

Bhagat Singh's Atheism

by J. Daniel Elam

Although less well known outside of South Asia, Bhagat Singh remains one of the most celebrated anticolonial agitators and thinkers in India and Pakistan. In December 1928 under the auspices of a new revolutionary organization he had helped to found, the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army (HSRA), he assassinated British police officer J. P. Saunders to avenge the recent beating of Punjabi activist Lala Lajpat Rai; a few months later, in 1929, he threw a smoke-bomb in the Delhi Legislative Assembly, proclaimed *inqilab zindbad* (long live revolution), and awaited his arrest. From jail he debated M.K. Gandhi, wrote extensively, and staged hunger strikes with his fellow inmates. At the age of twenty-three, in 1931, Bhagat Singh was hanged by the British and became a martyr for the anticolonial cause – as well as for a growing revolutionary movement that challenged the moderation of the Nehru-led Congress Party and the asceticism of Gandhian non-violence. Especially in Punjab (both Pakistani and Indian Punjab), Bhagat Singh has sustained a vibrant afterlife, not least because of the iconographic studio portrait that he published in 1928. His image, as well as his revolutionary thought, continue to enjoy wide circulation today. Academics have turned their attention to the previously overlooked activist, producing a significant amount of work under the rubrics of what Kama Maclean has called, provocatively, ‘the revolutionary turn’.¹

Of the essays that Bhagat Singh published in his lifetime, ‘Why I am an Atheist’ has remained especially popular. Bhagat Singh published it from jail in 1930, largely as a response to his critics among the revolutionaries, who worried that anticolonial stardom had gone to Bhagat Singh’s head – or, alternatively, that his anticolonial agitation had been motivated by arrogance and egotism. Quite unlike the HSRA’s response to M.K. Gandhi’s ‘The Philosophy of the Bomb’, ‘Why I am an Atheist’ charts a different philosophical territory, one that this essay will attempt to explore by illuminating a particular transnational archive in circulation. Like ‘The Philosophy of the Bomb’, ‘Why I am an Atheist’ is an apologia; but unlike the former essay and despite its title, the essay is not a manifesto.²

Two reasons for the lingering success of Bhagat Singh’s essay suggest themselves. First, the rise of dogmatic atheism in the early twenty-first-century Anglo-American world – popularized by Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett – has encouraged a postcolonial rejoinder, producing a lineage of South Asian thought that is anti-religious

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(even as the category of ‘religion’ itself has undergone significant reconsideration in the South Asian context). Second, and perhaps more urgently, the essay has been a proper response to the overwhelming success of the Hindu Right, who have co-opted the varieties of early twentieth-century anticolonialism, including Bhagat Singh, for themselves.³

Nevertheless, these uses of Bhagat Singh’s so-called atheism rely on three fundamental misinterpretations of the essay: first, the equation of Sikh atheism with Abrahamic atheism; second, the equation of ‘atheism’ with religious non-belief; and third, the assumption that the title accurately describes the essay that follows it.

This is not to deny that Bhagat Singh’s essay is, in part, a rejection of religious belief – he is not ambiguous on this point. Here, however, I want to press further than simply taking the title without reference to its historical conjuncture or in place of the essay’s complete argument. To take seriously the ‘atheism’ at the centre of Bhagat Singh’s manifesto requires attention to a transnational archive of circulating texts and ideas in the 1920s.⁴ This necessarily includes pulp publishing in the US, freethought associations in the UK, and anarchist networks across the US and Europe. Attention to this expansive archive – one that Bhagat Singh himself consistently foregrounds, but which often goes unmentioned in scholarship – offers us a substantially more nuanced and accurate image of the precise concept of ‘atheism’, as well as the global circulation history that makes the term a critical one for global intellectual historians. Attention to this sprawling archive, of course, gives us a clearer sense of the intellectual entanglements of Bhagat Singh’s worldly critique.

Consequently, I demonstrate here the productive relationship between religion and interwar philosophy that stands at the centre of Bhagat Singh’s concerns, the global conversation that he thus partakes in, and the relationship, ultimately, between doubt and anticolonialism. Treating this text as philosophical without reducing it to an anti-theological screed (or an ‘autobiographical note’, as K.C. Yadav has called it) reveals the possibilities of an ethics that disavows the transcendent authority of both colonial rule *and* an anticolonial response.

‘Why I am an Atheist’ proceeds in five sections. The first three primarily detail Bhagat Singh’s formation as a revolutionary from his youth to his jail sentence; the last two are mostly concerned with critiques of religious belief. At first, the relationship between Bhagat Singh’s rebuttal of his alleged arrogance and his argument in favour of atheism seems unclear. Bhagat Singh’s answer, however, is that an activist can be arrogant and self-assured only if he possesses faith in transcendent truth; as an atheist, Bhagat Singh fundamentally cannot believe and therefore cannot act with full self-knowledge and assurance. The relationship hinges on a point that Bhagat Singh fails to elaborate in his essay: namely, that ‘atheism’ names not simply the absence of assurance as to a ‘Supreme Being’ but also the absence of assurance about one’s own self. In other words, the proper anticolonial

agitator must relinquish not only theological certainty, but also self-knowledge.

Robin Rinehart has written how Sikh agnosticism, across the twentieth century, cannot be easily aligned with its Christian counterpart; rather, it was invested in practices that combine irreligiosity and cultural pride. She traces a legacy of Sikh identity in the context of Sikh irreligiosity that complicates a simple understanding of Bhagat Singh's claim to atheism.⁵ As others have written, atheism, like European secularism, is a predominantly Protestant concept that carefully demarcates 'religion' as a separate realm from other cultural, social, and political practices.⁶

Nevertheless, Rinehart's attempt to cover a century of Sikh irreligiosity – from Bhagat Singh to Khushwant Singh – does a disservice to the historical specificity of 'atheism' in the wake of the First World War. Bhagat Singh was not merely participating in a debate about Sikh disbelief – if indeed he was – but rather cultivating a particular form of pessimistic utopianism that was available in the aftermath of the Great War and the Bolshevik Revolution. Dubbed 'atheism', this body of thought was interested less in declaring god 'dead', but rather – and more appropriately to Nietzsche, who receives credit for that aphorism – in recognizing that an appeal to transcendence was no longer sufficient ground for ethics and morals. The horrors of the First World War rendered this absence in starker terms. Shell-shocked philosophers and intellectuals were forced to make sense of a world that appeared to lack transcendent reason. Gone, too, were grounds for philosophical universalism that had comforted European thought prior to the twentieth century. 'Atheism' was the term most appropriate for imagining a cosmopolitan pluralistic world without imagining a universalist one. In this sense, it is 'atheism', as much as Protestantism, which gave rise to the early twentieth-century field of comparative religions.⁷

In other words, 'atheism' was the name given not to a confident know- ingness of postwar philosophy, but rather to the existential muck these philosophers found themselves mired in: what Edmund Husserl, in 1935, aptly identified as the 'crisis of European man'. In short, 'atheism' was the name given to colonial doubt and anticolonial unknowingness – practices that resuscitated the secular human in the absence of metaphysical assuredness.⁸

This doubt and unknowingness, coupled with the recuperation of 'man', appears across much of European philosophy in the 1920s and 1930s, but it is overshadowed by the more dominant forms of politics that would gain traction in the 1940s, primarily fascism, but also the return of religiosity. But in the 1920s and 1930s it was uniquely possible to imagine ethics and politics without the assurance of metaphysics, and this yielded a spectacular array of philosophical experimentation. For Bhagat Singh, like many others – Emma Goldman, Leon Trotsky, Edmund Husserl, Randolph Bourne, among them – it was precisely the *lack* of metaphysical fixedness that made it possible to imagine new forms of worldly affiliation, including friendship (for E.M.

Forster), love (in Ram Prasad Bismil's poetry), society (in John Dewey's radical pragmatism), and what William James called 'muddy ontologies'.⁹

These forms of worldly affiliation, rooted in the *relinquishment* of meta-physical assurance, made the teleological acquisition of value irrelevant. In Bhagat Singh's words:

I know, the moment the rope is fitted round my neck and rafters removed from under my feet, that will be the final moment A short life of struggle, with no such magnificent end, shall in itself be the reward if I have the courage to take it in that light. That is all.¹⁰

It seems very possible that Bhagat Singh's 'Why I am an Atheist' was inspired by Bertrand Russell's 'Why I am not a Christian', a lecture Russell delivered in March 1927 that was published in London by the secularist and rationalist publisher Watts & Co. later the same year. Watts books were distributed in British India – they would later publish former Ghadr Party Leader Lala Har Dayal's work – and it seems likely that Bhagat Singh would have read 'Why I am not a Christian' in some form. On the other hand, the connection between these two texts relies primarily on the similarity of their titles. Bhagat Singh had access to other writings on Christianity and Christian agnosticism by Bertrand Russell, most notably Russell's 1927 pamphlet, 'Has Religion Made Useful Contributions to Civilization?', whose first paragraph appears in Bhagat Singh's jail notebook.¹¹

Russell's argument, across his writings on Christianity, is decidedly *not* atheist: his concern is his discontent with the institutionalization of Christianity. He is considerably more ambiguous about theology and religious doubt. Russell sets aside the question of personal belief in favour of arguing against the role of belief in determining political and social action. It is in this sense that Russell was one of the most prominent members of the Freethought movement in the 1920s. The movement – which began in earnest in the 1880s in both the UK and the US – drew on earlier French and German Enlightenment thinkers to demand logic, reason and empiricism as the grounding for truth claims. Logic and reason stood in opposition, according to most Freethought writings, to authority, theology, tradition, or dogma. By the 1920s, however, the terms 'logic' and 'reason' had come under significant pressure as philosophical movements like pragmatism (especially as expounded by William James and John Dewey) questioned the relationship between 'empiricism', 'experience' and 'truth'. In response, and under its influence, Freethought became even more radically anti-authoritarian, arguing increasingly for consensus, group discussion, and collective agreement as the basis for non-theological protocols for answering questions of truth, ethics, and politics.

'Has Religion Made Useful Contributions to Civilization?' was published by the Haldeman-Julius Publishing Company as part of its \$5 subscription programme, the Little Blue Book series. This ran from 1919 to 1978 and

published over 1900 pamphlets at five cents each – the \$5 subscription rate would guarantee up to 100 small pamphlets. The Little Blue Book series postdates Charles Eliot's Harvard Classics Series, a fifty-one volume collection of world literature for the middle-class home library, founded in 1909. But the series prefigures the more famous US subscription book programme, the Book of the Month Club (founded in 1926), as well as the monthly magazine *Readers Digest* (1920). Janice Radway and Joan Shelley Rubin have both written extensively about the ways in which all three series instructed emergent American middle-class readers how to navigate the changing demands and anxieties of postwar modernity by rendering world literature and its cosmopolitan aspirations accessible to – and displayable in – to middle-class homes.¹²

The Little Blue Book series, founded by Emanuel and Marcet Haldeman-Julius, had related but slightly different aspirations. Using funds raised by their socialist weekly newspaper, *Appeal to Reason* (which ran from 1895 to 1922), the couple marketed the Little Blue Books for working-class men – each copy was designed to fit in the pocket of a standard-issue blue-collar shirt – and their families. The subscription service, with its eventual minimum order of \$1 (for twenty pamphlets), kept costs down through a combination of cheap pulp paper and a largely copyright-free archive. It did, however, publish significant socialist, leftist, anti-sexist, and anti-racist texts that are unavailable elsewhere. Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood, contributed three titles to the series; W.E.B. Du Bois, the famous Black thinker, first published his accounts of his African travels in the series upon his return in 1928. Will Durant published selections from what would become his *Story of Philosophy* (1926). The series published documents from the Bolshevik Revolution, a defence of homosexuality, and some uncensored editions of Oscar Wilde's late work. Their list included Russell's 'Why I am not a Christian' as well as his 'Has Religion Made Useful Contributions to Civilization?', along with two other brief essays in the 1920s.

We can be fairly certain that Bhagat Singh's copy of 'Has Religion Made Useful Contributions to Civilization?' was the 1927 Little Blue Book edition of the essay, which was not published in any other format until after Bhagat Singh's death. The pamphlet would have been sent to Punjab from California along the same Ghadr Party connections that made it possible for Bhagat Singh to receive other leftist US texts, like Upton Sinclair's 1915 self-published volume *Cry for Justice*.¹³

The other work which Bhagat Singh cites directly in his essay is Mikhail Bakunin's 1872 posthumous and unfinished manuscript, 'God and the State'. This was translated from Russian into French, and then into English in 1883; in 1910 it was retranslated (this time directly from Russian) and distributed as a pamphlet. In 1916 Emma Goldman published the manuscript in its entirety in her publication *Mother Earth*, issues of which Bhagat Singh received through radical Punjabi circuits between San

Francisco and Lahore. 'God and the State' could be obtained in British India in many forms.

In his discussion of 'God and the State', Bhagat Singh blithely places Bakunin alongside Lenin, Trotsky and Marx: all four men had, for the young thinker, put forward convincing cases that state power relied on the suppression of masses through appeals to transcendence. In Bakunin's analysis, 'God' is the transcendent justification for state power over its controlled masses. Bakunin's text is fragmentary – some sentences, most famously the last, are unfinished – but shifts rapidly between 'God' (and Christianity in particular) and the 'universalism' for which 'God' is a metonym. Consequently, although the essay is in favour of religious non-belief, its ultimate target is not religion but the transcendental universalism that serves as the alibi for state rule. Immanent doubt, therefore, rather than self-assured atheism, undergirds an anarchist secular politics. For Bakunin, 'God', and consequently a universalist claim to knowledge and authority, comes at the expense of a secular universalism: humanity. Proper authority should therefore instead be rooted in expertise, experience and collective agreement. Bakunin, in line with many anarchistic (and liberal) thinkers of his time, rejects metaphysics for positivism: knowledge produced from lived experience and non-generalizable facts.¹⁴

Although Bakunin remained a central thinker in the anarchist philosophical canon into the twentieth century, theories of plurality and relativity in the politicized social sciences divided the anarchist intellectual movement. Some thinkers, like Emma Goldman in the US, consistently promoted an anarchism that promoted positivism, individualism and individual authority against the state. Others, like Lala Har Dayal (and M.K. Gandhi), would draw their anarchist ideas through the sieve of *fin-de-siècle* thought to produce an anarchism rooted in communal and collective organizing.¹⁵ Like the contemporaneous Freethought movement and its turn away from the authority of individual knowledge, this line of anarchist thought moved in directions that radically redefined anti-authoritarianism, locating at its core a challenge to liberal individualism.

Bhagat Singh offers what seems at first like a fairly tepid conclusion: 'The ideas contained in Bakunin's "God and State" seem inconclusive, but it is an interesting book', he writes in 'Why I am an Atheist'.¹⁶ Though he declares himself to be an atheist and an anarchist – using, elsewhere, Goldman's 1916 definition of anarchism verbatim – his declaration of atheism departs significantly from Bakunin's definition.¹⁷

For his corrections to Bakunin's definition of 'atheism', Bhagat Singh makes a counter-intuitive turn to Hindu theology. Besides citing Krishna, Guru Nanak Singh, and Charvaka, 'Why I am an Atheist' draws on Arya Samajist writings to align Sikh irreligiosity with its more recognizable Protestant counterpart; it draws on theosophical writings to render atheism more conducive to secular cosmopolitanism.

Another transnational discourse was circulating in the 1890s and 1930s between the US, Europe, and South Asia: that of the 'soul'. Inspired by an agglomeration of theosophy, spiritualism, and the cosmopolitan interest in 'world religions' – but equally indebted to a long history of European philosophy – the 'soul' straddled the line between transcendent religiosity and immanent action; it named simultaneously a metaphysical force and a secular affiliation. Leela Gandhi and Shruti Kapila have traced the migration of 'spirit' and 'soul' from its European predecessors to its twentieth-century advocates.¹⁸

'Soul', of course, appears most prominently in anticolonial discourse by way of M.K. Gandhi, whose 'soul-force' emerged during his stay in South Africa. Gandhi's curious translation of his new term *satyagraha* (and occasionally *atman*) into English as 'soul-force' highlights the metaphysical confidence of what Ajay Skaria has called Gandhi's 'religion of resistance'.¹⁹ By aligning 'soul' with 'truth' as well as 'soul' with 'being', but combining it with secular action ('force'), Gandhi placed contemporaneous discourses about the 'soul' squarely within an anticolonial idiom. Much like the terms of worldly affiliation that I have listed above, and as Shruti Kapila has written in greater detail, 'soul', especially in its anticolonial context (and in the wake of Gandhi's re-working of the *Gita*), could become the basis for a type of interpersonal affinity beyond the 'self', and, relatedly, a critique of liberalism.²⁰

The term had a certain appeal, such that neither the HRSA nor Bhagat Singh could avoid it. 'The Philosophy of the Bomb', the HRSA's response to Gandhi's critique of the revolutionary movement, does not critique 'soul-force', but applies greater pressure instead to the second half of the neologism. Nor is the term absent in 'Why I am an Atheist', although Bhagat Singh is careful to quarantine his own use of it by rendering it synonymous with biological 'life'.

Skaria has written extensively about Gandhi's rendering of *satya* as simultaneously 'soul' and 'truth', and it is on this ground that Bhagat Singh's 'atheism' emerges most clearly as a critique of knowingness and anticolonial authority. The argument – not uncommon in the aftermath of the First World War – proceeds as follows: if there is an infallible supreme being, why would he create a world with so many problems? Bhagat Singh's abstract discussion of religious belief takes on a worldly subject in this section:

Because our forefathers had set up a faith in some Supreme Being, the Almighty God, therefore any man who dares to challenge the validity of that faith . . . shall have to be called an apostate . . . Because Mahatmaji is great, therefore none should criticise him. Because he has risen above, therefore everything he says – maybe in the field of Politics or Religion, Economics or Ethics – is right.²¹

There is much to say about this curious transition from 'Almighty God' to M.K. Gandhi. The first, briefly, is to point out Bhagat Singh's consistent

strategy of claiming Gandhi as having ‘risen above’; as in the debate staged between HSRA’s ‘The Philosophy of the Bomb’ and Gandhi’s ‘The Cult of the Bomb’, the two agitators consistently fought over, ironically, who was the *least* authoritative anticolonial leader. Each leader disavowed his own authority and, in its place, asserted the expertise of the other.²² The renunciation of authority, as I have noted elsewhere, marks a critical anticolonial philosophical practice.²³ Relatedly, Bhagat Singh’s challenge to Gandhi’s *satya* is not that ‘truth’ does not exist, but that ‘truth’ is unavailable. This is a far cry from our standard conception of ‘atheism’ as well as more aggressive than mere agnosticism. Because a properly anticolonial imagination embraces critique, such an imagination should consequently reject the possibility of infallibility. Bhagat Singh’s anticolonial philosophy thus replaces ‘authority’ with the egalitarian social relationship founded on secular criticism *ad infinitum*. In other words, it is here that Bhagat Singh makes obvious his revolutionary stance: it derives not from vanity but rather from humility and egalitarianism.

This would align the activist with yet another strain of interwar philosophy. The other term that muddled the distinction between theological and secular worlds was the phrase ‘universal brotherhood’, a concept popularized by theosophical writers from P. D. Ouspensky to Annie Besant. Theosophists took the phrase from the *Maha Upanishad* as a translation of *vasudheva kutumbakam* (loosely translated into Hindi and English from Sanskrit, ‘the world is a family’). Bhagat Singh was drawn to the phrase in Hindi as well as in English – it appears in his early published works for the radical periodical *Kirti* as well as in his jail notebook – as much as he was drawn to the sociological unit which signalled its eventual arrival: the mass, the crowd. ‘Universal brotherhood’ was not uncomplicatedly synonymous with ‘cosmopolitanism’; indeed, the phrase is associated, even in Bhagat Singh’s jail notebook, with ‘spiritual democracy’ – a phrase borrowed from the introduction to an American edition of Iqbal’s *Secrets of the Self* (1920).²⁴ But as early as 1924, Bhagat Singh disavowed the theological conception of ‘universal brotherhood’ in favour of a worldly society yet to be forged: ‘For that imagined future we will have to sacrifice the real present. For that imagined peace we will have to create chaos. For that fairy tale we will have to give everything’.²⁵

What, then, is the relationship between the incomplete ‘autobiography’ in the first half and the atheism of the second? We might suggest, following the structural logic of the essay – and the implicit argument of the text, given its unmarked citations – that the proper anticolonial agitator must relinquish not only theological certainty, but also the possibility of self-knowledge. Instead, the anticolonial agitator must participate in the ‘murky ontology’ of heteronomous collectivity beyond the bounds of the liberal imagination. The essay is caught, however, between the desire to imagine this collectivity-to-come and the demand to relinquish self-knowledge; or, in Bhagat Singh’s words, the desire for idealism and the demand for realism.

Sacrifice for fantasy is difficult to square with a simple conception of atheism – sacrifice and martyrdom (which Bhagat Singh welcomed, and which firmly places him in a lineage of Sikh heroes) are hardly commitments to the secular present. And fantasy – ‘imagined future’, ‘imagined peace’, ‘fairy tale’ – are hardly appropriate for a ‘realist’ revolutionary stance. Might we then suggest, following the full scope of Bhagat Singh’s argument, as well as the philosophical conjuncture of which he was part, that the anticolonial imagination revelled in the disavowal of *assurance* – transcendent or otherwise – and instead favoured the less stable ground of unknowing and doubt that underlay the pessimistic utopianism of the 1920s and 1930s? It is inexperience and the *lack* of authority that make possible the shift between ethical affinity and political solidarity.

The importance of this particular transnational circulation of texts and ideas cannot be exaggerated. Due in large part to the Ghadr Party’s San Francisco headquarters and the resultant circulation of texts between California and Punjab, Bhagat Singh was a central figure in a network of interwar political and philosophical thought indebted to an extra-imperial circuit of influence. Bhagat Singh arrives at Bertrand Russell, a British philosopher, by way of a socialist printing press in Kansas and Berkeley. Closer to Punjab, Bhagat Singh returns to theological Hindu, Sikh, and theosophical texts to render European and Anglo-American thought conducive to a radical inconclusive anti-authoritarianism. In other words, Bhagat Singh’s atheism was a product of the particular forms of Russian anti-imperialism as much as it was a product of leftist pulp publishing in the US, interwar European philosophy, and practices of religious doubt within the British Empire.

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In lieu of a conclusion, I will briefly trace a genealogy of criticism from anticolonial philosophy to contemporary criticism. This situates Bhagat Singh in a trajectory of philosophers and critics who continue to wrestle with the absence of transcendental assurance – and takes him quite far away from later dogmatic ‘atheists’ like Christopher Hitchens. The more critically compelling trajectory was a subject of vibrant academic debate in the early 2000s and 2010s, and was championed most prominently by Charles Taylor and Edward Said.²⁶ Taylor and Said arrived at notions of ‘secular criticism’ by very different routes – Taylor’s was a confrontation with multicultural liberalism; Said’s was a recuperation of philology.

The debates that followed foregrounded once more the confusion between ‘secularism’ and ‘religion’. Talal Asad and Seyla Benhabib, among others, argued persuasively for the inherent Christianity of secularity – especially in France following the headscarf controversy (*l’affaire du foulard*) there in the 1990s.²⁷ At the same time, ‘secularism’ referred to a mode of criticism rather than policy: an immanent critique that insisted on remaining in the realm of

worldly human action. It is easy to say that the conflation of the two debates was on the basis of linguistic happenstance – Taylor’s ‘secularism’ is from the French *laïcité* and Said’s is from the German *irdische* – but we might focus instead how this confusion was foregrounded in Bhagat Singh’s text. ‘Why I am an Atheist’ is a rejection of the imposition of religion (the famously ‘untranslatable’ *laïcité*) and, simultaneously, an embrace of the unassured worldliness (*irdische* – earthly) of political action.

‘Secular criticism’, in Said’s formulation, was hardly a dismissal of religious belief but rather a demand for the examination of texts, history, and Empire without reference to transcendental and transcendentalist authority. If humans had created the world modernity had inherited, humans alone would need to imagine alternative futures (even if, or perhaps especially because, those futures were unguaranteed). As Stathis Gourgouris has written, Said foregrounded doubt and worldliness and consequently proffered a theory that could make possible unprecedented forms of worldly affiliation and affinity that had the potential to be radically egalitarian in their formation.²⁸

We might thus align Bhagat Singh’s ‘atheism’ with Said’s ‘secularism’ as a way of imagining a world that could be otherwise, and one for which we would have to sacrifice the world we have made for ourselves. And we might simultaneously align Bhagat Singh’s ‘atheism’ with Taylor’s ‘secularism’ as a way of imagining a theological doubt left tethered to its theological imagination. In the meantime, we would do well to recuperate the lost pessimistic utopian strains of anticolonial critique, not for a politics of the present, but in order to better grasp the intellectual breadth of our archives.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2 The most comprehensive English-language collection of Bhagat Singh’s writings is *Fragrance of Freedom: the Writings of Bhagat Singh*, ed. K.C. Yadav, Guragaon, 2006. Page references below correspond to this volume.

3 See, for example: Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, London, 2007; Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, London, 2008; and Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, London, 2007. In a number of cases across north India the far-right Hindu Party (BJP) has used Bhagat Singh in their campaigns. The left has been equally invested

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4 See in this issue: Chris Moffat, 'The Itinerant Library of Lala Lajpat Rai', *History Workshop Journal* 89, spring 2020

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22 See in this issue Kama Maclean, 'Returning Insurgency to the Archive: the Dissemination of "The Philosophy of the Bomb"', *History Workshop Journal* 89, spring 2019.

23 For discussion, see J. Daniel Elam, *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth: Anticolonial Aesthetics, Postcolonial Politics*, New York, 2020.

24 Annie Besant, *General Council of the Theosophical Society*, 23 Dec. 1924; P. D. Ouspensky, *The Fourth Way* (1921–46), New York, 1957; Muhammad Iqbal, *Secrets of the Self*, transl. Reynold A. Nicholson, London, 1920.

25 Quoted in Sawhney, 'Bhagat Singh: a Politics of Death and Hope', pp. 377–408.

26 See, most notably, Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Cambridge MA, 1983; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA and London, 2007.

27 See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford and London, 2003; Seyla Benhabib, *Another Cosmopolitanism*, New York and Oxford, 2008.

28 Stathis Gourgouris, *Lessons in Secular Criticism*, New York, 2013. Gourgouris explicates the differences and commonalities between the two debates around secularism, and offers an especially amusing and clear definition of the distinction that should be made between 'atheism' and 'secularism': 'I am not a post-secularist because I am not even a secularist. I am an atheist' (p. 65). An atheist expresses belief (as negation); a secularist, following Said, expresses 'commitment'.

ABSTRACT

Of the essays that Indian nationalist Bhagat Singh published in his lifetime, 'Why I am an Atheist' has remained especially popular. Bhagat Singh published the essay from jail in 1930, largely as a response to his critics among the revolutionaries, who worried that anticolonial stardom had gone to Bhagat Singh's head – or alternatively that his anticolonial agitation had been motivated by arrogance and egotism. Quite different from the the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army's response to M. K. Gandhi – 'The Philosophy of the Bomb' – 'Why I am an Atheist' marks a different philosophical territory, one that this essay will attempt to explore in detail. This essay demonstrates the productive relationship between religion and interwar philosophy that stands at the centre of Bhagat Singh's concerns, the global conversation that he thus partakes in, and the relationship, ultimately, between doubt and anticolonialism. Treating this text as philosophical without reducing it to an anti-theological screed reveals the possibilities of an ethics that avoids the transcendent authority of both colonial rule and anticolonial response.