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For Monu and Ritwik, with love

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INTRODUCTION

In the beginning of *Why I Am Not a Hindu*—a passionate and insightful "Sudra critique of Hindutva philosophy, culture, and political economy"—the intellectual and Dalitbahujan activist Kancha Ilaiah writes about a moment when he faced a vexing problem of identity. Born and raised in a small village in Telengana, Ilaiah hailed from the Kurumaa (shepherd) caste. It was only around 1990, when he was ending the fourth decade of his life, that he found himself in a new existential quandary. All of a sudden, the word *Hindutva* was being bandied around with fierce intensity, and the entire cultural machinery of the urban middle classes was insisting that he announce himself a Hindu. Refusing to do so would result in social castigation and a generally vitiated atmosphere. Ilaiah writes eloquently about why this was a nuisance:

> The question is, What do we, the lower Sudras and Ati-Sudras (whom I also call Dalitbahujans) have to do with Hindus or with Hindutva itself? I, indeed, not only I, but all of us, the Dalitbahujans of India, have never heard the word "Hindu," not as a word, nor as the name of a culture, nor as the name of a religion in our early childhood days. We heard about Turukoollu (Muslims), we heard about Kirastaanapoollu (Christians), we heard about Baapanoollu (Brahmins) and Koomatoollu (Baniyas) spoken of as people different from us. Among these four categories, the most different were the Baapanoollu and the Koomatoollu. There are at least some aspects of life common to us and the Turukoollu and the Kirastaanapoollu. We all eat meat, we all touch each other. With the Turukoollu we shared several other cultural relations. We both celebrated the Peerila festival. Many Turukoollu came with us to the fields. The only people with whom we had no relations, whatsoever, were the Baapanoollu and the Koomatoollu.[1]

Ilaiah's countermemory is a candid mapping of childhood instincts, familiarities, and identities. The "shock" of adulthood, for him, was being told that he had to now politically and culturally congregate with the Baapanoollu and the Koomatoollu and zealously distance himself from others. This was after some alienating school years in between, spent with Telugu textbooks that extolled unfamiliar Hindu gods like Vishnu or Durga, leaving out the ones he had grown up with: Pochamma who delivers from smallpox, Kattamaisamma who grants rain, or Potaraju who protects crops from thieves. It was thus an autobiographical journey that compressed profound historical questions of more than a century of nation and state thinking in the subcontinent, as well as its complex pendulations of identity. Ilaiah, from his own vantage point, felt that he was being coerced into joining a national majoritarian community that he, and people like him, never belonged to, in terms of piety or way of life. Later, he justifies the title of his book with a pithy and incisive sentence: "I was not born a Hindu for the simple reason that my parents did not know that they were Hindus."[2]

This powerful note of dissent points to the impasses in the way of what I will elaborate as a majoritarian quest for a modern Hindu political monotheism. If indeed the Dalitbahujans—an umbrella group in which Ilaiah includes the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Other Backward Castes (OBCs), and Scheduled Tribes (STs)—did not, in essence, consider themselves "Hindus," then the purported majoritarian specter of Hindutva would shrink to the sound and fury of a Savarna (upper caste) segment of the Baapanoollu and Koomatoollu that made up just about a quarter of the Indian population.[3] That too, with innumerable divisions among the Savarna groups themselves along the lines of class, culture, region, and language. The modern project of a Hindu political monotheism has been to induct the privileged and the pariah into a universal, congregational plane of Hindu identity. The question that Ilaiah, in effect, poses is whether the whole thing is simply a Brahminical minority's historical masquerade as a Hindu majority.

The book I present here is a long genealogy of Hindutva, culminating in a critical understanding of a mediatic and urban Hindu normative that has come into being in our times. It is not a presentist elaboration of what we are witnessing now, but a deep search of its historical origins. A good part of the recent story is, of course, quite well known. There has been the consolidation of a new techno-financial Hindu nationalist ideology with strong overseas connections over the last three decades, beginning, roughly in the early 1990s, with the globalization of the Indian economy, the rapid expansion

of the electronic public sphere, and accelerated urbanization. The process gathered strength in the aftermath of the mass movement leading up to the destruction of Babri Masjid in 1992, periodic communal riots that gradually took the form of institutionalized genocide, the border war with Pakistan in 1999, an increasingly volatile Kashmir, intermittent events of cross-border terror, and a global swell of Islamophobic sentiments after 9/11. This unfolding scenario birthed a new, muscular Hindu chauvinism with growing pan-Indian populist traction. The new version is one that is for a good part more urbane, tech-finance friendly, and different from older agrarian-conservative models. The political rise of this Hindu right culminated in the ascension of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under Narendra Modi, when the party came to power in the Indian General Elections of 2014 with an overwhelming mandate.

But then, there is that other consideration: To what extent may this recent story of majoritarian insurrection in India be confined to the internal, long gestation of Hindutva, roughly from the 1920s? Or is it part of a wider planetary phenomenon, of people turning to default nativist positions, anti-immigrant sentiment, and xenophobia, prompted by a globalization of precarity, suspicion, and fear in the era of new media and finance capital? This book is a genealogy of Hindutva as political monotheism in relation to the colonial epistemological invention of "Hinduism," the broader arc of Indian modernity itself, and India's own constitutional revolution of 1950. At a secondary level, it ultimately aims to place the present Hindu ascension in a wider basin of global unrest, liberal crisis, and the rise of untimely chauvinisms like monarchism in Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil or neo-Ottomanism in Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Turkey. That is, not to mention the first-world theaters: the return of a Jacksonist "Know Nothing" nativism in Donald Trump's United States, or the ominous spread of neo-Nazi politics in Austria and Germany.

Hindutva as Political Monotheism looks at the long genesis of Hindu political identity and nationalism through a hitherto underused but critically important prism. I begin by visiting the works of the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt to draw out a tacit monotheistic imperative in European organic theories of religious and ethnocentric nationhood. Seen from that vantage point, the "oriental solution" would be that, in order for there to be a Hindu nation and a Hindu state, there had to be a Hindu monotheism. There had to be an axiomatic Church and a sense of Hindu laity that could then be parlayed into the political construction of a national *fraternité*. This was not just a question of affirming faith in one God (there have always been strong monistic currents

in the Vedic tradition and many theistic ones in the devotional Bhakti movements), but a religiosity with a strong eschatology and providential destinying. The tendency to impart an Abrahamic cast to a vast, eclectic field of polytheistic, pantheistic, henotheistic, or atheistic forms of Indic piety can be traced as a consistent feature in the modern invention of the Hindu as a religious and eventually jealous political identity. In nationalistic discourse, it meant finding a pan-Indian congregational principle to subsume long-standing caste divisions, regional eccentricities, gender segregations, and practices of untouchability. In terms of political theology, it meant compacting a pantheon of 330 million gods into axiomatic Hindu icons like Rama or Krishna, absorbing errant, syncretic pieties, and picturing a singular Hindu telos. Finally the project had to make this Hindu template politically indistinguishable from an "Indian" one. The consummation, devoutly wished for, would then consolidate the nation as an organic unity, making the profane federalism of the Constitutional Republic obsolete. I trace the genesis and progression of this quest for a Hindu "political monotheism" as a literary and culturalist project during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and eventually suggest that, in our times, it has been largely replaced by an advertised and informational Indian experience of urban normativity that some have called "Hindutva 2.0."

Chapter 1, "Questions Concerning the Hindu Political," connects Carl Schmitt's concept of political theology with some traditional notions of Hindu sovereignty and nationhood. I argue that the religious urge that defines the "political" for Schmitt—that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts"—is necessarily an austere and monotheistic one.[4] In order to have a majoritarian "Hindu India"—one that is an organic and religious whole rather than a contractual federation—one would need an "Indian monotheism" that was normatively Hindu. This may be marked, within the parameters of Schmitt's organismic logic, as an imperative for any people who want to emerge as a political entity deserving and capable of sovereign assertion. In polytheistic and polyphonic cultures of the global South, this was actually a tacit condition that the framework of colonial modernity imposed when it came to engaging with the modern state, nation-thinking, and political representation. In the case of India, the imperative came with the Indological apparatus and its nineteenth-century geopolitical invention of "India" and its traditions, along with the demographic and juridical marking of a Hindu people. This question of compelling political monotheism, to this day, determines the revival-

ist strong state/strong economy Hindu model in the epoch of globalization. The invocation of Schmitt, apart from the prima facie fascist connection, is justified because, as I will demonstrate more fully, Hindutva as an ideology is almost entirely orientalist in its roots. Historically, as we know, the Hindu project has been a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it has birthed and generalized a puritan desire for a jealous majoritarian unity. On the other, it has faced considerable problems in its attempts to gather a multitude of faith traditions into a singular axiomatic of statist religiosity. I use the term *axiomatic* throughout this study as a singular religious passion that does not necessarily depend on theological consistency. The axiomatic, in this sense, is thus more of a techno-social regime of governmentality than simply a theologico-pastoral formation. I draw the idea for the most part from William Connolly's work on the American evangelical-capitalist resonance machine ("Cowboy Capitalism"): "An axiomatic . . . is a set of institutional knots with dense tangles and loose ends." It is not a static edifice of faith, but one that "twists and turns through time as it absorbs the shocks and additions created by previously exogenous forces." These exogenous forces include mutations in enemy axiomatics like Islam.[5]

In chapter 2, "The Hindu Nation as Organism," I point out some key bottlenecks in Hindu nation-thinking that followed the imperative of political monotheism, both in a Brahminical theocratic vein of imagining sacred territory, as well as in terms of a Hindu brand of ethnocultural nationalism. Here I talk about the twentieth-century discourse of Hindutva that, for the most part, operated with a set of Herderian pieties that never coalesced into a constitutive "whole" in terms of territory, identity, language, memory, and other crucial matters. Cultivating a unified Hindu theology for a monothematic religious passion and inventing a concomitant organismic nationhood were obviously very complicated missions in the essentially pluralistic civilizational complex of the subcontinent. It was perhaps because of this that Hindutva nationalism from the 1920s took a different route from earlier nineteenth-century regional reform organizations like the Brahmo Samaj or the Arya Samaj. The ideology of Hindutva sought a unifying ethnocultural consistency rather than a theological unity.[6] Such a development would be fine for the Schmittian model, which seeks a monotheme of religiosity rather than religion itself; and this persuasive principle could be based on race, culturalism, or ideology. The "political," as secular religiosity, had to simply present a captivating principle of martyrdom for a cause greater than the individual's own salvation. Similarly, in the discourse of Hindutva, there

could be no artificial distinctions between religion, ideology, and culture; and, after a process of torrid political abstraction, there had to be only one "way of life" for the nation.

I examine the works of the philosopher Bimal Krishna Matilal (1935–1991) to glimpse the breathtaking range of Indic "little traditions" of faith, memory, and poesis that an axiomatic Hindu Tradition would seek to engulf or extinguish. The little traditions were and continue to be based on eccentric vernacular appropriations of the great epics, imaginaries clustering around local saints, deities, or pilgrimage spots, and often on a primary disavowal of a Brahminical cosmology based on the Vedas. It was this mélange of pieties that the purported Hindu political monotheism had to violently append to itself or abolish. While the Abrahamic religions themselves have had numerous heretical traditions, the difference in the case of the historical Hindu faith complex was that no presiding ontological framework or instituted church existed, at the end of the day, to demand filiation to a singular theistic principle. This was a void that twentieth-century Hindu nationalist missions hoped to fill.

Hindutva was consolidated with the coming into being of Hindu organizations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS; National Volunteer Service), political parties like the Hindu Mahasabha and the Jan Sangh, and, eventually, ecumenical formations like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) that looked to establish a ministry with clearly defined political, pedagogic, and pastoral missions.[7] I explore this project as a literary-cultural enterprise in the writings of Hindu right-wing ideologues like Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966) and Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar (1906–1973), visiting especially the points of bipolar tension: the squaring of a Hindu homogeneity with the hierarchies of caste; the utopian restoration of a greater India (Akhand Bharat) with the geopolitical realities of partition; Hindu mythology with Indian history; the particularities of faith with the universals of science; the "Aryan" inheritance of the North with the Dravidian identities of the South; axiomatic icons like Rama with millions of gods; or a desired Sanskritization of culture with myriad vernacular countercurrents. Within the purported "Tradition" itself, there were many subsurface tensions that had to be resolved or mystified at every step. The political quest here was for a unified and jealous religiosity, marking the many-armed, eclectic traditions of subcontinental Islam as a competing monotheism. This was an originary polarization that, in the fullness of time, would birth a nation or two.

This twentieth-century vision of a Hindu India may be better illuminated by wrapping it in a temporal double bind. It has to be viewed in the light of its discursive antecedents, in terms of the broader nineteenth-century Indological identification of "Hinduism" and the discourses of Hindu reform, Hindu anthropology, jurisprudence, and history. And then it also must be seen from the other end, in terms of millennial mutations in the era of information and globalization. I therefore go further back in time in chapter 3, "The Indian Monotheism." It elaborates the quest for an axiomatic Hindu "religion," a historical sense of being, and a matching template for nationalism, revision, modernity, and secularism as a wider literary-theological project in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This axiomatic tended to assume the shape of a "monotheism" that was quintessentially Indian, as opposed to foreign imports like Islam or Christianity. Its early articulations followed the path of universal religion (or natural religion, as some of its Western interlocutors would say) and then gradually acquired jealous properties with the birth of nationalist discourses in the final quarter of the nineteenth century. Here I discuss the works of Raja Rammohun Roy (1774–1833), Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay (1838–1894), Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975), and M. K. Gandhi (1868–1948). The broader project was usually fronted by the abstraction of a neo-Vedantic monism—the Brahman as One—in relation to which the massive spread of Hindu polytheism, idolatry, and mythology had to be understood as allegorical approximations of a singular calling. This dispensation called for the elevation of the Bhagwad Gita as the Holy Book of the Hindu people, marked Manusmriti as Hindu Law, and cast figures like Rama or Krishna as Hindu ideals who offered greater prophetic revelations than Christ or the Buddha. The prime articulators of this modern Hinduism and of reform addressed the matter of caste variously: as scientific labor management, as original principle of communal and race harmony perverted by Islamic colonization, or as nonhereditary meritocracy. This overall enterprise came with a new time consciousness that challenged the temporal imaginary of progress postulated by a Calvinistic empire of capital.

I bookend this elaboration of a Hindu-normative Indian modernity, nationalism, and the secular with an introductory discussion of G. W. F. Hegel's 1827 reading of the Bhagwad Gita as theodicy, and with a concluding account of the powerful, foundational critique of Hinduism in the works of B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956). The latter, especially, points to certain endemic features of contradiction and dissonance that haunt this quest for a uniform peopleness. Politically, such questions would continue to resonate over the

decades and up to the present. From the vantage point of the Dalitbahujan, was the so-called Hinduism just a cover for Brahminism? Was the One of Advaita a warm universal, or was it cold, Sanskritic, and distant when it came to the vernacular masses? Was there such a thing called Hindu society, or was it just a confederation of castes that came together during communal riots? Could there actually be an axiomatic Hindu theology in the tradition of a Pauline Christianity, or do the scriptures, in the end, offer only a mélange of philosophical speculations inextricably mired in mythology and caste ethics? Did caste segregation and untouchability foreclose the possibility of a Hindu congregation and fraternité? Was a Hindu nation possible without a Hindu equity? My critical exploration of this nineteenth- and early twentieth-century tradition of moderate "reform" is not only intended to discover its secret commerce with the hardline Sangh Parivaar nationalism of a later moment, but also to understand the Savarna-normative nature of the secular Indian nationalist project itself.[8] That is, to see how an implicit principle of caste paternalism and tolerance informs the otherwise admirable Indian experiment in democracy and federalism.

I come to the present after these nonlinear excavations of a layered and weighted past. In the concluding chapter 4, "Hindutva 2.0 as Advertised Monotheism," I argue that, in recent decades, with the ushering-in of an informational world and networks of electronic urbanization, the literary-cultural project of Hindu nationalism has undergone fundamental transformations. Its defining themes and mythologies have been rendered spectral and auratic, no longer dependent on theological justification, literary elaboration, or historical apologies. This ecology comes with media protocols, ritual values, spectacle, and perception management; it involves instant, informational transfers between the past and the present, between science and dogma, and between the home and the world. "Hindutva 2.0," as it has been called, does not in essence seek long-pending, final resolutions for stories of becoming; nor does it present a unified worldview. Instead, it combines obscurantism with smart technophilia, the idea of financialization and progress with atavistic imaginations of time. It becomes an order of resonances rather than a closed book of the world, cutting across formations of mass culture and affect industries like Bollywood, consumerism, pop pieties, or yoga. It has its own modes of Disneyfication and a spectrum of industries from Vaastu, astrology, and herbal medicine to New Religious spiritualism and artful living. It includes Twitter and WhatsApp tribalisms that can create virtual congregations, bypassing caste strictures pertaining to custom, touch, food,

and water. I call this new ecology of Hinduness an instance of "advertised modernization," with modernization characterized as a mutating scenario in which "modernity" does not trump "tradition," but in which the two shift to a different threshold of performance and mutual arrangement. "Advertised" is a conceptual shorthand for varied, multidirectional pulsations in an electrified public culture that deliver innocuous "take homes," "feel good" nostrums, and, in some cases, consumable fears without narrative obligation to truth or closure. In its exemplary forms, this urban and advertised sense of Hinduness is incipient and neurological; it is meant to be felt in the pith and marrow of being, between terror and the global sublime.

The ecology creates a metropolitan normal, by which a caste Hindu urban existence becomes the only form of life worth living in a world in which both desire and precarity are democratized. It does so by excluding Islam and other minorities by way of calibrated discriminations, from terror management to segregated details of lived life like culture, language, hygiene, breeding, aesthetics, proprietorship of women, or eating habits. This normal is the bedrock of affectations on which the increasingly strident, organized, right-wing assertions of our times anchor themselves. In other words, RSS-type forces work on such a plane to exert long-pending but decisive majoritarian effects on the polity. However, the plane itself is wider than them, and it tends to define the entire political spectrum itself in terms of soft and hard Hinduness. Among other things, this order, on the one hand, entails a final turn away from the welfare traditions of the Indian state after 1947 and the history of anticolonial nonalignment; on the other, it entails embracing a set of military-industrial alliances with a continuum of metropolitan power stretching from Washington to Tel Aviv.

This isn't to say that there was not a Brahminical bias in the workings of the Indian state and society before this time, but the present electronic version comes devoid of many caste, regional, and cultural accents that once stood in the way of a working politico-religious axiomatic. In recent decades this electronic Hinduness has increased its powers as a psychological parabasis for a majoritarian nation. I draw the term *parabasis* from Gayatri Spivak's work and from its classical meaning in Greek theater: the period of a performance in which the actors leave the stage and the chorus addresses the audience.[9] In other words, I am interested in the historical roots of a relatively recent voice of a wider urban consensus beyond usual suspects such as the ardent disciple of Golwalkar or the angry foot soldier of Modi. It comes from a plane of consistency—in terms of massified common sense, structures

of feeling and perception—that seems to bind opponents together even as they disagree on matters like Kashmir, terrorism, corruption, development, or good governance. An insidious convergence of categories affiliated exclusively with a caste Hindu urban male existence seems to increasingly govern such democratic disputes. The idea of the parabasis as a choral unity, therefore, pertains to what Blanchot once called the silent "murmur" of discourse from which contending subjectivities erupt into being.[10] The feature that distinguishes this phenomenon from past forms pertains to the increasing metropolitan revision of regional eccentricities and the fervor for security and techno-financial growth. It is the possibility of a new, augmented dimension of the political in the Schmittian sense, an electronic Hindu political monotheism, if you will, surpassing the old impasses of print capitalism. In studying its long genesis, my objective is not to advance toward a prognostic reading of the present, since the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk. My purpose will instead be to explore, with some degree of speculation, the ground of the present.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1 Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu*, xi.

2 Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu*, 1.

3 A complete breakdown by caste of the Hindu population of India—in terms of marking the OBCs who are 40–44 percent of the population—has been avoided in modern Indian censuses. However, the 2015–16 survey commissioned by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, reached the following conclusions: "Forty-three percent of women and 44 percent of men belong to other backward classes (OBC), while 20 percent each of women and men belong to scheduled castes, 9 percent each of women and men belong to scheduled tribes, and 26 percent of women and 27 percent of men do not belong to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, or other backward classes." The Savarna Hindus, however, control 41 percent of the total wealth in the country. See International Institute for Population Sciences, *National Family Health Survey*, 53.

4 Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.

5 See Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity*, 10.

6 Gyan Prakash has, with reason, pointed out that the Hindu right, in essence, seeks an ethnic majoritarianism, not religious dominance. According to him, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) does not want to dismantle the secular structure of the state but to declare Hindutva as the secular reason of the state. It is only the fringe elements that actually want Hindu Rashtra. See Prakash, "Secular Nationalism, Hindutva, and the Minority." His formulation presumes a calculating Hindu subject of the political mainstream presiding over and balancing a complicated field of zealots and moderates. I would rather look at the "movement" as a mutating historical assemblage of events, powers, and affectations that can take opportune hegemonic directions as well as become a suicidal statism. The Hindu might be making his own history, but not the way he would like it.

7 The RSS was established in 1925 as a voluntary paramilitary organization intended to foster a spirit of European-style ethnic nationalism rather than

reform the earlier Arya Samaj (1875) or the community interest–based politics of the Hindu Mahasabha (1906). It came into being in a particular climate of anti-Islamic sentiment after the Minto-Morley Reforms of 1909 (granting a separate electorate to Muslims), and it came into its own with rising fears of pan-Arabism, the Khilafat Movement, and the Moplah revolt of the early 1920s. The RSS was also formed as a primarily Marathi Brahmin organization in response to rising Dalit assertion, the latter already having taken an Ambedkarite turn in terms of demands for rights, social justice, and representation. For a brief overview, see Sumit Sarkar, "Indian Nationalism and the Politics of Hindutva."

8 The word *Savarna* refers to the twice-born castes: the Brahmin, the Kshatriya, and the Vaishya. *Sangh Parivaar* is an umbrella term used to designate the RSS and its many affiliate organizations, like the VHP, the student-wing ABVP (Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthy Parishad), and the labor union Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh.

9 See especially chapter 1 of *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* for Spivak's de Manian take on allegory and parabasis.

10 See Deleuze, *Foucault*, 7, 56.

CHAPTER ONE. QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE HINDU POLITICAL

1 See Fukuyama, *The End of History*, and Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism*. Since Fukuyama's reading of the notion of *thymos* in book 4 of Plato's *Republic* as desire for recognition, Charles Taylor has read the political condition of belief in the age of the secular in terms of a spiritual quest for fullness that marks the human condition and a paradoxical modern demand that we pick only *one* option for fullness. Also, unlike the ancients, for whom fullness was eschatological, moderns have "internalized" the question. The mercurial Peter Sloterdijk, on the other hand, has proposed a historical humanism in terms of rage, and not the Hobbesian fear or the neo-Hegelian desire for recognition. See Taylor, *A Secular* Age; and Sloterdijk, *Rage and Time*.

2 See for instance Abu-Lughod, "Going beyond Global Babble," for an interesting early reckoning of this globalization unrest and of its similarities to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century imperial cosmopolitanisms in the era of what Karl Polyani called "The Great Transformation." On neoliberal transformations in haunted maps of old empires, see also Ann Laura Stoler's *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* and *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination*. For classic reckonings of the globalization phenomenon, see Saskia Sassen's *Globalization and the World System* and Joseph Stiglitz's recently updated *Globalization and Its Discontents Revisited*.

3 See Carl Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political* (1976) and *Political Theology* (1985).