in *Selected Studies*, New York: J. J. Augustin, 1965, 398.

secularized into omnipotent state – would enjoy such traction in twentieth-century European political theory. I would argue that the weaknesses of postcolonial democracy in Asia and North Africa, and especially the rise of authoritarian ruling classes, have also intensified the traction of PT 1 in scholarly discussion here. In recent years, books on these regions have started systematically engaging with Schmitt and Kantorowicz.⁸

In this forum, the essays by Andrew March, Hussein Omar, and Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi reveal the root rationale. The history of twentieth-century Asia and North Africa is a history of decolonization. As people revolted against direct colonial rule, as in British India or Egypt, or against Western-supported authoritarian regimes, as in Iran, theology nourished democracy. Omar shows how during the 1919 revolution in Egypt, multitudes of ordinary Egyptians advanced radical republican claims, surcharged with theological concepts. March demonstrates how South Asian and Arab Muslim thinkers claimed that God spoke through the people.

Yet, as postcolonial, postrevolutionary, regimes consolidated, those that captured power sought to monopolize God’s voice. What would happen to those who fell foul of the regime; who were categorized by states as minorities? Sadeghi-Boroujerdi exposes such paradox. Sovereignty demands a central commander, a vicar of God – but democracy demands that this centre be empty, to obviate authoritarianism. How can these opposed drives ever be reconciled?

Meanwhile, the crisis of neoliberalism has led to increasing scholarly preoccupation with “economic theology” – and particularly with ways in which Christian theology has moulded capitalism. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben popularized the term. For Agamben, as with Schmitt, theology is domination. We find that the divine has not only transfigured into the state, but also transformed into the invisible hand of the market, into capitalist value-extraction.⁹ Much of this scholarship focuses on Europe and North America. However, there are comparable Asian economic theologies. For example, Indian merchants speak about “auspicious profit” (*shubh labh*) and regard the mercantile seat (*gaddi*) as divine. Gods like Lakshmi and Ganesha sanctify wealth. Family firms worship capital and divinize accumulation.¹⁰

⁸ Milinda Banerjee, *The Mortal God: Imagining the Sovereign in Colonial India*, Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2018; David Gilmartin, Pamela Price, and Arild Engelsen Ruud, eds. *South Asian Sovereignty: The Conundrum of Worldly Power*, London: Routledge, 2019; Andrew F. March, *The Caliphate of Man: Popular Sovereignty in Modern Islamic Thought*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019; Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, *Revolution and its Discontents: Political Thought and Reform in Iran*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019; Caleb Simmons, *Devotional Sovereignty: Kingship and Religion in India*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, translated by Lorenzo Chiesa, with Matteo Mandarini, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011; Mitchell Dean, “What is Economic Theology? A New Governmental-Political Paradigm?”, *Theory, Culture and Society*, 36 (3) 2019: 3-26; Stefan Schwarzkopf, ed. *The Routledge Handbook of Economic Theology*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2020.

¹⁰ Milinda Banerjee, “How ‘Dynasty’ became a Modern Global Concept: Intellectual Histories of Sovereignty and Property”, *Global Intellectual History* 2020 (published online; print version forthcoming).

Ultimately, capitalist theology is transnational. US President Donald Trump, during his visit to India in 2020, invoked the nineteenth-century Hindu religious reformer Vivekananda to suggest that belief in God facilitated commercial development in the United States and India.¹¹ His invocation attempted to connect conservative-American and Hindu-nationalist capitalism. Capital can indeed coexist with Christian monotheism as well as Hindu polyarchy of deities, as long as it subsumes both into the theology of profit-making – a “monotheism of capital” (*punjir ekeshvaravad*) – to borrow the postcolonial theorist Partha Chatterjee’s term.¹² Or, to draw on a Bengali translation of Karl Marx’s phrase “commodity fetishism” – here is *panyapauttalikata*, commodity idolatry.¹³

The question remains: how can we conceptualize a second model, PT 2, where the political, the economic, and the theological nourish each other and promote the wellbeing of the multitudes, not the dominance of state and capital? To find the lost pathways, we must return to the contradictions within decolonization. Many anti-colonial activists opposed the modern-Western state form.¹⁴ They saw the modern state as a fundamentally illegitimate political form that usurped the place of deity and community. Anti-colonial rebellions produced ideas about human beings as individually and collectively imbued with divinity, and hence possessing the mandate to rise against and overthrow unjust empires – in the name of Allah, under the sign of the Mahdi, with the blessings of the Devi, or under the guidance of *avatars*.¹⁵

Yet, from Egypt to India, what emerged as a result of decolonization was the postcolonial state. The postcolonial state, while claiming to be a democracy, has often acted only as a bourgeois state – and ruthlessly crushed ancient indigenous democracies. The independent Indian state’s suppression of democratic forms of life and theology present among the shifting cultivators of highland northeast India is exemplary of a wider pattern.¹⁶

Decolonization has thus remained only half-done. The early postcolonial state generally promoted various kinds of state-aided capitalism, that eventually succumbed to neoliberalism by the 1990s.

During the great anti-colonial struggles across Asia and North Africa, community-oriented theologies sustained rebellion against the colonial state and its indigenous-elite allies.

¹¹ “President Trump quotes Swami Vivekananda at ‘Namaste Trump’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4icGgFxVueQ>.

¹² Partha Chatterjee, “Bangali Sanskritir Vishvajanin Itihas” (2009), in *Janapratidinhi*, Calcutta: Anushtup, 2013, 68-70.

¹³ Piyush Dasgupta, tr. *Karl Marx, Capital [Mulghan]: Dhanatantrik Utpadaner Vicharmulak Vishleshan*, Calcutta: Baniprakash, 1955, 39-54.

¹⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination*, London: Verso, 2005; Maia Ramnath, *Decolonizing Anarchism: An Antiauthoritarian History of India’s Liberation Struggle*, Oakland: AK Press, 2011; Laura Galian, *Colonialism, Transnationalism, and Anarchism in the South of the Mediterranean*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

¹⁵ Banerjee, *Mortal God*.

¹⁶ Jelle J. P. Wouters, *In the Shadows of Naga Insurgency: Tribes, State, and Violence in Northeast India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018; Milinda Banerjee, “A Non-Eurocentric Genealogy of Indian Democracy: Tripura in History of Political Thought”, in Jelle J. P. Wouters, ed. *Vernacular Politics in Northeast India: Democracy, Ethnicity, and Indigeneity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022, 83-109.

Subaltern Studies historians like Ranajit Guha and Gautam Bhadra have showed how community religiosity, especially peasant religiosity, weakened the sinews of empire.¹⁷ In this forum, Mou Banerjee demonstrates how Bengali Muslim multitudes consolidated their religious identity to challenge British-supported high-caste Hindu landlords. Even the postcolonial state was unable to stamp out these communitarian everyday theologies. Dalit political theologies lie at the heart of egalitarian politics in India today.¹⁸

Lucia Michelutti's and Anastasia Piliavsky's essays here underline how vernacular theologies nurture postcolonial Indian democracy. Michelutti calls this divine kinship. Subaltern communities in India (and Venezuela) worship, draw lineage from, and identify with gods and heroic beings – this enables them to fight against exploitative elites. Piliavsky highlights the resilience of centrifugal local traditions – that emphasize accountability of the powerful to the poor, that saturate everyday relationships with divinity, that emphasize neighbourliness and tolerance across sectarian borders – against the centripetal force of Hindu nationalist state. Both reveal how women draw political strength from goddess imaginaries.

The question then would be – how do we liberate these democratic models of political theology from the authoritarian models, how can we unshackle PT 2 from PT 1? And concomitantly, what would non-exploitative economic theology look like? The essays by Sean Dowdy and Jelle Wouters in this forum address these questions from the perspective of the nonhuman. For Dowdy, to understand democracy, we must look not only at human assemblies, but also at how humans relate to water, volcanoes, insects. Wouters argues that Bhutan exemplifies a polity where the spirits of nature are still alive and powerful. State and capital bow to tutelary gods. Divine permission is taken before capitalist intervention can transform landscapes; the country is constitutionally mandated to retain sixty-percent territory under forest-cover.

In our recent book, Wouters and I draw on India and Bhutan to conceptualize the multibeing demos, the multispecies democracy. Across large parts of the world, in societies past and present, human and nonhuman wellbeing has been the center of politics – not the empire of sovereignty or the thirst of capital. Some of these societies and worldviews still persist, despite centuries of colonial assault – in the Indigenous Americas, in Adivasi South Asia, in Aboriginal Australia, in Africa, and elsewhere. Politics here privileges consensus over coercion.¹⁹ For example, in the Sundarbans mangrove delta of eastern India and Bangladesh, pacts of friendship (*dostani*) traditionally regulate relations between humans and tigers and between Muslim and Hindu spirits, thereby maintaining ecological balance between various human and nonhuman denizens of the forest.²⁰ Naga highlanders in northeast India reject the Indian state and its Westminster-style first-past-the-post electoral system that promotes brute

¹⁷ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983; Gautam Bhadra, *Iman o Nishan: Unish Shataker Banglar Krishak Chaitanyer ek Adhyay, c. 1800–1850*, Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 1994.

¹⁸ Gnana Patrick, *Public Theology: Indian Concerns, Perspectives, and Themes*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2020.

¹⁹ Milinda Banerjee and Jelle J. P. Wouters, *Subaltern Studies 2.0: Being against the Capitalocene*, Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2022.

²⁰ Krishnaram Das, "Raymangal" in Satyanarayan Bhattacharya, ed. *Kavi Krishnaram Daser Granthavali* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 1958), 166.

majoritarianism. They forge politics through consensual deliberation, with decisions reached through lengthy assemblies and pacts.²¹ They believe that spirits, tigers, and pythons have such assemblies too.²²

Shuvatri Dasgupta argues that empire, state, and capital acted in conjunction to precipitate a global crisis of care where atomistic individualism was privileged over kinship and community welfare. She suggests that women and other subalterns were the primary victims of this colonial assault on collective living.²³ I would argue that to promote multispecies care today, decolonizing politics, economy, and theology is essential. This can only proceed through the withering of state and the erosion of capital.

Democratic political, economic, environmental theologies – many of which still persist across Afro-Eurasia – are vital weapons in this struggle. Against Locke’s capitalist theology, where God gives white man the mandate to subdue and appropriate the earth, we must call for animist revolution – uprisings of Indigenous humans and spirits, of their animal and plant kin. We must create a global *dostani* where local communities converse with each other to erode their internal class and gender inequalities, while collectively challenging authoritarian states and wealthy ruling classes. We must see other beings, human and nonhuman, not as commodities, but as beings – divinities to be revered and cared for.²⁴ This would be multispecies political theology.

From primordial traditions, we must learn how to decommodify, deprivatize, subordinate the profit form – share and enjoy in common the fruits of the earth. To desovereignize, we must learn how to speak and assemble beyond and against the state – the common assembly ranged against the state’s sovereign “I will.”²⁵ This would be the long labour of decolonizing political theology – make theology speak for multispecies justice, address the present social-ecological catastrophe of the Capitalocene.

Hence, the Buddha’s ancient words sound forth from “lower-caste” Dalit-Bahujan assemblies today – *bahujanahitaya bahujanasukhaya*, strive for the welfare of many beings, the happiness of many beings.

Free the multitudes from state and capital – liberate Being from Unbeing!

²¹ Wouters, *In the Shadows*.

²² Banerjee and Wouters, *Subaltern Studies 2.0*.

²³ Shuvatri Dasgupta, “A History of Conjugalities: On Patriarchy, Caste, and Capital, in the British Empire c.1872-1947” (PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, ongoing).

²⁴ Banerjee and Wouters, *Subaltern Studies 2.0*.

²⁵ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft im Grundrisse: Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, Leipzig: Verlag von Felix Meiner, 1911, 228.

