

Religion, Secularism and the Indian Scenario : A Study

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Humanity and the role of religion

Human beings, perturbed by doubts, confide to religion as a way of seeking certainty or truth (Engineer 1999, 38). The functionalists claim that the main role of religion lies in helping a society cope with tension and a sense of uncertainty and powerlessness that arise out of realizing that God is unpredictable and indifferent to human ethics. Thought that way, religion helps a society to work normally. Absence of religion can lead to the recognition of one's limitedness before the human condition and intensify one's frustration and intolerability (Parsons 1957, 380-5). According to David Martin's analysis, religion plays a role in forming the collective psyche of a people, in 'unit[ing] myth in the sense of partial representation to a framework of understanding, a perspective, a poetic and dramatized symbolic system' (Martin 1969, 19).

While the rationalists question religion for promoting superstitions, both Bertrand Russell and William James underscore the importance of faith, a psychological category, in developing knowledge. Nevertheless, religion in its fossilized state can lead to convictions, manufactured violence, hatred and divisive attitudes, producing an unjust society where the category of the ethical has been replaced by

the formal and the methodical. Marxians look at religion as playing a vital role in supporting the values and goals of the bourgeoisie and the ruling class (Winter 1977, 35). According to Marx, '...the final demise of religion as a form of consciousness could only be achieved through a transformation of the actual structure of society' (Turner 2011, 7).

Having been churned out of a specific social, historical and political context, each religion has its own locus. For example, Hinduism emphasizes non-violence, Buddhism dwells on compassion, Christianity's crux is love, and Islam highlights justice and brotherhood (Engineer 1999, 43). However, one cannot deny that all the religions universally appeal to humanitarianism and share a complementary relationship with one another. While Buddhism bases its values on compassion, it is still reliant on the pacifist world-view that defines the Hindu philosophy. The Sufi school of thought looks at the Creator more as a personal, affectionate being than an austere doctrinaire body, which draws on Christian ideals. Seen this way, a common thread of human experience, agency and consciousness runs through all the religions in the world, coordinating each cult's incipience, evolution and decadence. According to Satchidananda Dhar, the deep-seated significance of religion lies in its

ability to sift divinity from animality and appeal to the humanitarian values, which 'shall be a common ground of union in all aspects of life. And religion and religious outlook alone can foster true unity and integration between man and man' (Dhar 1989, 85).

Human, God, and society

It is paradoxical that religion in its early stage is a hothouse of revolutions, whereas propped up by priests and ideologues in its prime, it sustains orthodoxies and ritualistic aspects, endorsing a structure of institutionalism. Paul Siegel observes that the discursive notion of divinity exists as a mode of survival and inspires awe and fear, until it eventually gets absorbed within the hidebound skeleton of dogmas. Gods such as Zeus, Jehovah and Krishna are more like leaders of their respective clans than deities, who are believed to have borne offsprings with human females and revealed earthly traits and follies.

Thus, the concept of God is not divorced from the immediate socio-political relations and enables the formation of faith-based groupings, which are usually combative with one another and build narrow definitions of Self and Other. For example, the gradual transformation of Islam from a tribal alliance to a concrete political structure is realized in the rule that prevents an individual believer from making peace with the 'enemy' without the consent of his Islamist brethren (Siegel 2005, 174). The Brahmanical religion establishes caste gradations by professing that an individual can ascend to a higher caste in the future life by stringently following caste obligations. On the other hand, the birth of Buddhism is coeval with a number of social evils that were fostered under the

Brahmanical law, including monarchic despotism, expansion of kingship at the expense of tribal privilege, and a widespread casteist attitude.

Durkheim reveals how the divinity-mortal relationship ultimately simulates the functioning of a government:

God stands in same relationship to his worshippers as a society to its members (Winter 1977, 27) . . . a society has all that is necessary to arouse the sensation of the divine in minds merely by the power that it has over them. . . . At every instant we are obliged to submit ourselves to rules of conduct we have neither made nor desired, and which are sometimes contrary to our fundamental inclinations and instincts. . . . (28)

That the religious policies of a given geographical space are interlaced with other instantaneous factors is illuminated from the fact that the global expulsion of the Jews due to their usury trade subsequently took a religious expression of hatred, as Jews, as a race, were accused of the crime of deicide (Siegel 2005, 62). The peasant revolt in Alsace (1525) against the Jews and the clergy was fuelled as much by religious issues as by social and economic reasons. In colonial India, historic acts of insurgency, such as the Sepoy Mutiny (1857) and the Khilafat Movement (1919-22) were motivated by the desire for political independence as well as the need to defend one's religious identity. In Germany, Austria and France, the crisis of capitalism followed by the stock market crash (1873) led to a pauperized condition and mass discontent among the petty bourgeoisie, in turn leading to intensification of anti-Semitic feelings and a rise of Catholic socialism. All these illustrations reinforce R.A.L.H. Gunawardana's statement that religion shares

an 'antagonistic symbiosis' with economic and social forces (Gunawardana 1979, 344).

Secularism, and why it does not fit the Indian bill

'Secular' is a French word, whose etymological root traces back to the Latin word *secularis*, as opposed to 'ecclesiastical' (Mishra 1980, 114). Secularization is supposed to be a concomitant of the decline of scope of authority structures, and aid the corrosion of the power of the priestly class. Its accompanying factors are rationalization, individualism, democratic politics and liberal values (Turner 2011, 10). When a society is unified in terms of functional interdependence than traditional integration through common cultural elements, religious creeds become increasingly less significant (Winter 1977, 79, 80). Leibniz, the German founder of French enlightenment, suggested the cosmopolitan virtue of exchanging innate ideas through dialogical critical understanding, which can be seen as an expression of secularism. Further, Martin notes that secularization is actually realizable only when there is a holistic attitude of espousing the diverse patterns of thinking, and submitting to the unpredictable conditions of human life:

Only if we learn to accept the opportunity cost of alternative ideals, and if we accept the need to live with ambiguity, with the ambivalence written into every achievement, and with the elements of determination, limits and sheer arbitrary chaos which enclose and make possible our freedom, order and purpose, only then do we in fact come to terms with the secular (Martin 1969, 47).

In the Western societies, secularism started with the worldly Graeco-Roman

state unsettling the common Christian's loyalty to the emperor and the Pope. Gradually, by eradicating the omnipresent character of the Church, secularism uncoupled the everyday lives of the people from the Church, and post-Reformation, a policy of tolerance was formulated (Verma 1986, 43). While secularism in England was initially a protest movement against the political selfishness of the wealthy and authoritarian theologians that later on took an atheistic turn under the auspices of Charles Bradlaugh and George Holyoake, in France, secularism ushered in after the French Revolution and following Napoleon's civil code. It finally made an impression after Waldeck Rousseau's passing the education bill under the Third Republic. In Germany, Ludwig Feuerbach proposed that, rather than having a state that is neutral to religions, God and His traits need to be secularized and the conventional God rendered redundant. In America, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson and George Washington were proponents of a secular state.

It is not wrong to say that the Western sense of secularism carries a negative connotation, in that it creates a wall between the state and religious activities. Notwithstanding their anti-religious positions, some cases of convinced scientism, dogmatism and communism, which are all based on secularist values, also have a religious element entrenched in them. Alternatively, Protestantism extends religious concepts through the paradoxical method of uncoupling the Church from the State, and propagates itself by devaluing the priest and priestly rituals on religious grounds (Martin 1969, 50).

The causations that led to the secularization of Western societies are in no

way analogous to the Indian case of *Sarvadharmā Sambhāvanā* (possibility of coexistence of different religions), as can be observed during the Bhakti Movement, or under the reigns of rulers like Akbar and Dara Shikoh (Hasan 1996, 203). According to Wendy Doniger, 'Rather than characterizing the ritual world of the *Rig-Veda* as worldly, one might do better to characterize the non-ritual Vedic world as sacred' (Doniger 1981, 229). In India, the essence of religious principles lies in coalescing a moral community around certain beliefs and practices, and is regardless of the Western values of objective reasoning and positing of man as a cognitive animal. Unlike the Church whose cosmic theories had been disproved by inventors like Galileo Galilei, the eastern religions were not at odds with science, and so would not be seen as a hurdle to the path of secularization by way of scientific advancement (Devi 2002, 64). Even prior to the crystallization of a scientific self-image of the Indian nation-state, the idea of human community here was shaped around religious lores and traditions. Contrarily, some scholars understand Indian religion as '... an artifact of historical sources ... people's ideas and behaviour were shaped ... by an underlying network of power relations, not religion' (Copland et al. 2012, 16).

Showing how the idea of modernity and religion in India are not entirely removed from one another, Turner observes that India has at least partially succeeded in 'avoiding the dismemberment of important ritual types, and [they] have incorporated into [their] ritual performances many of the issues and problems of modern urban living and succeeded in giving them religious meaning' (Turner 2003, 131). Until the

present day, many Indian religious institutions thrive in the form of a bureaucratized and multipurpose complex around the sanctum sanctorum. They are a self-sufficient structure, comprising a kitchen for cooking, a tank for bathing, and specific allotted places for the development of education through lectures, discourses and publication of souvenirs, and additionally provide accommodation to young scholars at a waived fee. Such an institution is responsible for the production of knowledge, employment of skilled labours, and sometimes even financing of the needy, such as the poor orphans and the aged. It reserves a dual capacity of influencing the Indian society—through instilling fundamentalism and corruption, as well as through supporting philanthropism and social service.

Because 'secularism' is not an indigenous concept and the pre-colonial Indian government systems were based either on Vedic or Islamic treatises, it is not perfectly translatable to Indian languages, and leads to an array of misplaced meanings, which range between agnosticism and religious neutrality. In his research, Satchidananda Dhar shows that the *Dharmashāstras* and *Arthashāstras*, which offer practical methods towards education, trade, commerce, economic progress and justice, have always formed the edifice of the Indian governments, monarchic or otherwise (Dhar 1989, 21). The Jātakas also discuss the qualities of members who would constitute an assembly of justice, and in the Purānic myths Nārada is described as having emphasized the importance of elderly people, *dharma* and truth in the court of law (Dhar 1989, 24). Louis Dumont's study argues that secularism in ancient India faced a setback when religion

was uncoupled from administration, resulting in the sacerdotal Brahmin elites deciding the legitimacy and limits of 'that which fell into the realm of the secular' for the warrior-noble Kshatriya elites (Dumont 1962). S. L. Verma claims that secularism in India has not been amply probed in line with the support of the elites and has, therefore, frozen into a stereotype without a precise definition. What is more, Dina Nath Mishra asserts that the parliamentary secularism in India makes an individual skeptic of all religions instead of cultivating a sense of respect for the religious 'Other' (Mishra 1980, 112).

India experienced British secularism during colonial contact under the rule of Queen Victoria, whose government purported to be neutral in religious matters, and through the system of English education (Verma 1986, 45). However, the 'divide and rule' policy played by the British colonizers prevented the adaptation of secularism in India in the Western sense of the term. While the post-colonial Indian Constitution chose secularism to keep together the various faiths within a multilingual, multiethnic nation state, the pre-colonial Indian subcontinent had always celebrated a peaceable climate, where an individual participated in religious activities and prayed to different gods, irrespective of his/her own communal identity.

According to T. N. Madan: 'The principal question . . . could be considered to be not whether Indian society will eventually become secularized as Nehru believed it would, but rather whether it is desirable that it should become so and by what means' (Madan 2009, 295). In Mushirul Hasan's words, ' . . . Western concept of state and civil society is

intrinsically out of place in India where . . . religion is not just recognized as a mediating force in political and social affairs but legitimized through private and state intervention' (Hasan 1996, 201-2). Furthermore, arguing that there is inequality and constitutive violence to the statist projects of secularism, Ashis Nandy points out that secularism inferiorizes other schools of thought and insists that only it can practise pluralism, and that secularism can even justify the colonial apparatus (Skaria 2009, 181). He states that the ideology and politics of secularism: ' . . . have more or less exhausted their possibilities and . . . we may now have to work a different conceptual frame which is already visible at the borders of Indian political culture' (Nandy 1988, 85).

The inherent complexity of the Indian society is observable in the fact that the communities are not homogeneous, either at the national or the local level. When politically studying the Indian scenario, it is less productive for the leaders to mobilize the people solely along communitarian lines. Depending on individual circumstances, the focus of identification shifts from communal to caste and class factors (see Gould 1966, 51-73). In the South Asian context, the problem aggravates with several absolutist ideologies coexisting simultaneously. The resistance of the Muslim communities to the Uniform Civil Code points to the fact that no two religions undergo the same process to become secular, and what is 'religion' and 'morality' for one may not be the same for others. This is reminiscent of Winter's remark that 'theism' is 'one of the many category of things and beings regarded as sacred by one or another human grouping' (Winter 1977, 24).

Jawaharlal Nehru suggests that during Akbar's reign, Tulsidās was more popular than the Mughal emperor himself (Nehru 2004). Likewise, Engineer studies several cases that bear out to the layered and syncretic spirit of India. The Shaivite poetess, Laleshwari, and the Sufi saint, Rishi Nuruddin, for example, both of whom belong to a common Kashmiri ethnicity, share a similar style of poetry writing. While a number of *ulemas* of the Firang Mahli order have been worshippers of Lord Krishna, the Meo Muslims of Rajasthan and Haryana are highly Hinduized in their customs of celebrating Holi and Diwali, and solemnizing marriages through circumambulation of fire. On the other hand, Brahmin caretakers have been in charge of several mausoleums in the past, such as the Haji Malang Baba's Sufi mausoleum (Engineer 1999, 177). Both Dhar and Engineer note that 'purification' movements to either rid Indian Islam of local non-Muslim influences, or the Hindutva parties' attempts at curtailing religious freedom and binding all faiths into one for the sake of political and economic benefits, have repeatedly proven ineffectual.

Gandhi confessed that he would, if needed, die for his own religion; yet, he also considered religion as a personal affair, such that he would never support a theocratic government in India. Rāma, for Gandhi, was not a Hindu god, but symbolized the supreme truth and the law that governs everything, in other words, the *Sachchidānanda* (ibid., 238). However, as a flip side to his egalitarian vision, he combined religious spirit with the spirit of *Swadeshi*. According to him, just as one ought to restrict oneself to the service of one's immediate surroundings, one also must confide only to one's ancestral

religion, even if at the cost of amending its defects (Skaria 2009,189). In the immediate decades after independence, the Congress tried to fortify the secularist framework by electing three presidents from among the minorities—Badrudin Tyebji from the Muslims, Dadabhai Naoroji from the Parsis, and Woomesh Chandra Bonnerjea from the Christians. However, these strategies did not put the minority-majority question to rest, and cannot be equated on the same plane with the teachings of Kabir, Dādu, Nānak, Vivekananda and Ramakrishna, which appealed to dissolving religious differences and bringing about religious synthesis. Before the cracking of the subcontinent, leaders of the Muslim League and the Congress played the religious rather than the national card, and dismissed the likelihood of meeting at a 'common platform' (Joshi and Josh 1992, 281). Under such circumstances, the reformist approach appeared as nothing short of 'creation of a new ethic, a doctrine which would give the 'sanction of orthodoxy' to newly emerging feelings and moods' (ibid., 274). These 'feelings and moods' mostly came up in the form of affected nationalistic and religious rhetorics, shrouding vested interests, both at the level of the individual and the collective. In today's India, these rhetorics are visible through the furnishing of a definitive history of different faiths and museumization of sacred sites to draw compatibility between the ancient tenets and modern science (see Brady Williams 2001). *Secularism in the present-day India as a reflection of the Western model, then, frequently becomes a pretext for floating ideas that are crafted towards benefiting personal interests, by foraying the phantasm called religion.* ■

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