

On the Question of Secularism

SWAMI SUPARNANANDA

Secularism is never defined as materialism (*vastuvād*) or atheism (*nāstikyavād*) in the dictionaries. Only the intellectuals with a materialist point of view think so. The dictionaries declare that secularism relates to worldly or temporal matters as distinct from the spiritual or eternal. Such a definition assumes that a man has both secular and sacred dimensions. When he goes to a church and prays, he feels he is sacred and when he practises medicine or works in the field and factories, he is secular. Can one have such a split-personality? Swami Vivekananda never admitted of such a notion. One is an integrated 'whole', rather than having one part secular and the other part sacred. So a better definition was needed. Swamiji has given that in his own unique way. Secularism is not a means of handling matter, it is sacrificing man for matter. Man has a divine dimension; his material existence as physical body and mind (and also in its still subtler form, intellect) is false in that it changes over time like all material things. It is only the inner spirit or divinity that is changeless in us. Unfortunately, except Vedanta, no other faiths or sects either from Hinduism or from the semitic religions concern themselves with this undying aspect of our being. They take a dual existence of Reality for granted. Like the atheists, they look upon man as a combination of material things or forces. But unlike the atheists they accept the existence of God, either (i) with a form, or (ii) having attributes but no form or image. But unlike

the Vedantins they would never accept the idea of the Reality being without a form and an attribute (*Nirguna-Nirākāra*). From this standpoint, we can infer that Vedanta in its highest form does not accept the secular view of existence. Everything, matter and non-matter alike, here is pulsating with life. *Sarvam Khalvidam Brahman*.

The Ultimate Truth

Our question is: Can we not build our education, culture, art, literature and social institutions, in a word, our life on the foundation of this highest truth of Vedanta? In fact, it has to be. We wrongly place emphasis on the material aspect of reality and protect our individual faith by hedging it around with mutually conflicting notions. Following this erroneous view of existence, we engage ourselves in developing a system of social ethics, moral values, educational philosophy solely with reference to the immediate or the present life and not anything that precedes it. We scrupulously avoid religion or spirituality. Vedanta accepts spirit as indestructible (*Avināshi*) or Ātman, while physical body is subject to destruction and hence *Anātman*. The same spirit moves from one body to another in order to perfect itself. In other words, we need different bodies in different births to perfect ourselves. For most of us, our present body is not enough, it would die. But the spirit is deathless. It goes out and finds out another body according to the degrees of knowledge and merit acquired in the preceding birth/births, until it becomes perfect. This idea

has been echoed by Tagore in his song beginning with: '*Āmārey tumi ashesh korecho emani leelā tava/ phurāye phele ābār bhorecho jibana nava nava*'. (You have made me infinite, such is your play / You have emptied me out to fill me with newer lives.) In modern times, Swamiji wanted to usher in a mega-renaissance based on the Vedantic principles of (i) Freedom, (ii) Equity and (iii) Sacredness of human personality. The old concept of renaissance for the attainment of freedom, equality and fraternity could not take root because of this wrong notion of human nature.

A Mega-renaissance

The Vedantic concept of freedom is freedom from the senses, not freedom of the senses. Its goal is to make us control our love for enjoyment and grow in renunciation. Vedantic concept of equity stems from the idea of unity in existence. Ātman alone exists in all as an undying element. So, the Lord as the divine principle resides in every heart. Every heart is the abode of the Lord, Brahman. We are all related. Even the earthworm is the Lord Buddha involved and the Buddha is that earthworm evolved. Hence, equality has a deeper meaning and we should look upon nobody as inferior or superior. We cannot exploit anybody, govern anybody. All that we can do is to serve and sacrifice. To bring equity in society we have to be unselfish. And only the completely unselfish men are spiritually advanced. Then comes the Vedantic concept of sacredness of human personality. From the very beginning of our life, we are in search of greatness. We do not know what it is like and where we can get it. But we do want it sincerely. Our earnest desire is to perceive the sacredness, the divinity in our hearts. All men and women would be equal

on the physical plane when they are aware of the purity within their hearts. It is not an outside phenomenon. God is not outside us. When we are pure, unselfish, we live for others. Others are our very own. Our society has to grow with these three concepts culled from the Vedanta. The great socio-political thinkers of the past could not fulfil this goal of Renaissance because they rejected the sacredness of human personality and accepted man as matter. Swamiji set aright their mistakes and declared: Society has to pay homage to this Truth or perish.

We pause and ask: Is this the alternative that Tagore had suggested? Obviously no. The only effective path leading to regeneration has been given by Swamiji himself and none else. Man is Divine—the most despicable man in society is no less so. Serve him; love him as the manifestation of the Divine. By embracing this philosophy, one can flourish in a joyous venture, envisaged as 'Sevāyoga' by Swamiji and 'Sarvodaya' by Mahatma Gandhi. What is needed is a kind of leadership that may take into account the true import of the prescription given by Swamiji and then put the ideas into practice. For regeneration, we need not go back to the dangerous atheism which eats into the very vitals of the dignity in man. But where is the leadership? Swamiji has given us the life-giving message of Vedanta in clear terms unlike the Brāhmos and set the wheel of work in motion. We want a Faith where every faith has its place. There is no condemnation of any faith, rather acceptance of all, whole-heartedly. We find within the fold of Ramakrishna Mission aspirants from all faiths including the Brāhmo Samaj, who choose to live the monastic life based on these liberal views of religion.

Swamiji himself started it and handed this great task over to us. In the face of tumultuous difficulty, we have to take

pledge to do his biddings. Swamiji established the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897, after his triumphant return from the West. He extensively toured all over India, giving out his clarion call to rebuild the nation on the basis of the Divinity of all life. That was the only solution available to us. The leaders unfortunately did not listen to this great call and the whole nation ran amok with violence and hatred. We did not listen to his life-giving message. In the face of widespread violence in the country, Rabindranath Tagore, out of desperation, wrote in *Pravāsi*, June issue, 1926: This false religion in India we have to burn into ashes and in its place shall spring up pure atheism for our betterment. Then we can rebuild the new India based on theism. We have to burn everything that is irreligious with the fire of atheism first and then rebuild it. I do not find any other way than this.

We painfully notice this call to go back to stark atheism and destroy everything that exists in the interest of a new birth. It was as if the Ganga was being asked to go back to her source at the Himalayas and restart her journey on a different bed. Swamiji initiated his plan of work in 1897 through the foundation of the Ramakrishna Mission. The principles of its workings might have escaped the notice of Tagore even in 1926. Or, Tagore might have deliberately avoided noticing the sea-change in the very essence of the Sanātana Dharma that was being brought about by Swamiji on the basis of the Vedantic truth. He could not see the surging waves of change created by Swamiji by reawakening the old Hinduism from the centuries-old slumber. None can deny today that the modern India is the greatest gift of Swamiji to his country. And he did not criticize us in the least but showed in action that what we need is work and that is to be done in the spirit of service.

The Radical Humanists

So, secularism has to be construed as a form of humanism working for human welfare. It may be construed also as radical humanism if the word ‘radical’ is interpreted in its basic meaning of fundamental truth in unselfish service. The word ‘fundamental’ is to be strictly distinguished from ‘fundamentalism’ which has been coined to mean having some fixed dogma for the protection of a cult or sect. Otherwise, religions, sects or creeds are welcome with their respective fundamental principles. Nobody should have any quarrel with them. We feel ‘Maulavād’ or fundamentalism has a questionable element in it. It fosters dogma, caring for no reason.

The present writer had an interesting experience in a seminar on ‘Fundamentalism’ once held at the Asiatic Society, Kolkata. He told, among other things, that the protagonists of every religion should be allowed to follow the fundamental truths lived and preached by its founder prophets. Prophets made no mistakes. And hence, there should be no ill-feeling anywhere. In his Presidential address Prof. Shibnarayan Roy mercilessly criticized this opinion of mine and said that he had no intention to go back to fundamentalism of any kind. He railed against the organised religion to which I belonged and proudly proclaimed that he was against it without any compromise. Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Ramakrishna Mission are all organised religions. Prof. Roy then gave his twofold prescription to ease out the problem of fundamentalism, of which the first was eradication of poverty and the second, spread of education.

During lunch-break we sat side by side and I wanted to know in what respect his idea of ‘radical’ was different from the fundamental teachings of our prophets. He

became furious. I enquired how many members he had in the fold of Radical Humanism. He said five or six (in fact, he named a few like Prof. Amlan Datta, Prof. Amiya Bagchi and Prof. Amalendu Dey). I asked, 'After you what?' Annoyed, he replied—'nothing'. I answered, 'How can you afford to let your pet ideas die if you sincerely feel that with these ideas you could do lots of good to people? Organisation is a must, Swami Vivekananda understood that truth long ago.' Then referring to his twofold prescription of poverty eradication and spread of true education, I remarked, 'Sir, affluent and educated families would appreciate your philosophic stand, I mean Radical Humanism, better.' He became all the more furious.

Long before this incident, I came across Sri Sitangshu Chatterjee of Baruipur, a man above 80, who happened to be Prof. Roy's close associate in a Radical Humanism group. He, however, became a convert and used to offer Ramakrishna Kathamrita classes at Sitala Mandir, Baruipur. I had to do that job once in a month. I met him, went to his house too. People used to say, he worked with M. N. Roy as well. He changed while his compatriots did not. Another great Radical Humanist also changed within. He was Prof. Amlan Datta.

The Vice-Chancellor of Visva-Bharati University, Prof. Sujit Basu, had invited me to Santiniketan for a national seminar on education in the 1990s. Prof. Amlan Datta was the Chairman. He spoke well from his standpoint of secularism. After the meeting was over, I met him for clarification of some ideas. My point of view obviously was centred on the sacred element in education which the secularists always opposed. I told him, 'Sir, you could have been my teacher. I have a query. Tagore was a Brāhmo having unswerving faith in Brahman and Ātman. This philosophy

declares that our real nature is divine and, beyond the pale of body, mind and intellect. But our intellectuals have faith only in the secular aspect of man, his body, mind and intellect. At Santiniketan, everywhere we find written, *Satyam, Jnānam, Anantam, Ānandarupam Yadbibhati...* If the Vice-Chancellors of Visva-Bharati do not have faith in Brahman or Ātman, then why do they accept the job here?' He didn't reply, only stared at me. Later, on 13 February 2010 he gave a talk at the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Gol Park, just four days before he passed away on 18 February 2010. The talk was subsequently published in the September 2010 issue of *Udbodhan*. He, in his old age, was very much distressed over the simultaneous death of God and Marx in the secular world and was apprehensive of the future of humanity which he loved so much. He gave out a call to one and all, not based on material aspect of man but on the special quality in man which he called *Manushyatva* or the undying element in man (which Swamiji calls Purity or Divinity). Hitherto the leaders of the Renaissance could not believe in this real nature of man and instead regarded the 'Man' just as he appears. That was why there was an all-round failure in achieving Equality, Freedom and Fraternity. Prof. Dutta with this new approach wanted to address the threefold challenge of the modern world, namely, (i) to protect humanity and combat the nuclear weapon after Hiroshima, (ii) to mitigate global warming and (iii) to address communalism arising out of clashes between Islamic and Western civilizations. But what about the possible solution? Prof. Dutta could not elucidate it except referring to the Special Quality in Man (SQM). Swami Vivekananda's entire life was devoted to this task only. For him, that Special Quality

in Man denoted his divinity. We have to respect all persons with their faiths, customs, ways of life, as his Master Sri Ramakrishna did and thereby create a worldwide awareness of this great philosophy. It is an uphill task. He initiated it and we have to carry it forward.

A way out

The main problem with the secularists is that they do not countenance dogmatism anywhere except in one's adherence to secularism itself. That has become, to all intents and purposes, the 'religion' of the so called secularists. It is equally difficult for the religious people to ignore and reject the fundamental truths preached by the founders of their faiths. In fact, all faiths are in tune with the fundamental preachings of their founders. We have to find out the common bases in them and be ready for continuous dialogues. In fact, Swamiji has done just this and his organization Ramakrishna Mission has been assiduously following in his footsteps in eradicating the mutual distrust and ignorance among religious groups. This is urgently necessary. Otherwise, mutual ignorance would hinder amity and fraternity, leading ultimately to destruction and violence. So, finding out a mutually agreeable space for the existing faiths is an urgent necessity. Swamiji has given that solution in the form of a fourfold principle which has been his greatest contribution to humanity. These are the principles of a Universal Faith:

i) Each Soul is potentially divine or all life is divine. That divinity is common to all has now been accepted by the Christians, the Muslims, the Hindus and others. Swamiji's premise is that nothing is secular, everything is Divine. All bodies are His. Man is God, because every good act leads to the

unfoldment of the divine power in us. We enter the church to become good and pure.

ii) The goal is to manifest this Divinity within, by controlling nature, external and internal. Thus comes a discussion on science and religion. Science is controlling external nature and has already discovered a 'unity' behind the phenomenal world of multiplicity (note the discovery of 'God particles' or quarks). But to bring about equality in mankind is the function of religion. As Ātman or Divinity, we are all one; but different in body, mind and intellect.

iii) Do this either by work (Karma Yoga), or worship (Bhakti Yoga), or psychic control (Rāja Yoga), or philosophy (Jñāna Yoga)—by one or more, or all of these and be free. So, the divinity in us can be made manifest by all of our faculties put together. We have hand to work, heart to love, brain to reason out and mind to introspect or meditate. Here harmony of all the Yogas is suggested.

iv) This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details. Here the Swami keeps intact the doctrines, dogmas, rituals etc. These are the outer coating, outer husk for the protection of the grain. The green mango needs the skin for its fullest ripening. When it is ripe we peel off the skin and enjoy the mango. Skin is necessary as it protects the mango but no longer when it is ripe. This is the meaning of the secondary details as opposed to the primary ones. So, rituals, temples, churches are necessary in the beginning. He says, it is good to be born in a church but it is bad to die there. We have to come out of the cage and be universal—respecting and accepting all people belonging to all faiths. ■

* Swami Suparnanandaji is Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Gol Park.