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World's Religions After September 11:
Some Philosophical Reflections

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World's Religions After September 11

Some Philosophical Reflections*

The reader's first reaction to the title is likely to be one of scepticism, for although the events of September 11 are doubtless firmly etched in modern memory, and their connection to the world's religions, or at least to one of them, is plain enough; to propose that these events could prompt philosophical reflections seems so far-fetched as to suggest an academic's desperate search for a new topic – a push for novelty. Perhaps the clarification would palliate the reader somewhat that what we mean by philosophical reflections are considerations, which do not go all the way into pure philosophy but, nevertheless, embody reflections of a philosophical nature, inasmuch as their attempt is to place some of the issues raised by the events of September 11, specially in relation to world religions, in a broader perspective. The need for such reflection can hardly be questioned even here in India, now that we have had our own version of the 9/11, namely, the 26/11.

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I would like to focus on six such issues in what follows.

Reflections on Religion:

One needs to build up gradually towards the first philosophical consideration by dwelling for a moment on the implications the events indelibly associated with September 11 have had on the standing of religion in the public eye. One is struck by the negative imaging of religion in public discourse in general in the wake of

* Lecture delivered at the India International Centre on March 9 in collaboration with the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute.

this event. One might have imagined that it would be directed or restricted to Islam, and, moreover, to a particular kind of Islam, but that has not been the case. A series of books have since appeared, which are severely critical of religion.¹ Some of these focus more heavily on the religions of the Abrahamic tradition and tend to be more gentle towards some non-Western religions such as Buddhism², but there is no mistaking the general thrust that religion is an evil, or leads to it. Some more recent books challenge this general thrust³, but as of this moment, the momentum rests

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These developments force one to ask and try to answer the question: is religion good or bad? No one would doubt that religion has a mixed record in terms of its contribution to human flourishing, but the question to be faced is whether its record is as unremittingly negative as the impression generated by the current discourse on the topic.

There is room for questioning the view that we are moving only in an area of darkness, as it were, in this respect. One presumes that most readers would be equally opposed to genocide and slavery, but perhaps one needs to recognize that, at one stage in the evolution of human society, slavery was an improvement on genocide.⁴ That is to say, initially one killed off all surviving enemies after a victory, but later on decided to enslave them rather than kill them. These changes were associated with the rise of religious consciousness in the period.⁵ The impulse continued to manifest itself in later religions. The Buddha

¹ See, for instance, Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, New York: Harper Collins, 2002; Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Religion*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004; Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, New York: Bantam Books, 2006; Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, New York: Viking, 2006; Christopher E. Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, New York: Hachette Book Group, 2007.

² Sam Harris makes room for Buddhism and there are some positive notices of Hinduism, see Lisa Miller 'We Are All Hindus Now', *Newsweek*, August 15, 2009. But also see Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India's Future*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.

³ See Anthony Flew, *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*, New York: Harper Collins, 2007; Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion: Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine*, U.K.: Society for Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 2007; Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God*, New York: Random House, 2009; Jurgen Habermas, *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010.

⁴ Personal communication, Professor Gregory Baum.

⁵ See Alan Dershowitz, *Rights from Wrongs: A Secular Theory of the Origin of Rights*, New York: Basic Books, 2005, p. 124.

interceded to stop warring factions from fighting.⁶ According to the *Mahabharata*, a Brahman could stop a fight by stepping between two armies⁷, although the epic itself depicts an inexorable march towards fratricidal struggle, despite all efforts to prevent it. Early Christianity put an end to the gory gladiatorial spectacles in Rome.

St. Francis of Assisi is known to have tried to intercede in the Crusades and, in modern times, several peace initiatives have taken place under the aegis of religious bodies, including the moves towards achieving peace between Israel and Palestine in the Middle East, and the Tamils and the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka.

On the other hand, the record of secular ideologies in terms of furthering human welfare seems hardly an improvement on that of religion. After all, the two World Wars, which devastated the first half of the previous century and the Cold War, which characterized its second half, were fought between the secular forces of imperialism, fascism, capitalism and communism. So when it comes to secular substitutes for religion, one seems to fare no better. Perhaps the fault lies with extremism rather than ideology or religion. Be that as it may, these observations prepare the ground for introducing the following philosophical reflections.

- There is the issue of how we relate to our religions and how perfect we want them to be. We want our religions to be perfect – apparently that is why we are finding them at fault – but our religions want us to be perfect. So we want our religions to be perfect, and our religions want us to be perfect. Are we not placing emphasis at the wrong end, or at least being one-sided, when we go after religion alone? After all, if religions have inflicted a lot of damage on humanity, human beings have also inflicted a lot of damage on religion.

Are we not placing emphasis at the wrong end, or at least being one-sided, when we go after religion alone? After all, if religions have inflicted a lot of damage on humanity, human beings have also inflicted a lot of damage on religion

⁶ See G.P. Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, London: Luzac & Company, 1960, Vol. II, p. 876.

⁷ Hartmut Scharfe, *The State in Indian Tradition*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989, p. 185.

- Perhaps the right way to look upon religion is to consider it as a force in human affairs, a force which is capable of being harnessed for either good or evil; just as a natural force, such as fire, can cook one's meal but also burn one's house down. Or like a force such as atomic power, a force generated by human beings themselves, which can be used once again to incinerate humanity or be used as an additional source of electricity.
- People think we should be done with religion. Many sociologists thought we are done with religion, which belonged to a bygone age. This point will be discussed in more detail later. Suffice it to say at this point that at one time it was a widely held belief in Europe that religion represented a need which humanity had outgrown after the Enlightenment. It thus represented the stage of childhood in the evolution of humanity. Yet if religion persists in spite of predictions of its demise, then we have to consider the possibility that religion represents something fundamental and universal. The mistake we often commit, when we describe something as universal, is to assume that what is universal must be invariable. So when we think of something as universal, we tend to think of it as something present everywhere and at all times.

This is where the return of religion, represented by the events of September 11, should jolt us into realizing that some things can be universal without being invariable. The phenomenon of hunger provides a good example of this possibility. Most will probably concur that hunger is a universal phenomenon. However, this does not mean that we are hungry all the time; hunger is not invariable, though universal. Religion, too, could then be something which is universal but variable. It could then be in eclipse for long periods of time, like hunger, but that should not lead us into thinking it has gone away forever, and has or can be done away with.

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- The final philosophical point, which might be raised under the rubric of philosophical reflections on religion, is essentially a theological one, but with important philosophical implications. Among the many books mentioned earlier in this piece which take aim at religion, some do so by describing religion as a natural rather than a supernatural phenomenon (which it takes itself

to be). A lot of intellectual investment in the study of religion has gone into establishing the possibility that religion is essentially psychological, or sociological, or biological in nature. The important point to realize is that the essence of religion may not be religious. These theories of religion are described as reductive in nature, for the obvious reason that they tend to reduce religion to something other than religion. This position is then contrasted with its opposite, which advocates a non-reductive approach to the study of religion.

It is in this background that one might appreciate the theological argument alluded to earlier. Some theologians and philosophers of religion argue, John Hick notable among them⁸, that the universe hangs

out there before us as something ambiguous. One can produce a credible atheistic natural explanation of it, and one can also produce a credible theistic explanation of it. But this is precisely how it should be from the point of view of faith. If God wants our faith or devotion, but also wants it to be totally uncoerced, or totally free, in the sense of it being a free choice on our part, then such a God will create precisely the kind of universe we have, namely, one which is fundamentally ambiguous. For if one had compelling evidence either way, then it would not be a question of faith anymore, because then one would have evidence to resolve the issue one way or the other. Thus, the very ambiguity of the situation, that one can offer a fully naturalistic explanation of the universe as well as a fully theistic explanation of the universe, is itself capable of being explained in theological terms.

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Reflections on Secularism:

Reflections on the secularism of the kind one might wish to offer need to be prefaced by the realization that capitalism as well as communism, and liberalism as well as fascism, share a certain thesis about the human condition, which has its origin in post-Enlightenment Europe. It could be called the secular hypothesis. This hypothesis maintained that as the world modernizes, or Europeanizes, or Westernizes, which for the upholders of the thesis were overlapping terms, religion would recede steadily

⁸ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.

from the public square all over the world, and ultimately become a purely private affair, like one's appreciation of art or literature.

It should not come as a surprise that Westerners, especially European thinkers, should have thought along these lines. At one time even the domains of politics, social and economic life, and that of education as well, were within the purview of the church. In a sense, modernity meant the emergence of these areas of life as autonomous units, free from the control of the church. If recent history could be read as the Europeanization of the world⁹, then it was not too far-fetched to assume that Europe's past was the world's future.

This was a very widely held view until well after the Second World War. This confidence in the secularization of the globe, over the long run, went virtually uncontested. It is true that Pakistan had emerged as a 'Muslim' state in 1947 and Israel as a 'Jewish' state in 1948 but, in both these cases, special circumstances sufficed to explain these developments. The Holocaust during the Second World War credibly explained the formation of Israel; and although Pakistan was formed as a nation-state out of the Muslim-majority regions of India, its emergence could be viewed as a political

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rather than a primarily religious development, confirmed by the fact that the Hindu-majority India by its side did emerge, for all intents and purposes, as a 'secular' state.¹⁰

Thus, everything could be seen as going according to plan in terms of the secular hypothesis until 1979, when the Iranian Revolution occurred and one witnessed the re-entry of religion in the public square with a bang, at least in Iran. Since then, or even from earlier on, the level of fundamentalism has been rising in virtually all the religions of the world. These responses to secularism, which run counter to secularism, are often referred to by such terms as orthodoxy, fundamentalism, or fanaticism.

Such developments induce two sets of reflections, one terminological and the other eschatological.

⁹ See Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding*, Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1988, pp. 167-169.

¹⁰ Donald Eugene Smith, *India as a Secular State*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963.

- All of the three terms just mentioned: orthodoxy, fundamentalism, and fanaticism, constantly challenge secularism. The fact, however, that they constitute challenges to secularism in general has led to a certain lack of nuance in understanding them, because they are lumped together so often and can mimic each other. Thus, orthodoxy is a religious tradition's response to a perceived lack of piety in the public or private sphere, but fundamentalism is the religious tradition's response to a perceived loss of power in the public sphere. Fanaticism consists of being blinded by the intensity of the luminosity of one's own religious tradition by standing too close to it, instead of seeing the whole world transfigured in its light.
- When one talks of secularism and fundamentalism in the same breath, it is not always clear as to which is the problem and which is the solution, as each could lead to the other by going into overdrive. Thus, fundamentalism can be a reaction against excessive secularism, or the stripping of the public sphere of religion with a vengeance, just as the rise of secularism was a reaction to the excessive intrusion of religion in public life. But more significantly, their apposition raises the question: which of the two represents the trend of the immediate future: whether, if fanaticism can be defanged, it might be more in accord with facts to see the future of the world as characterized not so much by secularism as by religious pluralism, a possibility which is intellectually quite a game-changer in the present context.

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Reflections on Islam:

One cannot, of course, think for long of September 11 without having to reflect on Islam. And in this respect one very significant fact often goes unrecognized. It is important for us to realize that until around the end of the eighteenth century, everything seemed to be going according to the divine plan as perceived in the Muslim world. Islam is the final revelation; and in its own self-understanding regards Judaism and Christianity as belonging to the same prophetic line of which it constitutes the end-point. It is a matter of genuine puzzlement for Muslims that Jews and Christians do not accept Islam as the final revelation, when they accept earlier

revelations.¹¹ As the final revelation, Islam could easily be perceived as destined to be if not the sole, then the dominant religion of the planet. After all, from its emergence until the end of the eighteenth century, it was steadily expanding its frontiers around the globe.¹²

But when Napoleon marched into Egypt in 1798, the Islamic world realized that this assessment had to be revised. In other words, the rise of the West rained on the parade, as it were. If we look at the situation this way, then we realize how acute the frustration must be at the current state of affairs within the Islamic world. And how completely the West succeeded in dominating it during the colonial period may be gauged from the fact that, out of the fifty-seven states which constitute the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), barely less than half a dozen managed to escape colonization. A religion which was expecting to dominate the world found itself dominated by the (Western) world; the experience of such a reversal of fate can only have been traumatic.¹³

It is a striking experience to read the writings of Allama Iqbal on the relationship between the West and Islam a century ago.¹⁴ If one did not know their historical context, one would not be able to distinguish them from contemporary writings by

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Muslim savants critical of the West. The three great Islamic empires of the eighteenth century: the Mughal Empire in India, the Safavid Empire in Iran and the Ottoman Empire in Turkey, were either gone or in irreversible decline by the end of the First World War.

Given this background, the symbolic significance for the Islamic world of the events of September 11 should not be underestimated. But the philosophical reflection these events prompt one to engage in is to ask the following question: does the Qur'an provide revelatory room for a vision of the world in which different religions can exist in peace? In other words, can prophetic history provide an escape from such mundane history?

¹¹ See Patrick Burke, *The Major Religions: An Introduction with Texts*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004, p. 271.

¹² See H.A.R. Gibb, 'Islam', in R.C. Zaehner, ed., *The Concise Encyclopedia of Living Fathers*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1967, p. 178.

¹³ See Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, Chapter I.

¹⁴ See Shiela McDonough, *The Flame of Sinai: Hope and Vision in Iqbal*, Lahore: Iqbal Academy, 2002.

Two points deserve special philosophical reflection in this context:

- Most discussions of the concept of jihad, or of violence, in relation to Islam, tend to focus on the present, on what has been described as the ‘bloody borders’ of the Islamic world.¹⁵ But the philosophical investigation of the issue shifts the focus to the past – to the very origins of Islam, which are also not free from bloodletting, but this shift generates an interesting insight – that there is a difference between the sanguinary nature of the origin of Islam and of its present-day borders and that, in this case, similar phenomena may call for different explanations. One must begin, however, by first drawing attention to two more general points before turning to the specific case of Islam. The first is an anthropological one – that state formation in any society is seldom a pretty affair, and often accompanied by much bloodshed. The second is drawn from the comparative study of religion – that in the case of Islam the emergence of the religion in Arabia coincided with state formation in that part of the world. This is not the case with most world religions (with the possible exception of biblical Judaism). Thus, in the cases of both Hinduism and Buddhism, the state was already in place when they emerged, while in the case of Confucianism and Taoism, state formation in China may be said to have followed their founding by several centuries. One is thus led to wonder whether this natal intimacy of state and religion in the case of Arabia has something to do with the violence that characterized the rise of Islam, which actually established a unified Muslim community or *ummah*. Ironically, then, the current problems on the borders of the Islamic civilization seem to represent, in one sense, an opposite process – that of fragmentation of the *ummah* into many independent states.
- However, to revert to the question of revelatory spaces, which provide room for religious diversity in Islam, one is usually presented in this context with the concept of a ‘people of the book’ (*ahl al-kitab*) and how it provides a

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¹⁵ See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

definite place for non-Muslims in a Muslim polity, if admittedly not on par with Muslims.¹⁶ More metaphysically, verses of the Qur'an are sometimes interpreted to mean that the 'People of a Book' will be judged by their Book on the Day of Judgment.¹⁷ These avenues, though helpful, remain problematical.¹⁸ But some verses of the Qur'an seem to provide room for an anthropological approach, which seems to hold greater promise in our context. One has Qur'an 49:13 in mind here:

O mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes and ye may know one another. Lo! The noblest among you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct. Lo! Allah is Knower, Aware.¹⁹

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This verse is remarkable for making the division into nations and tribes as fundamental as the division of humanity into the sexes, and for this in itself sufficing for them to come to know each other. Although the verse is cited by Ibn Taymiyya to justify internal diversity within Islam²⁰, there seems to be no obstacle for extending it to the different religions themselves.

Reflections on Crime and War:

The next point has to do with how best to characterize the events of September 11: whether as a crime or an act of war. The importance of the distinction should be quite apparent: if they are described as a *crime* then another dynamic is set in motion, than if they or the response to them, is couched in terms of *war*. One may, however, yet be inclined to ask why the distinction is so important. The answer to this question lies in the fact that a crime is usually committed within

¹⁶ See Yohanan Friedmann, 'Medieval Muslim Views of Indian Religions', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* Vol. 5 No. 2, April-June 1975, pp. 216-221.

¹⁷ See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 'Religion, Globality, and Universality', in Arvind Sharma and Kathleen Dugan, eds, *A Dome of Many Colors: Studies in Religious Pluralism, Identity, and Unity*, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1999, p. 154.

¹⁸ See Arvind Sharma, *Islam for Hindus*, New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2009, Chapter 8.

¹⁹ Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, Multan: Maktaba Jawahar al Uloom, no date, p. 369.

²⁰ Tamara Sonn, *A Brief History of Islam*, Malden, M.A.: Blackwell Publishing, 2004, p. 127.

a state. International crime may well be on the increase, but the point which needs to be recognized is that the primary orientation of the notion of a crime involves a state, with a usually clearly recognized border wherein the crime is committed, within which recognized authorities are responsible for maintaining law and order. When law is broken and a crime committed, then forces are set in motion involving the state apparatus to apprehend the culprit. War, by contrast, typically involves different states (or parts of a country trying to become a separate state, as in a civil war).

The issue of how to describe the events of September 11 is extremely intriguing because one faces a major problem when it comes to assessing the significance of the events of September 11. As noted earlier, crimes are typically committed within a state, but the events of September 11 were international in scope, and, in a sense, 'inter-state', so understanding them in terms of war could probably be justified. However, it was also noted earlier that wars typically take place between states, and no such state seems to be involved in this case. The Al Qaeda is believed to be a loosely-knit organization, unlike the well-structured state. It is extremely significant, therefore, to reflect on how our outlook changes once we choose to term the events as a crime or as a war.²¹

This discussion enables one to raise a philosophical point about the nature of the state. The philosophical justification of a state ultimately boils down to the fact that it alone exercises legitimate monopoly on violence in society – it is the only legitimate authority for the exercise of physical coercion. This is what makes a state a state. And perhaps the states are so dead set against terrorism because terrorism involves precisely the deployment of that violence or coercion, over which the state claims a monopoly. There may thus be structural and morphological reasons, in addition to the moral, for why states are upset by the phenomenon of terrorism.

Mahatma Gandhi and September 11:

These last two points look at the events of September 11 from an Indian perspective, after surveying them from a religious, secular, Islamic and a criminal/martial perspective.

When law is broken and a crime committed, then forces are set in motion involving the state apparatus to apprehend the culprit

²¹ I am indebted to Professor Harvey Cox for alerting me to this dimension of the issue.

The first of these two points has to do with Gandhism. Mahatma Gandhi was an apostle of non-violence; it is natural, therefore, that such a violent sequence of events should provoke one to view it from the counter perspective of non-violence. Mahatma Gandhi insisted that 1) all injustice must be resisted and that 2) such resistance should be non-violent rather than violent. This is one way of parsing his emphasis on truth and non-violence, or *satya* and *ahimsa*, and mainstream this emphasis by pointing out that *truth* and *justice* are often equated in Hindu sacred texts.²² If the Islamic world feels that it has been victimized by the West then it has every right to protest, in accordance with the first principle, but such protest should be non-violent in keeping with the second. Mahatma Gandhi did prefer violence to cowardice but one wonders if the Muslim *ummah* can be accused of being faint-hearted. The Gandhian critique therefore seems justified that the protest should have been non-violent. An observation of Professor Elie Wiesel is also worth noting, that while it may not always be in our power to prevent injustice, it is always in our power to protest against it. This strengthens the first point made above, but the second remains unaffected by it.

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The Gandhian approach, when pursued further, does give rise to two philosophical reflections, which, when taken together, may constitute a paradox.

- Some observers remarked, after witnessing the carnage of September 11 that Gandhi was right after all. Perhaps what they had in mind is the fact that the world is so interconnected, so intermeshed and so interdependent today that no matter how genuine one's grievance, the use of violence to ventilate it causes more damage than the original injustice against which the protest is mounted. The damage, which a violent explosion of protest against injustice causes in the modern world, indeed, is bound to cause in the modern world after its shrinkage into a 'global village', is such that, by doing so, one will inevitably become unjust in the pursuit of justice, if non-violent means are not employed. Thus, the case for Gandhism is strengthened.

²² *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanisad* I.4, 14; see S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanisads*, Atlantic Heights, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1992 [1953], p. 70.

- It is, however, weakened by the second reflection; namely, that while Gandhian non-violent resistance seems to be fairly effective in facing organized violence (especially as represented by the state), it has not been equally effective against random violence. Thus, Gandhian methods were successful against the British government, but failed against the Muslim League and its random violence as represented by its policy of fomenting rioting.²³

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September 11 and Hindu Axiology:

Along with the doctrine of the four *varnas*, the four *asramas*, and the four *yugas*, Hinduism also contains the doctrine of the four *purusarthas*, or the legitimate goals of human endeavour.²⁴ The application of this doctrine to the events of September 11 seems to shed interesting light on it, belying the unlikeliness of such a prospect. It is well-known that these *purusarthas* are identified as *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, and *moksa*, and successively represent the pursuit of right conduct, wealth and power, worldly pleasures and spiritual liberation. From the point of view of the relative universality of the 'area of concern' involved, they may also be enumerated in the following order: *kama*, *artha*, *dharma*, and *moksa*, each in turn representing a broader, larger and more universal area of concern beyond one's own self. It has been suggested, if not compellingly then at least plausibly, that the sentiment within Hinduism against the sole pursuit of one of these *purusarthas*, and the emphasis on their harmonious pursuit, contains a very important insight into human affairs; namely, that the exclusive pursuit of any of these *purusarthas* compromises human flourishing instead of promoting it, and may lead to catastrophic consequences. Thus, exclusive focus on *kama* leads to Freudism, hedonism and consumerism; exclusive focus on *artha* to runaway capitalism and marxism; exclusive focus on *dharma* to orthodoxy, fanaticism and fundamentalism; and exclusive focus on *moksa* to escapism and otherworldliness. So the doctrine may be a useful lens to use in understanding the context of the events of September 11.

²³ Ramachandra Guha, *India After Gandhi*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007, p. 25.

²⁴ Ainslie T. Embree, ed., *The Hindu Tradition*, New York: Random House, 1972, pp. 74-79, 220.

Conclusion:

It required a certain epistemic distancing from the emotionally charged nature of an event of such magnitude as September 11 to draw certain intellectual conclusions based on it. The idea behind calling these reflections 'philosophical' was to hint at that desideratum. Now that such conclusions have been drawn and presented perhaps they could be pursued further in the realms of the philosophy of religion, secularism, Islam, political science, Gandhism, and Hinduism.

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