

TAMING THE GODS

RELIGION AND DEMOCRACY ON THREE CONTINENTS



Author of Murder in Amsterdam

IAN BURUMA

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PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

Princeton & Oxford

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Published by Princeton University Press

41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540

In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 6 Oxford Street, Woodstock, Oxfordshire OX20 1TW

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Paperback ISBN 978-0-691-15605-7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Buruma, Ian.

Taming the gods : religion and democracy
on three continents / Ian Buruma.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.).

ISBN 978-0-691-13489-5 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Religion and state. 2. Democracy—Religious aspects.

3. United States—Religion. 4. Europe—Religion.

5. Japan—Religion. 6. China—Religion. I. Title.

BL65.S8B87 2010 322'.109—dc22

2009031550

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

This book has been composed in ITC Caslon 224 Std

Printed on acid-free paper. ∞

press.princeton.edu

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5

T A M I N G T H E G O D S

FOR MY FATHER ,
S . L . BURUMA

T A M I N G T H E G O D S

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

The fact that religion is back is more newsworthy in Europe than in the United States, where religion was never supposed to have been away. But even in the United States, for about half a century between the 1920s and the 1970s, organized religion had not been a major political force. It was always there, especially outside the urban areas, as a social phenomenon. And it impinged on politics. John F. Kennedy, not an especially pious man, had to reassure the voters that he would never take orders from the Vatican. It would have been impossible for a candidate who openly professed disbelief to become president of the United States, and it still is. But Jimmy Carter's compulsion to spread the good news of his born-again faith was something of an anomaly. He was a political liberal, however, who never allowed religious authority to interfere with his politics. Since then, the influence of evangelical Christianity in the political arena has grown, mainly but not exclusively as a right-wing, socially conservative force.

Especially during the eight years of George W. Bush's administration, it was a commonplace in Europe to contrast the secular nature of the Old World to the religiosity of the United States. When the ideological positions that had hitched Western Europe and the United States together during the cold war became redundant after 1989, people

began to sense a growing rift between the two continents, as though a schism had occurred in Western civilization. Forgetting just how recently the authority of established churches had been diminished even in the most liberal European countries, Europeans talked as though secularism had always distinguished them from the parochial, conservative, God-fearing Americans. It was an understandable perception, because even as the church lost most of its clout in Europe, the faithful gained more political power in the United States, at least in the Republican Party.

It is by no means a sure thing, however, that Christianity will not stage a comeback in Europe or retain its influence on politics in the United States. Even if the old established Catholic and Protestant churches in Europe do not manage to climb back to their former pinnacles of authority in social, cultural, and political affairs, it would be hard to say with certainty that evangelical movements will not appeal to Europeans, as they so evidently do to citizens on every other continent, including Asia. Perhaps it is true that prosperity makes people less eager to be reborn in the bosom of Christ, but who is to say that Europeans will always be as rich as they are now? And the increasing wealth of the south of the United States does not seem to have diminished the appetite for religion among some of its richer denizens, including at least two former presidents.

Radical secularists often assume that any organized faith poses a threat to liberal democracy. In cases where religious authority assumes political authority, this threat is real. Democratic politics are a matter of resolving conflicting interests through negotiation and compromise. A religious institution claiming to represent absolute or divine truth cannot make these necessary compromises without the danger of corrupting its own principles, never mind political ones. This is why devout Christians, mainly

Protestants, in Europe as well as the United States were often the first to advocate the separation between church and state—to protect the integrity of their faith.

Although it would be absurd to claim that organized religion is incompatible with liberal democracy, tensions between religious and secular authority remain. My book is an attempt to sort out, in different cultures, how democracies have been affected, for better or worse, by these tensions. I do not assume to cover all religions, in all countries. That would be an impossible task. I have concentrated on Western Europe and the United States, as well as the two countries in Asia that I know best, Japan and China. One of my main guides in this venture is a great European thinker who wrote a classic about the United States of America, and even had interesting things to say about Islam: Alexis de Tocqueville. In his view, democracy in the United States could be established *because* Americans shared a Christian faith, specifically a Protestant faith, whose free agents observed clear boundaries between their churches and the democratic state. Tocqueville was worried, for good reason, that matters in Europe were not quite so simple. There, particularly in Catholic nations, religious claims were often seen as a barrier to democratic rule.

My book consists of three parts, one on church and state relations in Europe and the United States, one on religious authority in China and Japan, and one on the challenges of Islam in contemporary Europe. The thread that runs through these inquiries, despite their wide diversity in space and time, is the question posed by Tocqueville: what is needed, apart from freedom of speech and the right to vote, to hold democratic societies together? Is the rule of law enough, or do we need common values, ethics, mores? And what is the role of religion in all this; is it a help or a hindrance to liberal democracy?

What Tocqueville could never have foreseen was the rise of Islam as a major factor in European politics. Even though, statistically, pious Muslims only constitute a small minority of European citizens, Islam is a close rival to Christianity in some areas as the largest organized religion. Exactly what this means in terms of social or political authority is hard to measure, since unlike Roman Catholicism or established Protestant denominations, there is no Muslim Church, with a comparable hierarchy of priests. It would be difficult for most Muslims to establish a common program; their cultures, backgrounds, interests, and beliefs are too diverse, which is one reason why there are, as yet, no Muslim political parties in Europe. But still, practicing Muslims, including the majority of law-abiding believers who have no truck with any violent political ideology, are posing a challenge to the secular certainties gained by Europeans in the last thirty years or so.

Europeans—and perhaps to a lesser extent Americans—are afraid of the consequences. Populist warnings of being “out-bred” or “swamped” by Muslims are finding a receptive audience. Some writers, caught up in (and helping stir up) this mood of anxiety, speak of “Eurabia,” as though Europe, too weak or unwilling to defend its own civilization, were in danger of becoming “Islamized” by people who not only are more than willing to fight for their beliefs, but are producing many more children, at a much faster rate, than “we” are. The assumption here is that even if this were true, which is by no means sure, the grandchildren of the current breeders will be a carbon copy, in terms of culture and religion, of the current generation. An unlikely prospect.

It is not always easy to distinguish fear of an alien faith, a faith moreover with which Christendom has been at war in the past, from fear of aliens *tout court*. To some Europeans it doesn't matter whether a Muslim believes

in the Prophet, let alone whether he is a holy warrior, for he or she is a dark-skinned foreigner, and that is quite threatening enough. Some people fear that our very civilization is at stake when “their” customs, which may or may not have a religious background, clash with our present notions of how decent citizens should behave. This is why former liberals, who once prided themselves on their vigilance against racism, sometimes see eye to eye with cultural conservatives in their opposition to Islam. For Islam, as they see it, with its antiquated ideas on homosexuality, or the role of women, threatens to overthrow the very gains that progressives fought for in the last century. Hence the hysteria over women wearing body-covering burkas, even in countries where the number of such women is minimal.

No doubt some Muslims do hold views that fall short of contemporary secular norms. The same goes for some Jews, and some Christians, not to mention pockets of cultures frozen in time, such as the Amish or the American Mennonites. The reason people find Muslims especially frightening is their relative number in concentrated areas of European cities and the fusion, sometimes real, sometimes imagined, between these customary views and violent political ideologies. The brutality of radical political Islam has already left its bloody tracks in several European countries. But it is all too common to simply assume that the bearded man in ankle-length trousers or the woman in a black *hijab* is hiding an assassin’s knife or a ticking bomb.

Relations between church and state, or religious and secular authority, cannot be explained as abstractions. They can only be understood in the context of history. Since it is my intention to try and make sense of the world we live in, rather than to write a polemic, history, and thinkers in history, will form a large part of my account.

Because European countries have different histories, in terms of church-state relations and social behavior, societies grapple with the large presence of Muslims in different ways. Britain favors a social form of *laissez-faire*. People are entitled to stick to their own ways, as long as they abide by the law. British liberals, perhaps haunted by colonial guilt, have sometimes gone further and positively encouraged people to conserve their traditions, since any pressure to conform to British customs would smack of imperialist arrogance. Guilt, in this case, hides a peculiar irony, for this type of “multiculturalism,” much hated by conservatives, actually reflects the way much of the British Empire was governed, by dividing colonial subjects into communal groups, and ruling through their leaders. This, in turn, is in line with British traditions: religion, even the established Anglican Church, is seen in cultural more than theological terms. To be an Anglican does not demand belief so much as conformity to certain national customs. Why deny similar cultural allegiances to someone of Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin?

The Dutch, too, used to think of faith in terms of multiculturalism, long before that word was known. Each to his or her own, Protestant, Catholic, or Jew. In the Netherlands this idea used to be the applied to all aspects of life: a Catholic went to Catholic schools, Catholic football clubs, Catholic universities, Catholic social clubs. Catholics married Catholics, voted for Catholic political parties, listened to Catholic radio stations, and retired on the proceeds of Catholic pension funds. The same was true of the many Protestant denominations. And liberals and socialists had their own separate worlds as well. At the top of the social and political system, paternalistic representatives of the various “pillars” would work out a consensus on national policies, usually behind closed doors. This “pillar

system” was more or less invented in the nineteenth century to stop believers from going for one another’s throats. It made democracy work.

Since the French Revolution was in part a rebellion against the authority of the Catholic Church, the French republic is ideologically committed to secularism in a way the British and the Dutch are not. Public places, such as state schools, cannot allow religious symbols to challenge their secular nature. And the republican idea of the *citoyen*, equal before the law, an individual component of the general will, does not allow for a view that makes communal distinctions. Multiculturalism is anathema to the ideology of the French republic. Many people fear that the smallest concession to religious expression in the public or political sphere might revive the power of the hated priests.

Even if relations with Muslims are less fraught in the United States, the questions of church and state are hardly resolved. The rift between those who believe that the United States always was and always should remain a Christian (or Judeo-Christian) nation, and those who agree with Thomas Jefferson that the state is neutral and religion a wholly private affair, still runs deep. This is complicated by the fact that conservative American Christians, like their European counterparts, sometimes feel more akin to conservative Muslims than to secular liberals, whose wickedness, in the eyes of the believers, is the main threat to decent society.

It is often assumed that the vexing problem of religious dogmatism in politics is strictly due to monotheistic traditions. Only believers in one God become violently intolerant of other beliefs. And theocracy is something more commonly associated with Christian or Muslim faiths, based as they are on bookish dogmas, than with Hinduism, Taoism, or Buddhism.

The truth, as usual, is more complicated. Although believers in one God (except for the Jews) have a greater desire to spread their faith universally—since their God is a universal and not a tribal or local one—the problem of church and state, how to separate political from religious authority, can be just as acute in polytheistic countries. The Tibetan tradition, and the position of the Dalai Lama in contemporary politics, is an example that comes to mind. But it is not the only one. I will examine the examples of China and Japan in some detail to show how the politics of belief have been dealt with there, and how religious faith may have helped or hindered the development of Asian democratic institutions.

This is not unrelated to problems in the West. First of all, as relative power shifts to the East, politics in Asia will have an increasing impact on life elsewhere. But more important in terms of intellectual history, China in particular has often been held up as a mirror (highly distorted, to be sure) to the West by Western thinkers disenchanted by conditions at home. Voltaire, among others, assumed that China's political system, based on secular Confucian ethics, was more rational, that is, less encumbered by religious authority, and thus superior to the way France was ruled. Similar assumptions were made in the Maoist years, even as China was in the murderous grip of a quasi-religious insanity.

The paradox here is that both China and Japan have been idealized in the West, not only for the supposed rationalism of Confucian politics but also for the superior spirituality of their religious traditions: Zen, Taoism, and the like.

Parts of the Confucian world—Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan—are now ruled by democratically elected governments. Vietnam and China are not. My attempt to take a

closer look at the role played by religious institutions in these developments is not just meant as a way to delve into East Asian history, fascinating though it is, but also as a way to gain further insights into the tangled relations between religious faith and secular politics. Are certain faiths more conducive to democratic politics than others? Does monotheism indeed contain greater ideological dangers than more flexible beliefs?

Not having had either the benefits—or miseries—of a religious upbringing (we belonged to the “liberal pillar”), I cannot write as a partisan of any faith. Nor do I have a special preference for polytheism over monotheism, even though I can see the wisdom of hedging one’s bets by backing more than one god. I am not a militant atheist but duck behind the safe screen of agnosticism when challenged. I am persuaded of one thing, however: I do not think religious faith, the desire for metaphysical answers to questions that cannot be rationally answered, the need for and delight in mystical ritual and spiritual speculation, will go away. Nor am I persuaded that they should.

Attempts to crush organized faith with force have rarely resulted in peace, let alone democracy. On the contrary, they caused violent religious rebellions or produced political cults no less murderous than the worst religious violence. Since the subject of this essay is religion and democracy, I have left such quasi-religious political movements as Nazism and Stalinism aside. But they show clearly what happens when the state claims to be the source of absolute truth. Such claims, when backed with force, are always lethal, whether they are enforced by commissars or by priests.

Religion is not a rational enterprise. Its metaphysical claims cannot be proven; either one believes them or one does not. When reflecting on the problems of religion and

democracy, the main issue is how to stop irrational passions from turning violent. Spinoza, not a religious man, believed that religion was fine, but only under certain strict conditions. Faith should make people behave lovingly and peacefully, should never get mixed up in rational inquiry, and should always be controlled by rulers of the secular state. I'm not sure I agree with the last point, but the first two are unimpeachable.