

## Indian Secularism and Indian Christianity: Continuation of a Dialogue

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#### Introduction:

Anuradha Dingwaney Needham and Rajeshwari Sundaer Rajan, editors of the excellent collection of essays titled, *The Crisis of Secularism in India* identify two aspects of the “crisis” of secularism in India.<sup>1</sup> The first is the attack on the basis of secularism by forces external to it and the other is the failure of secularism to achieve many of its goals of historical transformations.

This essay will look at the challenges Christianity may pose to Secularism in a context where a revitalized and ascendant nationalistic Hinduism attacks secularism as “pseudo- secularism” and a politicized Islam while not directly attacking secularism has remained largely silent about the importance of Secularism in India.

The main thrust of this essay is to show that far from being incompatible with secularism in India, Christianity particularly protestant Christianity (in spite of its miniscule size) “played a disproportionately significant role in shaping Indian secularism, under the British rule”<sup>2</sup> This essay will also suggest that having helped in the emergence and making of Indian secularism, Indian Christianity must continue to engage with it and shape it as it faces unprecedented assaults. Indian Secularism allies need not only be secular scholars and activists. Christian Public Theology has something to contribute, as well.

#### A Stand Off and Suspicion

Attacks on secularism from religious nationalists have increased in the past decade rather than abated in spite of the scorn directed at them by scholars and social activists. Secularism debates in India today should continue to address the concerns and questions of those who give preeminence to their religious identity and see themselves as religious citizens of India first rather than secular citizens. Their religious identity is not just a subaltern one complementary to a secular identity but a primary identity that deals with modernity on its own terms. A democratic environment implies that identity of religious interlocutors of Indian Secularism is considered as deeply shaped by their religion and not just a device they use to negotiate the public space.

But there is still serious distrust about religion playing a serious role in society that is defined as secular. Romilla Thapar in the Ali Asghar Memorial Lecture of August 19, 2015 said “If, however, we wanted secular society, then we should stop identifying ourselves primarily by religion, caste, language and start thinking of ourselves as equal citizens of one nation both in theory and practice.”<sup>3</sup> This implies that those who chosen identity is primarily religious cannot be committed to equal citizenship to all irrespective of these

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<sup>1</sup> Rajan and Needham (2007), Pg. 2

<sup>2</sup> Chatterjee (2011), Pg. 2

<sup>3</sup> Thapar (2015), <http://sacw.net/article11529.html> (Accessed on February 12th, 2016)

religious, caste, and language identities. There is little justification in Indian history for such a sweeping conclusion.

A person's citizenly identity need not be primarily secular in order to protect the Indian Constitution. A secular citizenship is not the only way to deal with the challenges of India's religious fervor and diversity.

Christians in many parts of the world and in India see citizenship of their country as a gift from God. This fact does not weaken their commitment to their country but rather strengthens it. When religious faith is deep and religious identity primary, it will be an empowering resource for good citizenship.

Gayathri Spivak says that "Secularism is too rarefied, too existentially impoverished to take on the thickness of a language. It is a mechanism to avoid violence that must be learned as mere reasonableness. It is as thin as an ID card, not as thick as identity."<sup>4</sup> Secular identity is not deep enough to meet the challenges of Indian citizenship today.

### **A. Christianity and the Making of Indian Secularism**

Nandini Chatterjee's contends that Christians in India in spite of their small numbers' played disproportionately significant role in shaping Indian secularism. It is in the areas of education, personal laws, endowments and politics that protestant missionaries and Indian converts shaped the meaning of Indian Secularism. She disagrees with Gauri Vishwanathan who asserts that the British Imperial project used secularism as a legitimizing device for its rule in a context where religious conflict was allegedly undermining the development of modernity and civilization in India. Chatterjee asserts, and I fully endorse her conclusions that Indian protestant Christians with the full support of the evangelicals in Victorian Britain who were deeply connected with the protestant missionary enterprises in India, shaped the development of India's secularism drawing on their religious convictions. They saw law making and public policy as founded on a universal morality drawn from their Christian convictions. In this their views reflected what was happening in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain.

Chatterjee illustrates her thesis with the role of Christians in passing the Indian Succession Act of 1865 that provided relief to apostates from Hinduism and Islam. The act applied also to Parsis and Brahmos. The insistence that Christian educational institutions must include all religious communities has contributed to the emergence of a universal, religiously diverse educational system that became a bulwark for Indian secularism. The political culture that was shaped by that educational system contributed much to the making of Indian secularism.

Gauri Vishwanathan in *Masks of Conquests* claims that it was in the area of education that Evangelical Christians were able to make their mark in India. Nandini Chatterjee's chapter on St Stephen's College Delhi in her book confirms this. Gauri Vishwanathan also argues that while education was promoted as the dissemination of Christian values in Britain, in India, their Christian compatriots gave it a secular framework. For the colonial enterprise education became a key strategy through which civilizing mission could operate in the name of the secular, maintaining the stance of religious neutrality in the arena of colonial governance.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Rajan and Needham (2007), Pg. 33

<sup>5</sup> Vishwanathan (1989)

My reading of the same history suggests that the Christian missionary engagement in education did not mask its mission intentions under the guise of the secular but genuinely accepted the religious and cultural diversity of India and sought to serve all communities with a bias towards the excluded ones.

The unique effect of Christian missions in recovering Indian languages and promoting them also enabled the recovery of Indian religious texts and contributed to the renewal of Hinduism. This was not an unintended consequence of Christian mission activity. There was awareness of this result and in several cases the encouragement of such a goal.

Secularism was expected to provide a solution to the 'problem' of religious diversity in India – a diversity that existed as a fragile "co-existence" where conflict and violence seemed inevitable. A secular framework was expected to provide peaceful co-existence and co-operation.

Christian efforts of building educational institutions where all communities were welcome and learned together provided in practice what secularism was called to achieve and was often unable to deliver.

Nandini Chatterjee's work is a unique and significant contribution to India's political history that touches on the contribution of Christians at a national level. In the tracing of local routes to Indian secularism she focuses on the contribution of protestant Christianity in India. And her contention that Christians contributed significantly to the making of Indian secularism needs to be taken seriously.

## **B. Christian Contributions to the Understanding of the Secular**

Indian Christian understanding of the secular and secularism was deeply shaped by its development in the West in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. Edward Said's view of colonial history as "cross-currents" and his suggestion that we read history "contrapuntally" is a useful approach to employ here. The traffic of influence was not all one way as Edmund Burke the "father of modern conservatism" admitted.<sup>6</sup> He questioned the claims that governments in Asia were totalitarian and inescapably despotic. His political theory drew on his intersection with British Rule in India. He was a practicing Anglican Christian and his faith shaped his political thinking.

St Augustine's view of the secularism had a profound influence on western Christianity. Saeculum is a time between Christ's resurrection and second coming. It is an ambiguous time, a field of wheat and weeds neither wholly profane or sacred. The kingdom of God and the Kingdom of the world exist side by side. The secular is the mixed time where no single authority dominates. Different authorities contend for power and influence. This led to the turn to the human and the natural that are at the foundation of the secular.

The focus on nature led to the development of a universal natural law with humans possessing rights independent of their civil states. Theories of property rights, liberty, private rights, all developed as active rights based on a view of nature.

Slowly the sacred was essentialized as an external transcendent power. In 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century- Europe, the sacred got associated with the superstitious and reason became the instrument to eliminate

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<sup>6</sup> Refer to Wheelan (1996)

superstition from the public sphere. Conscience as the natural endowment replaced ecclesiastical authority.

Humans were seen as self-conscious creations of history. The world got disenchanting. Humans dominated nature and created nation states that regulate and protect the space where they live, move and flourish.

The above themes shaped the Indian Christian approach with the political sphere in India. The dignity and equal worth of every person founded on a Christian view of personhood led in practice to promote education and medical services for all. The focus on education was to develop good citizens from all religious backgrounds, all castes and languages. Christian engagement in education was about developing citizens and there was much suspicion about the colonial agenda of creating pliant subjects for the Raj.

I contend that Christian involvement in education contributed significantly to the idea of citizenship in India without separating citizens from their traditional identities.

### **C. The Identity and Role of Religious Minority Commissions**

Indians carry their community identities whether they wish to or not.<sup>7</sup> In conversion, Christians chose a religious identity and tried to lose their caste identity. A Christian identity while religious is also recognized as a universal one.

Secularization of society regulates the gradual disappearance of all identities other than that of the citizen – indeed secularization will be accompanied by this process.<sup>8</sup> While caste identities have not disappeared but asserted themselves in the Indian political space, religious identities are also seeking dominance in the current situation. I think the Christian experience of developing its Indian identity can contribute to the debate.

From the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Indian Christian communities were energized, if not empowered by their connectedness with the global Christian community, particularly the powerful colonial nations of the west. While the British Colonial powers in India did not privilege the Christian community in any special way, Indian Christians, a majority of who came from excluded caste backgrounds found security in the connection to the religion of the colonial powers.

Protestant and Orthodox churches globally are usually autonomous, self-governing national churches. Yet they are also part of a global family (Communion) that affirmed their identity in particular Christian traditions. International connections are treasured and provide support. But the Churches see themselves as national churches called to serve their nation. National and international are mutually reinforcing identities where the primary location is national, not international. This provided the basis for political activism of Christians in colonial India and into independent India. Historic Christian demonstrations like the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of South India and North India take their identity as national churches very seriously and engage in the public square. They are heirs to a tradition of engagement that was involved in rights activism, particularly for oppressed communities, in religious freedom activism, in peace building among communities. This is not as sometimes-alleged part of a mission conspiracy to

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<sup>7</sup> Menon (2007), Pg. 136

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, Pg. 134-135

convert the whole of India to Christianity but a Christian calling and duty to the nation. I must admit, some Christian groups often supported by external Christian forces use the language of conversation as the goal of Christianity in India. It is a marketing device and has little salience among mainstream historic churches in India.

It is widely recognized that Christians punch much above their weight when it comes to social engagement. Some years ago a survey showed that Christian engagement in addressing the needs of children at risk in India was disproportionately higher in relation to their population size.

Indian Christians draw inspiration and encouragement from the public sphere engagement of Christians in other nations. Many recognize the need to be contextual and work hard at being contextual.

I contend that all this engagement reflects a commitment to contributions to the issues of the public space based on a desire to demonstrate their identity as citizens of India. By and large, Christians do not engage in their community based politics but seek to contribute across communities. This is part of the Indian Christian identity, an identity that provides the moral framework and spiritual energy for engagement in public issues. Their faith and social engagement are integrally connected.

#### **D. The Moral Basis of Social Institutions**

Romila Thapar voices the apprehension of many Indian secular scholars and activists when she says, “If secularism is removed from the constitution, then democracy becomes a victim with an unthinkable future.”<sup>9</sup> This appears to imply that secularism is the best option for providing a moral basis for social and political institutions. This flies in the face of what the West has experienced in the past 70 years. A secular state based on the decline of religious belief and practices is no longer sustainable in the west and widely regarded as a failure. It was never an option in India.

Even John Rawls appreciated that social political deliberations cannot be deliberated in a language of reason alone leaving religion outside the door of the sanctum of public discourse. While Rawls wanted all to use a language that had a lot of common ground, to suggest that excludes religion is to do injustice to religious discourses that often place a high value on reason. For many Christians, revelation, reason and tradition (tradition as a result of the interaction between revelation and reason over history) is the triple chord that is the basis of its moral formulations. Islam and Hindu Philosophy also place a high value on reason.

Secularization suggests that there are alternative moral sources today, distinct from religious systems. These can be reason, moral sentiments and spiritual imagination. Secularism has a moral framework albeit an immanent one rather than a transcendent one.

Charles Taylor in his monumental work *A Secular Age* contends that a drive to reform is at the heart of western secularization. It is an impulse to reform in individuals so they might apply themselves to creating a better world.

Secular elites “from the U.S. to France, from Turkey to India are today confronting the rise and sometimes hostile demands of public religions,” writes Slavica Kacelic while reviewing Taylor’s work.<sup>10</sup> The demand to

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<sup>9</sup> Thapar (2015), <http://sacw.net/article11529.html> (Accessed on February 12th, 2016)

<sup>10</sup> Kacelic (2008), Pg. 9

contribute to and shape public life by religions is considered a hostile and merely power grabbing exercise by such elites.

Very often the secular elite do not see the reforming impulse in religions. Protestant Christianity sees itself as in a perpetual reformation "Semper Reformanda". In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Hinduism generated nearly 900 reform movements that dominated the Hindu religious landscape. Such reforming movements also contributed to the making of secularism in India. My sense is that the unfortunate tension and conflict between secular elites and religious nationalists of Hindutva threatens the reform impulse of Hinduism and is in danger of eroding it.

It is here that we need to encourage the active participation of religions in the public square in India as that engagement, keeps alive their reformist impulse and enables it to flourish.

Christian engagement in public life and its contributions to public policy are an expression of its commitment to its own continuing reformation.

### **E. Dialogue and Engagement between Christianity and Indian Secularism**

I highlight three areas where dialogue between Indian secularism and Christianity could be fruitful and mutually enriching.

#### **1. The Nature of Human Personhood.**

A deeper understanding of citizenship is possible if citizens are not just seen as subjects of a state but human persons first. The understanding of rights, of equality of justice and freedom is the deeper and richer when we consider human personhood as the source of such rights and entitlements.

Christian political thinking has reflected a great deal on human personhood particularly catholic social teaching. This is a rich treasure to draw on in relating personhood to secularism. The belief that modernity would enable human persons to shed religious sentiments, religious imagination and religious convictions now lies shattered. Humans continue to relate to the transcendent and will not reduce everything to the immanent. A secular person is not by definition devoid of religion. By the same token a religious person can engage with the secular at a deep level. It is this engagement that Christian contribution can foster.

#### **2. Another area of Christian contribution is the nature of community and diversity**

A naturalistic view of diversity sees diversity in human communities as reflecting the diversity of nature. The focus is not on unity or common ground but on the legitimacy of every diverse expression of human existence. It does not apply ethical or moral criteria to assess any community.

This view often fails to recognize that diversities are sometimes created, organized, socially legitimized and legalized. It is even suggested that they have always existed and powerful communities have hidden them from view. They are not created but emerge from their forced invisibility. This may be true of some but not so of increasingly new diversities that are being created in contemporary times.

A naturalistic view of diversity has no mechanism to assess the value of any diversity that presents itself and tends to accept all as expressions of Nature and its creativity. It must accept its demands for rights and entitlements.

Non-western cultures have developed their own particular approaches to diversity. The struggle in India today is the universalization of a particular religious identity stretched to include all persons who have their origins in India as the Hindu homeland. So diversity is permitted on the acceptance of a common Hindu identity, even if it is presented sometimes as an overarching canopy rather than primary. I see some parallels of this among Christians also when dealing with diversities in their communities. Secularism in India had little to contribute to the challenge of diversity in India except to insist on equality of all communities. How do diverse communities coexist, respect each other and enable all to flourish is still a work in progress where the Christian understanding of Reconciled Diversity can make a significant contribution.

3. Another area where Christian contribution can be significant is in the understanding and practice of democracy. Modern democracies are based on two pillars. One, politics as a discourse of public reason and two universal suffrages– the idea of a collective will, the will of the “people”. Public reason is the way of debating and dialoging between groups with diverse and competing opinions and views. This leads to consensus and to co-operation rather than an unbridgeable disagreement and even violence.

It’s an approach of reasoned respect. It is not about the content of a concept like justice or equality but procedures that ensure justice and equality that participate in the debate. John Rawls is best associated with the concept of public reason. Rawls central concern is how those with differing conceptions of the good life can live together in polity and provide justification for the use of coercive political forms in terms acceptable to one another.

The goal of public reason is not to arrive at a common truth but a consensus that is workable. It is to practice consensus not to live out a unity of understanding and views. Charles Taylor believes that a political ethic can be constructed without recourse to religion but based on political principles, law, public behavior, and relationships and that could provide the basis for consensus in a diverse and plural society. Behind such a view is still an assumption about a Natural Law that has the potential for universal applicability. Such a view of natural law is much contested in political theory.

The struggles with diversity, consensus and truth in Christian political thinking and traditions can be a useful source in dealing with similar issues in India.

#### 4. Political Power:

Marcel Gauchet’s brilliant, if speculative history of religion *The History of Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion* Princeton-, Princeton University Press 1999, argues that prophecy oriented religions shaped the idea of a monotheistic deity transcended from the world but also active in human history through human communities bound to God through worship and word. This enabled human beings to be politically engaged in dominating and transforming public life.

Hence, the understanding of power in society developed with divine power distant from human activity but still shaping it. Gauchet exegete’s biblical history to suggest that the understanding of power was profoundly political in the Bible. The giving of the Mosaic Law and making it pre-eminent to human life displaced the divinity of human Kings and Rulers and made them subject to a universal divine law. In the New Testament, the way Jesus dealt with political power was to privilege power from below as the divinely approved way of exercising power in society. His disciples were to be “servants” not “lords”.

Such an understanding of political power as the mainstream of Christian theology continues to shape Christian engagement with politics that is primarily prophetic and exercised on behalf of those at the bottom of society. This is a key contribution Christians continue to make.

### **Conclusion**

The goal of religious persons is not to shape secularism but to produce citizens for the country who can live in harmony with their neighbors and build flourishing communities and a strong nation. The Indian constitution defines our country as a secular nation. It is imperative that secularism and religion engage with one another for nation building respecting the gifts each bring to the discourse.

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