In Conversation With John Keane: Gods, Power, Democracy

Irfan Ahmad

Institute for Religion, Politics, & Society, Australian Catholic University, Melbourne

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In a wide-ranging conversation with Irfan Ahmad, John Keane, renowned political scientist and author of *The Life and Death of Democracy* discusses many key issues at the heart of contemporary reflections and concerns about democracy. Keane, described by *The Times* as a leading political thinker whose work has “world-wide importance”, sheds light on complex relationship between democracy and gods from ancient Athens to the 2014 elections in India. The conversation also dwells, *inter alia*, on the relations between dogs, fascism, democracy, environment, language, the “Arab Spring” and more.

Irfan Ahmad (IA): Let me begin by asking a general question you have touched upon in an earlier writing (Keane 2000a). In dominant Western thinking, democracy and religion are assumed to be neatly separated. Is it not that, philosophically and broadly speaking, democratic politics, even in its secular form, is also religious in much the same way as religion has been and is always political? Writing about contemporary America, for instance, David Bromwich (2014: 301) speaks of “evangelical democracy . . . itself an apocalyptic faith”.

John Keane (JK): To say democracy is a form of apocalyptic faith is for many contemporary democrats a prickly provocation. They’d no doubt reply that democracy is a thoroughly secular ideal. They’d say it’s a principled this-worldly belief that the power to decide who gets what, when and how on earth should be shared equally by people and their representatives, and not monopolized by tyrants, dictators, despots, tradition, Nature and God or the deities. When seen in this way, democracy is more than the opposite of
religious belief in a transmundane world. It is its antidote, the remedy for its illusions. This secular understanding of democracy correctly puts its finger on what I call the originality of democracy. Understood simply as the ideal of people governing themselves, democracy implies something radical: it supposes that humans can invent and harness special institutions to decide for themselves how they live together on Earth.

It may seem very straightforward. But when you think about it, the whole idea that flesh-and-blood mortals can organize themselves as equals into forums or assemblies, or constituencies, where they pause and consider and then decide this or that or some other thing, democracy in this sense is an extraordinary invention of breathtaking scope. It is in effect the quintessentially human form of government. All government is of course “human” in the sense that it is created and built up and operated by human beings. The exceptional – out-of-the-ordinary – feature of the type of government called democracy is that it requires people to see that life is never merely given, that nothing that is human is forever, that all human institutions and customs are built on the shifting sands of time and place, and that if people are to acknowledge their equal vulnerability to the evanescence of human existence then they have no option but to build and to maintain ways of living openly and flexibly.

IA: So, there’s a point to secular understandings of democracy?

JK: Yes, but for me the trouble is that those who draw from this the secularist conclusion that democracy is the mortal enemy of religion, that it’s a superior earthly remedy for other-worldly religious nonsense, are mistaken. They get two things wrong. They forget there have been many historical moments when democracy was literally idolized, imbued with “other worldly” qualities, and worshipped as such. Think of the way President George W. Bush, on the eve of the American-led invasion of Iraq, repeatedly said that democracy was a gift of God to the world; or the way the American version of democracy depends on public tropes like “in God we trust” (it first appeared on banknotes and coins in the 1860s) or “one nation under God” (the last two words of which were incorporated in the American Pledge of Allegiance only in 1954). Then let’s go back in time, to think of the way the goddess Dēmokratia was worshipped in Athens. She attracted a cult following. Stone and wooden monuments to her stood within the agora. She was offered prayers and public sacrifices: cakes, loaves of bread, wine and honey, the slaughtering and burning of goats or spring lambs. Her mysterious authority couldn’t be profaned, as we know from the famous relief picture carved in stone above an Athenian law of 336 BCE. It shows the goddess Dēmokratia crowning, shielding and sheltering an elderly bearded man who represents the dēmos, the people.

Blindly secular understandings of democracy ignore something else. My interpretation of the history of democracy (Keane 2009) suggests that the whole history of the spirit and language and institutional inventions that we now call democracy are closely connected with gods and goddesses and conceptions of God, the transmundane, the beyond, what William James famously called in his Edinburgh lectures “the more” (James 2002 [1902]). Historically speaking, democracies committed to laïcité – the marginalization or outright extinction of religious belief – are utterly exceptional.

IA: And doesn’t this connection between democracy and God or the transmundane run deeper, through medieval Christianity back to Athens, where democracy and gods stood connected, not separated?
JK: Archaeologists tell us that Athens was not a secular city in any recognizably modern sense. It was not an irreligious democracy. Its entire ethos mixed together the sacred and the profane, to the point where talk of the separation of religion and politics would have made no sense to Athenians. In the early 440s BCE, the first Sophist, Protagoras of Abdera, told Athenians that man was the measure of all things, including the deities, who perhaps did not exist, except in men’s minds. Others probably agreed, or silently pondered the same thought. But the reality was that Athenian democracy was widely seen through supernatural eyes. Those who accepted its terms were not in a position to take it or leave it, as and when they pleased. They had learned from an early age, in the religious cults and rituals practised within their own households, that life was anchored firmly in a polytheistic universe of gods and goddesses – in a community of deities who infused the democracy with a strong sense of sacred standards for life on earth.

IA: Seldom do we hear or read about this religious feature of Athenian democracy.

JK: That’s because of the grip of mundane thinking on most scholars of democracy, past and present. Truth is that the citizens of Athens invested great hopes in the deities. They also feared them. The public trial and execution of the philosopher Socrates in 399 BCE for importing fake gods into the city, and for impiously corrupting its youth, confirmed to many that individuals who snubbed the deities would suffer harsh punishment. The priests and old men of the city loved to reinforce the same moral. They had a habit, drawn from a story by Homer, of reminding citizens who mingled in the agora that at the entrance of the home of Zeus, the god of freedom, stood two large barrels, from which he dispensed ill to some newcomers, good to others, and to the rest a few ladles of good from one barrel and, from the other, a bit of ill. Tales like that put the whole city on edge.

We may scoff at these deep feelings for the sacred. But the reality was that many citizens of Athens thought of themselves as members of a community of worshippers who believed that deities like Zeus would punish them collectively if they or their leaders behaved unjustly. He and other deities were thought to enjoy the power to ruin democracy, for instance, by bringing bad weather or failed harvests, or the disappearance of fish from...
the nets of fishermen operating from the nearby port of Piraeus. That’s why the deities had to be feared and loved, respected and worshipped; and why the goddess Dēmokratia was worshipped by a cult following. The consequence was that many Athenians in fact thought of their democracy as a system for establishing and enforcing the will of the deities, who in turn authorized the exercise of human powers. The deities were seen as wisdom’s well-spring. They soothed the doubts of mortals. They calmed their fears and gave them courage and direction to act in worldly affairs. Divination and democracy were twins.

IA: Most accounts of democracy rarely tell the story you narrate about Athens. But aren’t there more uncharted dimensions of the relationship between gods and democracy, and not just in Athens? To use Max Weber’s phrase, aren’t there “elective affinities” between democracy and religion?

JK: Yes, you’re right. To understand why and how, historically speaking, democracy is bound up with divination, we need to understand in broad-brush terms the functional inter-relationship or “elective affinities” between forms of democracy and forms of divination. There are lots of nuances and paradoxes here, but I can think of a handful of functional affinities between democracy and divinity.

IA: What are these? Can you specify them?

JK: Most obviously, since democracy enables freedom of association and the public questioning of power it stirs up a sense of contingency that “reality” is not “real”, that things can be otherwise, that existing relations of power are not necessarily set in stone but are contingent, and alterable. The civil and political freedoms offered by democracy enable believers to join in solidarity to protect and extend their faith. David Martin (2014) has pointed out that the drive to secularism in many democracies has not displaced religion; it has instead stirred up religious enthusiasms. He’s right. Religiosity often flourishes under democratic conditions, and especially in troubled times. There are moments when democracy in action foments strife and flings people into the arms of liminality. We know historically of extreme instances – the outbreak of the American Civil War and the self-destruction of democracy in Weimar Germany – where democracy prepared the grounds for democide, the self-destruction of democracy. It is in these contexts of spreading uncertainty that religiosity, the belief in “the more”, in something beyond this world, serves as something of a comforting shock absorber for dealing with earthly disorientation and instability. In those moments when democracy unleashes bitter power struggles, or tragedies such as the assassination of a leader happen, people come to sense their lives to be drifting into an abyss. That’s when a shared sense of religiosity can provide stability, a place in the world for people gripped by the feeling that their lives are unbearably light and meaningless.

There’s a second and more direct functional connection between democracy and religion. Divination serves to remind flesh and blood mortal citizens who live in any given democracy of their own mortality. Religion is a custodian of the core democratic value of humility (Keane 2004). Friedrich Schleiermacher (1958) wrote that religion involves the feeling of “absolute dependence” upon a higher order. It also bolsters the capacity to feel piety (he used the word Frömmigkeit) in the face of this dependence upon a transmundane world and, hence, the need to act in humble ways. If you attend a Quaker meeting – in a circle of silence – you’ll see and feel the meaning of piety. The meeting among
worshippers is a manifestation of pious down-to-earthness, a sign of the mortality of those who have gathered, and their need for humility. Another case of piety in action is the democratizing role played by Christians in China, where Christianity is experiencing its most rapid growth ever. Ian Buruma (2001, 2010) and other scholars have pointed out that it’s no accident that a disproportionate number of self-declared democrats who believe in pluralism and complexity, who favour local forms of monitory democracy (jiǎn dū shì mínzhǔ) are Christians. Their feeling of dependence upon a higher order of being nurtures their resilience, adds courage, stokes their willingness to stand up against arbitrary power.

IA: If I understand you correctly, are you suggesting an interrelationship amongst humility, power and democracy?

JK: Divination, the belief in gods, goddesses or a God, functions to put arbitrary power on a leash. Monks and nuns of the early Christian church were familiar with the admonition of St Augustine to all who held positions of power that they had an obligation to fear God and serve others in love and humility. The twelfth century CE monk Manegold of Lautenbach pushed this principle to its limits. He was no democrat. But he insisted, in the spirit of St Augustine, using the Roman language of the people, that misbehaving monarchs were tyrants who were subject to the God-given right of the people to overthrow them. Much the same insight was later developed by the Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain, for whom religiosity – he had in mind a Christian God – was a living reminder to mortals that they should not behave like God or deities on earth; and that no individual or group was entitled to rule over others without limit. Sitting pompously on a throne of power, Maritain says in his Christianity and Democracy (1945 [1943]), is incompatible with belief in God. He pointed out that there’s a deep tension between the principle of a Sovereign People who think of themselves as the replacement of a deity on earth, and the belief in a transmundane beyond, “the more”. Against totalitarian manipulations of the Sovereign People principle, he called upon believers to stand up against arbitrary power. He thought that religious faith could be a weapon against hubris. It could serve as a barrier to the worship of earthly power. In Poland in the early 1980s, the case of Solidarnosc, a movement so infused with a strong spirit of Catholicism and democracy that it managed to break the back of Communism, showed that Maritain was on to something.

IA: Maritain’s point about religion bridling power is important. How about the other side of the story: the (re)shaping of religion by democracy?

JK: Some caveats are necessary. I’m well aware that in the heartlands of the West many people suppose that religion is “naturally” the accomplice of anti-democratic violent power. Yet Karen Armstrong (2014) and other scholars have shown that there was nothing inevitable or quintessentially “religious” about the monstrous violence of the First Crusade and the Spanish Inquisition, just as there is nothing “natural” or inherently “religious” about the violent power manoeuvres of twenty-first century jihadists, ultra-Orthodox Jews and fundamentalist Christians. The way rulers harness religious narratives to keep themselves in power is similarly a contingent process. Climbing Jacob’s Ladder, as happens in Saudi Arabia and Iran, is a tried and tested method of outflanking opponents and legitimating rule over people. Yet ruling through divination is tricky business. There have been many moments in the history of democracy when religious arrogance has been subject to democratization: struggles in the name of the people for the humbling of the powerful, for the equalization of power, have brought power-hungry religioners down to earth. Martin Luther and the printing press stand as early modern symbols of the fact that the democratic
spirit of questioning arbitrary power can humble the religious and their religious will to power. The same dynamic is evident in the late eighteenth century democratic revolutions, which made it easier for the poor and the powerless to attribute their wretched condition to the greed of fellow men, rather than to explain their destiny with reference to God. The invention during this period of poverty as a political category and the egalitarian vision of humans eliminating poverty on Earth turned poverty into an earthly problem. Thanks to the spread of the democratic sense that power relations are contingent, it was no longer seen in divine terms, as retribution for sinfulness, for instance. The point can be generalized: democracy brings to religious experience a measure of worldliness.

IA: Do you mean that democracy in practice can temper religious fervour?

JK: Yes, and here I find myself attracted to the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo’s (Vattimo and Rorty 2005) argument that thanks to democracy the relationship between the believer and God becomes in principle a gentler relationship. The imaginary power relationship between believers and God is subject to a process of Verwindung, a term that Vattimo traces to Nietzsche. Vattimo wants to say that democracy doesn’t necessarily lead to or imply the dialectical leaving behind (Überwindung) and destruction of religiosity. It rather transforms the quality of the relationship between believers and God. It’s as if God hands power to people who in turn build institutions that put the brakes on both concentrated power and feverish belief in God. Democracy helps to “soften” the relationship between flesh and blood people and the belief in a beyond. Vattimo, who is both a devout gay Catholic and a frequent critic of the Church, urges that the rejection of metaphysical truth does not necessitate the death of religiosity. Instead it opens new ways of imagining what it is to be religious, ways that emphasize charity, solidarity, democratic equality and irony. Vattimo shows that hermeneutic interpretation is central to Christianity, which has had the long-term effect of spreading the worldly principle of interiority, which in turn dissolves the experience of objective reality into “listening to and interpreting messages.”

IA: Doesn’t this raise the whole issue of the meaning of what has come to be termed “secular”?

JK: Thought of as a whole way of life, democracy indeed stirs up a sense of the saeculum, awareness of the present moment, the contingency of worldly things. The lived experience of democracy also heightens our awareness of the often overlooked fact that the trouble-making category of “religion” and its opposite – the secular – are modern European inventions.

IA: Can you explain this?

JK: What we call the sacred and the profane were typically mixed together in all recorded political orders of the past. Religious secularity, let’s call it, was the norm until the early seventeenth century when in Europe deep tensions between the ecclesiastical and civil powers spawned the distinction between the religious and the secular. That distinction was certainly familiar within the world of mediaeval Christianity but it only referred, say, to differences of types of property ownership and priestly roles within the Church. With texts such as John Locke’s A Letter Concerning Toleration (1689) the old Roman term religio, which had referred only to a given set of binding obligations, took on a new meaning. The word religion was redefined. It here on meant a well-defined cluster of sacred beliefs whose other-worldliness makes them potentially dogmatic, divisive and irrational. The
The doctrine of secularism was the nineteenth-century offspring of this way of thinking. It was a dogma that proved to be self-confirming. Its anti-clericalism ensured its hostility to religious believers, whose resistance, sometimes using strong words and even violence, “proved” religion is organized bigotry. Secularism confirmed what the American scholar William Cavanaugh (2009) has called the “myth of religious violence”. In this respect, when it functions well, democracy can help take the sting out of this conflict. It can stimulate awareness that “religion” is a contestable category. It enables citizens to see that the world is marked by the factual plurality of religious faiths and, in order to avoid bigotry and bloody uncivil war, democracy highlights the need for publicly negotiated peace deals among modes of religious belief that may and often are utterly incommensurable.

IA: Could you give an example of what you have in mind?

JK: During his 2013 visit to Sydney, which I helped to organize, amidst considerable public controversy, the Dalai Lama praised the principles of the Indian model of secularism. He pointed out that whereas for individuals the truth of a religion is often a given, an unquestioned and unquestionable Truth, the notion of several religions is highly relevant for whole political communities. He urged his listeners to speak not of religion, but of religions; and he went on to discuss India’s democratic experiment with secularism, a word which it took from the West in order fundamentally to transform its meaning. Beside its home-grown religions, he said, all the world’s main religions are deeply rooted in India. India’s constitution is based on the democratic principle of multiple religions. It maintains that a multi-religious nation must accept all religions equally. Secularism means respect for all religions, and for non-believers as well.

IA: Well, that appears more like parroting an official platitude. In late 2014, votaries of Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, organized coercive programs for the conversion of Muslims to Hinduism. Called ghar vāpśī, back home, for them it is not conversion because Muslims were earlier Hindus. Hence they want Muslims, also Christians, to go back to their “original” home, Hinduism. How do you explain the persistence, indeed rise, of religious bigotry, of a majoritarian type in democracies, including in India?

JK: The whole notion of Hinduism is an invention forged during the British occupation of India. The insistence that India is “essentially” a Hindu nation, and that Hinduism is its official faith, is among the specialities of the BJP and its leading voice, Narendra Modi. It’s not the position of the Dalai Lama, who during his Sydney visit went on to discuss the problem of animosity wrapped in religion, the so-called clash of civilizations. He emphasized, for instance, that Islam is a religion of compassion for all God’s creatures. He noted that there are mischievous Muslims, those who plant bombs or pick up Kalashnikovs, just as there are mischievous Hindus, Christians and Jews. There are mischievous Buddhists, like the monk named Wirathu, who is trying to whip up violence against the Rohingya minority of mostly Bengali-origin Muslims in north-western Burma. The Dalai Lama lampooned their bigoted views as “unrealistic”. What he meant by that is that believers in other-worldly principles should be mindful of worldly concerns, worldly dynamics. The Buddha, he said, was “realistic”. He never spoke in terms of only one religion and therefore urged his followers, monks and scholars, not to accept his teachings out of faith, or devotion, but rather out of earthly investigation and experiment. The same principle should apply to all religious people, said the Dalai Lama. “They need to be realistic. Even God should be realistic”, he said. It was a clever point infused with democratic sentiments.
IA: Is the Dalai Lama here saying, as most liberals do, that democracy brings choice to issues of faith?

JK: Yes, but the point was made by others long ago. For instance, a key theme of the Edinburgh lectures of William James is that religion ultimately is a matter of individual choice. His emphasis on the individual is questionable (what about group experiences, for instance?), but James wisely grasped the way democracy enables competition among faiths and beliefs, and provides room as well for those who do not believe, so prompting whole societies to sense the need for believers and non-believers to live together peacefully, without baiting and slandering and murdering one another. In this sense, under democratic conditions the religious experience becomes a matter of choice for individuals, households and whole communities. What should not be underestimated in the history of democracy and its relationship with religiosity is the way the openness, pluralism and sense of contingency that democracy unleashes through such mechanisms as press freedom, elections and freedom of association also clears spaces for the experience of freedom of religion. As James put it, democracy enables the thrill of being gripped by something that is analogous to entering a forest at twilight, or finding oneself breathless deep down in a spectacular mountain gorge.

IA: Well, you synoptically pointed out different dimensions of the interrelationship between religion and democracy. Yet, in popular perception as well as in many mainstream academic writings, this perception of democracy being irreligious or something as necessarily oppositional to religion persists. Why does that perception continue?

JK: I’ve mentioned before that the secularist understanding of democracy appears at a particular historical moment in European history. The French Revolution is the first organized political attempt, in the name of liberty, equality and fraternity, to destroy religiosity, to decapitate priests, lower the tops of churches so that they do not tower over secular buildings. Churches were stripped of tablecloths and pewter candlesticks, which were made into citizens’ military uniforms and bullets. The organized militant political attacks on the Church and “superstition” were part of a great upheaval that brought Terror, as it did later in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. Partly for these historical reasons, and even though organized suspicion of religiosity remains a strong impulse throughout Europe, and elsewhere, secularism sensu stricto was an exceptional episode in the history of modern representative democracies, almost all of which make room for faith and belief mixed with disbelief and unbelief. You could say the originally French project of exterminating religion has failed. The attempt to purge religiosity from the world, to render it mere private experience or to eliminate it from the public realm, as the Attaturk regime tried unsuccessfully to do in Turkey, has had the unintended effect of reminding us that the history of democracy is bound up with the history of divination.

IA: So, it is a retrospective move. That religion and democracy are and have been utterly separate emerges retrospectively in the late eighteenth century and subsequently. I want to pick up that idea in relation to the growth of social sciences and secularization. French sociologist August Comte believed that sociology would serve as “the Queen of the sciences” (cited in Gane 2006: 95). The interesting thing is that he wanted to create a secular church with himself as the Pope sitting in Paris or somewhere. So it is a secular move. He opposed religion and church. In its place, he sought to create a secular form of hierarchy.
JK: The genealogy of the modern social sciences is heavily bound up with the political project of secularism. Think of Destutt de Tracy’s efforts to build a science of “ideology”, or Feuerbach’s and Marx’s theory of religion as a this-worldly projection of an unhappy and unfree world, or Max Weber’s reinterpretation of modernity as driven by several forms of bureaucratic rationality that result in the “disenchantment of the world”. The social science presumption that religion will wither away, that gods and goddesses and God are dying, or already dead, is still widespread. Richard Rorty’s early description of religion as a conversation stopper remains a tenet of faith among many social scientists, including those who study democracy. From the point of view of the genealogy of democracy, their conviction is deeply misleading. I’ve always thought that those who dismiss religion as thoughtless copulation with the clouds of Unreason are equally subject to the charge that they themselves copulate with the clouds of Fact, Reason, Rationality and Reality. For philosophical and political reasons, I’m unpersuaded by both, and so you can see in matters of religiosity I’m a sceptical ecumenicist and agnostic, and a radical pluralist. Based on both the historical records and personal experience, it’s why French-style secularism (*laïcisme*) is for me a form of democratic pomposity.

IA: I like the term “democratic pomposity”. Quite evocative!

JK: The conviction that democracy has reason and the Sovereign people principle on its side and, hence, necessitates secularization is an early nineteenth century invention. Whatever its liberating effects, it has often heaped tragedies on people. Secularists conveniently forget the predation – bossing, bullying, humiliation, violence – that from the beginning attended enforced secularization. Think of Tocqueville’s recommendation that since the Muslim peoples of Algeria were incapable of democracy they should be controlled by a form of top-down rule based on “limited violence”. Then recall the wider French *mission civilisatrice*, especially its later experiments with colonization, for instance the atrocities committed in multi-faith Vietnam during the years 1930–1933, following the Yen Bay mutiny. Or think of American military efforts to bring secular democracy to Iraq with B-52 bombers and drones.

IA: You wrote an essay the title of which had a question mark: “Secularism?” In that essay, I was struck by your following observation: “the principle of secularism . . . represents a realisation of crucial motifs of Christianity itself” (Bonhöffer). In other words, secularism is founded upon a “sublimated version of the Christian belief that Christianity is “the religion of religions” (Schleiermacher 1958) and that Christianity is entitled to decide for non-Christian others what they can think or say – or even whether they are capable of thinking and saying anything at all” (Keane 2000a: 14). In some ways, this resonates with the argument of *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* (Anidjar 2013). Can you reflect further on the point?

JK: This strange alliance between Christianity and self-confident and dogmatic secularism is evident in the dynamics unleashed in France by the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre. The loud public insistence that “freedom of expression” is an indivisible principle, backed by police raids and troops on the streets, has made many thinking European Muslims nervous. For good reason they regard the doctrine of secularism, with its roots in the French Revolution, as an ideology of bigoted state power, just as it was throughout the period of European colonialism. French secularists insist they are the friends of democracy. But for many Muslims, the secularist insistence that “reasonable” men and women must leave God not for other gods, but for no god, is a species of bigotry. It is a power move, an excuse to round on people of faith who
refuse to let religiosity wither or be pushed away, into the obscurity of private life. The Muslim rejection of secularism explains why French school officials who refuse to provide dinner alternatives to pork meat for Muslim pupils, or “kebabphobes” who insist that “foreign” grilled fast food is replacing the baguette, are perceived by many Muslims as bigots: as hypocrites who pride themselves on “choice” but dish out insult. Muslims in France and elsewhere in Europe similarly feel insulted by the whipped-up controversies centred on the burqa, niqab, hijab and other forms of female veiling. They are dishonoured when people (who usually don’t know the difference among them) say these garments are incompatible with the modern way of life because they oppress women, whose weakness (oddly) makes them potentially dangerous accomplices of “terrorism”. For most Muslims in Europe, such secularist talk is more than absurd, or weirdly contradictory. To them it smacks of political prejudice, which itself is the carrier of discourtesy, denigration and a sense of felt humiliation. For them, “democratic secularism” is a form of hypocrisy.

IA: I spent some time living in Gottingen, Germany. Residents and citizens in Germany have to get registered to a municipality. In the registration form one can choose to be an atheist or non-religious. But if one chooses to be a Catholic, then one pays some sort of tax, which is collected by the government. So despite the polemical insistence on the separation between government and religion, even today in practice this religious tax is collected by the government.

JK: Yes, it’s confirmation that thoroughly secular democracies in which religion is separated from government and law, and where religion is privatized and has disappeared, are utterly exceptional. And if you actually look at the fate of representative democracy in modern times, you’ll see it is bound up with several and different competing models of how to handle religion. The Jeffersonian compromise in America is one in which there is an institutional separation of politics and religion. But the melding of the two domains is very striking in the history of American democracy, as you can hear in the references to God in every presidential address. The British model makes room for an established church and a monarch restrained by parliamentary democracy. Then there’s the German Kirchensteuer model. It mixes constitutional parliamentary democracy with the teaching of religious faith in schools and a church tax that requires taxpayers, whether Roman Catholic, Protestant or members of other religious communities, to pay through the state up to 9% of their income tax to the church, or to another community to which they belong.

The point is that the French model of laïcité isn’t a given universal norm. It’s worth emphasizing as well that the champions of secularism conveniently overlook the many ways in which the spirit and substance of religion morphed into democratic forms. For instance, although most people today are unaware of this, such mechanisms as liberty of the press, limited duration office holding by representatives, parliaments and constitutional conventions all have their roots in the world of medieval Christianity. My favourite example is the secret ballot. Often known as the Australian ballot, it was born of Christian inspiration. European Protestants – some of whom immigrated and colonized parts of Australia – were appalled by the godlessness, drunken bribery and corruption associated with elections. They insisted that the vote should resemble the act of standing before God with one’s conscience, in a private space, unmediated by a priest or Church, clear-headedly choosing a representative. This conviction required such practical things as printed ballot papers, polling officers and the construction of private booths in polling stations located at a specified minimum distance from the intoxicating effects of taverns.
The example of the secret ballot and its other-worldly inspirations might sound amusing, or perhaps quaintly old-fashioned, but in fact it stands as a symbol of a much bigger point, to do with the need to come to terms with sacred-profane hybridity within the theory and practice of democracy. I am trying to say that in matters of democracy it’s a category mistake to treat religion and secular politics as binary opposites. Fuzziness is the norm, and many tricky ethical and strategic questions consequently follow. For instance, how can believers and non-believers best live together as free equals on our planet? Through which institutional spaces and democratic practices can Buddhist believers in the wholeness of the world earn the respect and rub along with Pentecostalist Christians and salafi Muslims? What are their respective entitlements, which compromises must they make, and how do they resolve their boundary disputes without sacrificing their mutual dignity? And given that religious enthusiasm often succours bullying and revenge against others, how can the weak be protected against the strong, without resorting to force of arms? These are among the great twenty-first-century politico-religious questions facing all democrats and actually existing democracies.

IA: I want to put it in a somewhat exaggerated way that in an attempt to replace God and make people sovereign, can it also be said that the demos (or the people themselves) were/are being turned into some kind of God (especially through this extreme process of secularization) which could not escape – especially in the case of Comte – the idea of a secular Pope?

JK: You mentioned at the outset the problem of evangelical democracy. Well, the history of modern representative democracy has witnessed more than a few moments when people championed the Sovereign People principle as if the People were God on Earth, as if they could do no wrong. More than a few populist democrats still think of themselves as The People, as champions of the shortest of short textbook definitions of democracy as self-government of the people, by the people, for the people. This view of democracy has Christian theological and monarchic origins. Think of the ways in which hard-core monarchies symbolically represented their power over their subjects. The physical body of kings was conceived both in the figure of God the Father and Christ the Son. The body was divine and therefore immortal and unbreakable. It could not be admitted that kings died. Their bodies symbolized perfection. Like God and his Son, kings could do no wrong, which is why attempted violations of their bodies, through un-Godly acts ranging from unsolicited touching by their subjects through to attempted regicide, were harshly punishable. The body of kings also symbolized the unbreakable quality of the “body politic” over which they ruled. Like God, kings were omnipresent and their bodies coterminous with the polity itself. Monarchs were God-given givers of laws. But as Kantorowicz (1997 [1957] reminds us, they also resembled God the Son: sent by God to redeem humankind, kings had a “body natural” – the sign of God in the world – as well as a body politic. Just like the persons of the Trinity, the two bodies plus the authority they radiated were one, inseparable and indivisible.

We know, thanks to the research of Carl Schmitt and Edmund Morgan (1989) and others, the body politics of monarchy had an unexpected off-spring. The modern doctrine of popular sovereignty was an inverted form of monarchic thinking; according to the early champions of popular sovereignty, some of whom were prepared publicly to commit the most radical of acts by seizing the body and chopping off the heads of kings, monarchy rested upon the fiction of the sovereignty of a God-like body. That was said to be a falsehood. It was rather the God-like body of “the people” that was the source of all sovereign power and authority. *Vox populi, vox Dei*. All subsequent populist versions of democratic politics were indebted to this semiotic transformation. Its direct effects even worked their way into the thoughts and actions of avowedly anti-democratic movements, parties and
governments of the past century. Twentieth-century totalitarianism absorbed originally
monarchic fictions of the (potentially) integrated body politic grounded in “the people”.
You can see this dynamic at work in the writings of Martin Heidegger, who saw the state as
the highest political form whose leaders are the articulations of the people. This was fascist
thinking, with democratic qualities.

IA: These writings by Heidegger are from the early 1930s? Can we say that in contempo-
rary times in many places the term people itself can be used or it has become something
like a metaphysical entity?

JK: Yes, the whole idea of the coming-to-be of the Sovereign People is defended by Martin
Heidegger (2013) in his Freiburg lectures of 1933/1934. This was his reasoning: modernity
has experienced the disintegration of “dogmatic-ecclesiastical faith” and its replacement
by reason, the disembodied mathematical ratio, which becomes the dominant power in the
world, and speeds up the disintegration of community. The individual becomes the “final
court of appeal” in all matters. The concept of sovereignty develops in this context. The
State gives all Being new meaning. The highest actualization of Being, says Heidegger,
happens in the state. The Führer state is the culmination of the whole process of the actu-
alization of the people in the Leader. Little wonder that during the 1940s, in my reading of
the history of democracy, the spirit and language and institutions of democracy began to
be reinterpreted in a radically new way. Monitory democracy was born – in opposition to
totalitarian power. Democracy came to mean much more than the practice of free and fair
elections. It signified something more expansive: the effort to resist and publicly restrain
arbitrary power, wherever it is exercised. Monitory democracy nowadays means the pub-
clic accountability of power, political humility, respect for diversity and complexity, and
the refusal of all forms of bossing, bullying and violence against flesh and blood people,
wherever they live. Today’s populists turn their backs on this trend. They are recidivists.
They want to wind back the clock, to move forward by stepping back in time, into a world
where the People supposedly once ruled, and should once again rule. When these populists
speak of democracy and the people, in opposition to immigrants, Muslims and others,
what they really mean is “you don’t belong here because you are not one of us”. Their
aesthetic sounds thoroughly democratic. It is in fact a new form of demagogy – the refusal
of monitory democracy and its resistance to arbitrary power.

IA: I am also thinking of more contemporary articulations. In the course of election cam-
paigning as the Prime Ministerial candidate, Narendra Modi in India said: “In democracy,
people are like God. I am proud to . . . seek their votes” (IBN-7 2014). After the suppress
of the LTTE, Sri Lanka’s Mahinda Rajapaksa said: “There are only two peoples in this
country. One is the people who love this country. The other comprises the small groups
that have no love for the land of their birth”. And you can see similar sentiments in Nicolas
Sarkozy. “If foreigners want to remain in France”, Sarkozy asserted, “they have to love
France; otherwise, they should leave” (both quotes in Ahmad 2013: 246). What we see in
all these cases is the divinization of people/territoriality and the nation and the simultane-
ous creation of the other, an inimical other. I wonder if you can say something about that?

JK: We should remember that in these early years of the twenty-first century practically
every political system on the face of the earth, and all those who govern through these
polities, claim to be representative of the people, who are said to be sovereign. This is
ture for all the new despotisms of the twenty-first century: Russia, China, the Gulf states,
Turkey and Iran and the Central Asia republics. Nobody today dares to be against the people. At one glance, this is a great victory for the spirit and the language and the institutional dynamics of democracy. All who govern seem to do so according to the principle that their power comes only from the people. But what’s striking about this trend is that “the people” are ubiquitous and absent. They are everywhere and nowhere, constantly referred to but invisible and unlocatable, as Pierre Rosanvallon (1998) says. In the name of the supposedly sovereign People, hypocrisy flourishes. It’s in this respect that religious believers, with their sensual belief in the more, their feeling of awe in the presence of a trans-mundane world, can serve as demystifiers of the political fetish and idolatry of the so-called sovereign people. The historical dialectics here are paradoxical: the earthly abuse by populists of the originally God-given principle of the Sovereign People is resisted by believers in God for whom no earthly ruler is entitled to play God on Earth. Important examples of this democratic line of argument can be found in the works of Mohsen Kadivar and Abdolkarim Soroush, who are among Iran’s most prominent scholars and respected religious critics of the predatory populism lurking in the official state doctrine of Velayat e Faqih.

IA: I want to ask a different, though related, question. As a scholar of democracy who has written a wonderful book about its history, and has done comparative studies of Central-Eastern Europe, Western Europe, the USA and so on, not to mention notable volumes on Thomas Paine (1995) and Václav Havel (2000b), how do you read the “Arab Spring” and what happened afterwards?

JK: I don’t like or use the term. Not only is it a Western cliché, but things on the ground are far messier than any seasonal simile can plausibly convey. The upheavals that began in 2011, symbolized by the extraordinary toppling of the Mubarak regime, are turning out to be a highly complex revolutionary dynamic. Their breathtaking democratic potential comes mixed with the most heinous crimes. The uprisings have unleashed great destructiveness and war: uncivil strife among Muslims, a definite breakdown of the old postcolonial structures, and the dirty involvement of the United States and its allies in trying to plug the power vacuums and cope with the rebirth of religious sentiment, and
religious hatreds, in armed form. Just as Alexis de Tocqueville and others noted when analysing the French events of 1789, these revolutions will take decades to unfold. The whole regional dynamic currently seems crazed and unpredictable. The uprisings have led to the contested return of the old guard in Tunisia, a vicious despotism in Egypt, a Saudi-backed crackdown in Bahrain, the destruction of the Syrian and Yemen states, the emergence of a potent ISIS caliphate under al-Baghdadi, the rise of Turkey as a powerful regional force and the newfound friendship of the Shia republic of Iran with the United States. One has to smile, and simultaneously to weep, and to harbour bemusement and hold one’s breath when confronted by these contradictory processes. For me, only one conclusion is safe: this unfinished revolutionary dynamic is not leading to a new phase of secularization of the world, in the sense of Max Weber. Things are actually heading in the opposite direction. This raises questions about how power shall in future be distributed in the region. Will decisions be publicly shared and their effects controlled and, if so, through which institutions? What will be the relationship between politics and the experience of the transmundane, the experience of “the more”, the experience of divinity among many millions of people? And how shall people of faith live side by side with people for whom there is a deep suspicion of organized divinity? These questions are among the Greek gifts of these remarkable Arab uprisings: these thoroughly modern, spectacularly multi-mediated networked resistances to arbitrary power have announced to the whole world that local disaffection with the status quo demands a new regional political settlement in which religious faith will not wither away. As you can see in the Palestinian resistance to Israeli domination, of central importance are questions about the compatibility between Islam and democracy, what that might mean in practice, and whether new democratic forms of “religious secularity” (Ghobadzadeh 2014) can flourish among Muslims.

IA: Are there historical precedents for the compatibility of Islam and democracy? Did the early Muslim world even pay attention to democracy?

JK: It did. From the seventh century onwards, there were forthright calls among Muslims for the open election of rulers. Loud trumpet blasts were plentiful, but easily the most sonorous was produced by the first Muslim to speak of democracy, Abu Nasr al-Farabi (c. 870–950). Al-Farabi was a great champion of a new form of government that secured people’s freedom and happiness (sa’ada). He was thoroughly familiar with the Greek experiment with dēmokratia, although in some parts of his work he regarded the ideal with ambivalence. Al-Farabi worried, as Plato’s Republic before him had done, that democracy (he used the words al-madina al-jamaiyya) rather overstated the virtue of what he called “absolute freedom”. Democracy for that reason might degenerate into a free for all because the people would devote themselves to self-interested pleasure seeking.

IA: Did Al-Farabi imagine there were better alternatives?

JK: Interestingly, Al-Farabi was even less impressed by all other forms of earthly government. With the cruel caliphate of the Abbasids in mind, he expressed dislike of polities that catered merely to men’s animal needs; cities based on meanness, the belief that property, wealth and money-making are the only things that count in life; and cities driven by the pursuit of recognition, honour and power, based on the right of the stronger. He called these degenerate polities “ignorant cities”. Democracy, he thought, was the least ignorant of all polities. Al-Farabi knew it could never produce paradise on Earth, but it did nurture a form of public self-awareness that sprang from democracy’s unique stress on frank speech
and self-government through open public assembly. Al-Farabi liked these qualities. They danced to the tune of his conviction that since humans are equipped with the divinely given capacity for free deliberation, they can contribute substantially to their own perfection, understood as the desire to cooperate for the sake of happiness. Democracy unleashes this human capacity. It ensures that “democratic people have many aims”.

IA: To Al-Farabi, were there downsides to popular government?

JK: There were times, al-Farabi admitted, when democracies led to excessive polarization among differing aims and conflicting opinions. And democracies were especially vulnerable to war, the threat or possibility of which tends to sub-divide the people into two hostile groups: those in favour of peace and those who “maintain that the good consists in ruling by force” (Al-Farabi 1964: 100 ff). Democratic freedom for Al-Farabi was a double-edged dagger. It could bring out the worst in people. But it could also produce virtuous citizens, wise men, fine orators and poets. Al-Farabi favoured freedom and happiness of all God’s creatures on earth and he thought that it required political leadership by good men of active intellect, good judgment and strong physique: leaders who were good orators, lovers of learning and truth and who stood above the materialism of this world. This was the singular advantage of democracy, he said. It enabled the cream of good leadership freely to rise to the surface of public life.

IA: Final, short question! You spoke a lot about gods and democracy. I was just wondering what the relationship between dogs and democracy is.

JK: Dogs?

IA: Yes. In Holland, America or Australia one rarely sees any free dogs, though human beings are allegedly free in these Western democracies. But if you go to a place like Egypt or Senegal or India you always see free dogs. In the West there are no unleashed dogs. Every dog seems to have a master. In India, Senegal, Egypt and many other African countries most dogs are without a leash. They’re free. They have freedom of movement, and the freedom to bark. This suggests there is some kind of relationship between political forms, human beings and animals, and even multi-lingualism. Dogs in India have at least two languages: one to speak with humans and another to communicate with fellow dogs. In Melbourne or New York perhaps the only place where one dog can meet another dog is in a park. Even there the master pulls the leash, or growls, refusing his or her dog permission to interact with another dog. Have scholars looked at this relationship of democracy, dogs and freedom?

JK: I wasn’t expecting a wonderful witticism, a reverse palindrome, what’s playfully called a semordnilap, a word in the English lexicon that when spelled backward forms an entirely different word: like stressed and desserts; dog and god.

When I think about it, what springs to mind is Hannah Arendt’s remark that a dog with a name has a much higher chance of survival in this world than a stray dog with no name. With the fate of refugees in mind, she meant that in the human sciences, as in public life, the process of giving things of this world a name is always contestable, misleading and potentially dangerous, but it is unavoidable and (think of words like freedom and democracy) politically fruitful. Naming the world enables recognition. It helps us to think. It provides signposts for how we should act and which means we should use.
Arendt’s remark could be given a bio-political twist, to highlight a more profound, more perplexing sense of the political importance of dogs to democracy. In many actually existing democracies, democrats express growing concern about the relationship between humans and non-humans. They worry that the democratic principle that the sovereign people through their representatives should govern themselves in time-space contexts is in fact a carrier of homocentrism. Rightly so, for until the coming of the age of monitory democracy during the 1940s, democracy indulged a thoroughly anthropocentric understanding of the world. Hence the question: Is it possible to re-conceptualize democracy, to humble it, to bring it back to Earth, to democratize democracy by understanding it as a political form, a way of life, a language, a set of institutional dynamics that requires humans to humble themselves in relation to the biomes in which they dwell?

As Edward McCord (2012), Elizabeth Colbert (1996) and others have recently pointed out, this need for humans to think in more humble ways about our inter-dependence with animals and other living and non-living species is driven by the industrial-scale destruction of our biosphere at an alarming rate.

IA: What can democrats do in the face of this trend?

JK: I’m struck by the slow-motion greening of democracy that is now under way (see Keane 2012). Votes are being extended to a whole new constituency – our biosphere – that never before enjoyed the franchise. Efforts to ensure its political representation include more than talk of animal rights, simian sovereignty and respect for sentient creatures. The greening trend runs much deeper. It includes such innovations as bio-regional assemblies, constitutional protection of the biosphere, green parties and citizen science. The whole trend prompts fundamental questions about the meaning of democracy, and whether it has a future. It forces us to think about how we think about democracy. What I have in mind is whether the greening of democracy, let’s call it, goes beyond the familiar arguments about whether open democratic societies are capable of cultivating public awareness of future generations (they can) or whether democracies can act quickly enough to handle the coming mega-disasters (they can). The trend forces us to answer the most basic question: are we human beings capable of democratizing ourselves?

IA: Do you mean by democratization of democracy the effort to make non-human entities – in fact, the whole planet Earth – central to the future of democracy?

JK: Your question has at least three pointed parts. Can we human beings humble ourselves by collectively recognizing our ineluctably deep dependence upon the ecosystems in which we dwell? Can we simultaneously find new ways of practically extending voices and votes in human affairs to our ecosystems? Thirdly, and consequently, is it possible in theory and practice to rid the whole idea of democracy of its anthropocentrism? Can it come to mean, descriptively speaking, a form of life and a way of rendering power publicly accountable by means of institutions in which humans and their biosphere are treated symmetrically, as interdependent equals, in opposition to the reigning view that humans are the pinnacle of creation, lords and ladies of the universe, “the people” who are the ultimate source of sovereign power and authority on Earth?

IA: Shouldn’t this democratization also include languages, many of which are disappearing?
JK: I’m not equipped to talk about the global disappearance of languages and dialects. But I do agree that the key point, that human and non-human nature form part of a common but fragile dynamic, needs to be registered in the very language of democracy. Language shapes who we are. It speaks us and that’s why, in matters of democracy, thinking hard and deeply about language is necessary therapy. There have been many past moments when the key terms of democracy were turned upside down, or inside out. The history of democracy is full of phrase struggles. Think of the still-unfinished job of subverting sexist or homophobic language; or the invention and popularization of terms such as social democracy, liberal democracy and Christian democracy; or the (hardly remembered) contribution by democrats of words like “ok” to the English language (Keane 2009).

Now think of the way the language of democratic politics is a carrier of unwarranted insults and blind indignities thrust at our biosphere. Dogs have suffered their fair share of abuse, as you say. In many cultures, calling a human a dog is among the greatest insults – despite the historical fact, well documented by Laura Hobgood-Oster (2014), that we humans would never have flourished without the support of canines.

IA: So you’re saying democracy is deeply implicated in the verbal denigration of dogs – their human stereotyping as wild creatures in need of stern words and the occasional kick?

JK: Yes, though there seems to be hardly any research on this. Let’s take a more familiar example, the case of donkey voting and the denigration of donkeys. Donkey voting is a familiar phrase, dating from the early 1960s. It refers, especially in compulsory parliamentary elections using preferential voting systems, to citizens who thoughtlessly rank each candidate in the order they are listed on the ballot paper. The donkey voter is a stupid voter, an idiot who pays no attention to the merits of the candidates. The presumption buried deep within the phrase is that donkeys are foolish, gloomy and (as in an old icon still used by supporters of the Democratic Party in the United States) mulishly stubborn. The main trouble with the phrase is its ignorance of donkeys. Humans are often enough stubborn, gloomy and foolish. Donkeys aren’t. They’re patient, gentle and as loyal as Eeyore, or Sancho Panza’s Platero and Dapple. Their learning capacity is higher than horses. Donkeys require little feeding, and can easily survive the harshest conditions. They ferried wounded soldiers out of the hellish trenches of the Somme; transported Napoleon across the Alps; delivered Jesus to Jerusalem. Even today, in India and many other places, they carry much-needed clean water to households without running water. They’re surefooted and brave: they’ve been known to survive 50-metre cliff falls, and jennies will walk through raging fires to save their young. Laboratory tests show that compared with all other mammals donkey milk is closest to human milk. That’s reason enough to stop insulting the donkey, to remember that the future of humanity is bound up not just with dogs and donkeys, but with all living species, and to see that the future of democracy thus depends on greening its own language.

IA: Experientially, I have been concerned more with dogs (free ones) than donkeys. Anyway, how do you see democracy can reconfigure itself in future to ensure dignity and freedom to dogs, donkeys and other non-humans as well?

JK: I don’t know that we can know this yet. Yet ridding the language of democracy of human hubris would be a good beginning. How should we go about this? Searching through the world’s religions and indigenous spiritual codes for tips and clues would be a good
start. Consider for instance of the much-loved fable called *The Animals' Lawsuit Against Humanity* (ben Me'ir 2005). Written by a group of tenth-century Sufi Muslims from near Basra, it features an assembly attended by bees, horses and all representatives of the animal kingdom. In the presence of the Spirit King, they complain bitterly of their dreadful suffering at the hands of humans. Much can be learned from such texts. We can learn much, too, by familiarizing ourselves with alternative ways of granting dogs the entitlement to explore public spaces, to be fed, stroked and loved, to speak in their languages, and to be respected, not as an object and ornament of human narcissism. Think of the media and security mayhem unleashed when a fine free-range dog came to check out President Barak Obama as he was being officially welcomed in Delhi in early 2015. Why the mayhem? Then consider Pope Francis, who tried recently to console a young boy whose dog had died. “One day,” he said, “we will see our animals again in the eternity of Christ. Paradise is open to all of God’s creatures.” With these few words, Pope Francis (*New York Times* 2014) caused a storm, whipping up such questions as whether animals have souls, and what is meant by the famous passage in Genesis about Man being given “dominion” over every living thing that moves on the Earth, and whether “dominion” implies the obligation of stewardship. With that controversy and Pope Francis in mind, tongue half in cheek, perhaps it’s no exaggeration to conclude that recognition and respect for dogs is among the unintended, positive effects on democracy of the belief in God and the gods.

**Note**

1. The initial conversation took place in Melbourne on 15 November 2014. I thank Sunniya Wajahat (Hons. student at Australian Catholic University, Melbourne) for transcribing the conversation. The text was subsequently edited in a series of exchanges between John Keane and Irfan Ahmad.

**References**


