

## Secularism and Its Confusingly Diverse Meanings

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[Material compiled by Dr. Edlin from a variety of sources and personal contacts]

### Background.

- In an increasingly globalised world, it is important to remember that differing socio-cultural experiences, even among Christians, have generated significantly different vocabularies. Consequently, even exactly the same words can have widely different meanings and implications. If not understood, this variance can result in misunderstandings and confusion.
- An example of this variance is how the concept of the secular, and secularism, is understood in some western countries compared to some non-Western countries.

### The Western Experience

- Though some might describe the western experience as being post-secular, at the popular level in countries like the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States, secularism continues to present a significant negative challenge to the gospel, particularly in key social institutions such as schools. Western popularised secularism, sometimes seen as being akin to secular humanism, in a Post-Enlightenment sense, has come to be understood as the belief that all of life is to be explained and lived on the basis purely of naturalistic forces, absent of the expectation of any concept of transcendence or the supernatural.
- In this context, frequent claims by non-Christian educators and media commentators in the West can be found that demand public education be kept “free of religious interference” by being structured along avowedly secular lines. In this way, it is claimed, secularisation of the classroom will remove the divisiveness of religion and will create universally appealing schools and colleges. Such is the power of this trend for example, that in Europe, the Council of Europe’s Parliamentary Assembly asserted that any mention of the concept of intelligent design should be barred from discussion in all European schools *any subject area* (science, history, current affairs etc) except in religious education – imagine the outcry if such a directive was made concerning evolutionism!
- The monumental fallacy behind this western perspective is that secularism is not a religious ideology. In fact, when the Meriam-Webster dictionary’s definition of a religion is considered (“a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held with ardour and faith”), it is obvious that western secularism is a major non-theistic religion in its own right. Thus when schooling is made secular, rather than barring religion

from the classroom, in effect what is happening is that education is being given over to the totalitarian control of one religious group (i.e. secularism), thus acting as a persecutor of all other genuine religious beliefs. In fact, leading post-modern secularists such as Richard Rorty have been quite open and vocal that this eradication of the truths of other religions is secularists' deliberate, intention [see Rorty, R. (2000). *Universality and truth*. In R. Brandom (Ed), *Rorty and his critics*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 21-22].

- Therefore, in the West, whether intentional or otherwise, secularism is an example of oppressive and exclusive religious extremism.

### The Indian Experience

- In India, rather than secularism being the destroyer of religious freedom, since Independence, secularism in India has been a vital *protector* of religious freedoms and diversity. Contemporary attacks against secularism by mainstream groups in India today threaten national cohesion, harmony, and the very identity of what it means to be Indian. The apparent rejection of secularism, in favour of nationalistic Hindutva, has led to the dramatic rise of persecution of Christians and other non-Hindu groups across the country.
- The purpose of this paper, briefly and in general, non-academic terms, is to explore and explain the distinctive nature of secularism as it has developed in India. Without such an understanding, Western Christians will not comprehend the meaning and application of “secular” as used by their Indian brethren, and vice versa.

## 1. History & The Development of Indian Secularism

### a. Pre-British Colonialism

- In its initial iteration, the term “Hindu” initially appears to have been a socio-geographic concept, referring to groups of people living around the Indus river in modern Pakistan and northern India (Doniger, *The Hindus*, 2009, p.30). The word Hindu itself is a derivation of Sindhu, the Sanskrit name for the Indus river.
- The term initially appeared in ancient documents around 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.
- Around the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, the term Hindu began to be recognised as having religious connotations, and by the 17<sup>th</sup> century it was being used to distinguish between the indigenous people and foreigners or Muslims.
- The Hindu religion (or Sanatana Dharma) has many different shapes to it. There is no universally agreed sacred canon (though most Hindus revere the Vedas as sacred texts), no codified universal creed, no founder, and a variety of viewpoints about deity. There are widely accepted Hindu beliefs about Dharma (ethics), Kama (sensual pleasure), Karma (linked to reincarnation), and Varnas (the caste system).

### b. The British in India

- In the 18th century the term Hinduism was introduced into the English language to denote religious and cultural traditions synonymous with India. But given India's huge geographical extent, it is not surprising that the Anglicisation of the term was very general, covering a wide variety of

beliefs and traditions – with the primary common denominator being its geographical synonymity with the Indian subcontinent.

- Because the term Hindu represents a synthesis of a variety of traditions indigenous to India, it has become a rallying point for contemporary, post-colonial nationalism, as we will see later on.
  - In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the British East India Company expanded British influence over India, a rule transferred to the British Crown after the 1857 Indian Rebellion. The country was unified via consistent colonial rule and infrastructure expansion (notably railways).
  - In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, anti-colonial sentiments increased across India. Indian political parties (India National Congress, All India Muslim League) were formed, and some local representation came about. Calls for Swaraj (self-government) increased, led by Ghandi and others.
  - Indian bravery in WWII gave global recognition to the Indian independence cause. The British oversaw Partition, and India gained independence in 1947, with its own Constitution coming into effect on 26 January 1950.
- c. Framing of the Indian Constitution – its Deliberate Secular Declaration
- Two of the influential members of the Constituent Assembly that drafted the Indian Constitution, were Jawaharlal Nehru and Herendra Coomar Maviankar. Though a Christian, Maviankar was widely respected across India. Nehru, who became the first Prime Minister of India, was educated in England (Trinity College Cambridge). These scholarly Indian leaders were exposed to Judeo-Christian ideas of freedom and tolerance, ideas that came to be reflected in their new constitution.
  - Though 85% of Indians were Hindu of some variety, with encouragement from Nehru, Maviankar and others (including Mahatma Ghandi), it was agreed that India should not declare itself to be a Hindu nation, but should remain officially secular, recognising the freedom of practice and proselytization for all religious communities.
  - The specific inclusion of the term “secular” into the Preamble of the Indian Constitution occurred in the 42nd Amendment, enacted in 1976. It was designed to save the country from religious partisanship, and thus foster harmony, peaceful co-existence, and freedom of religion for all. This also allowed state governments across India to intervene in religious affairs, and offer special support to minority religions in their regions, in order to maintain religious diversity (different from the separation of church and state concept in the US for example).
  - Nehru led the Congress party, and was opposed by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (the BJP party of today).
  - => *for India, in the post-colonial period and until recent times, secularism has been a positive force, a bulwark against religious extremism, and a protector of religious freedom.*

## 2. Current Trends & the Decline of Secularism

Contemporary India has been polarized along religious lines with the advent of the Hindu nationalist political

party to power in 2014 with an absolute majority. Hindu nationalism is an ideology that [rejects secularism and] seeks to create a Hindu *rashtra* (nation) by redefining 'Indianness' on the basis of religion and culture. It is a hegemonic attempt to essentialize and homogenize India as a Hindu nation. [This has fostered]...the systematic sowing of hatred and targeted violence against the Christian communities, particularly in Gujarat and Orissa. [Prabhu Singh (2017). *Surfing the Third Wave of Missions in India*]

a. BJP Party and Post-Colonial Nationalism

- Communalism is a term used in India to describe the increasingly vocal movement that calls for the abandonment of secularism, and its replacement with a strident, overt, Hindu nationalism. This is seen by its proponents as a sign of India finally “coming of age”, becoming its own nation, and not a pale imitation of some previous colonial regime.
- Saffronisation, Hindutva, and Hindu communalism have been inherently accepted in much of India’s public education (see cartoon). As Engineer reports in 2004, “Our textbooks at both primary and higher levels are thoroughly contaminated by communal [Hindutva] outlook.”



[Illustration found in Ganapathy et al (2015), *50 Shades of Saffron*, page 1.]

- This revisionist process, though controversial among some academics, has expanded in recent years, with textbooks in states like Rajasthan in 2016 being re-written to highlight and proclaim as truth, Hindu mythology. Writing in 2015, Tripathi cites the following example of this mythology:
  - [Hindutva proponents] claimed that the Wright brothers did not build the first plane, flown for the first time in 1903. According to the claim, that invention goes back 7000 years and was recorded in the ancient Hindu text “Rigveda”, more than 3000 years ago. The ancient mythological aircraft was built by a sage, Maharishi Bharadwaj, had ‘40 small engines and a flexible exhaust system which a modern aviation cannot even approach’. India’s environment minister and BJP spokesman, Prakash Javadekar, put his official stamp of approval on the claim. <http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/11/02/saffronisation-of-india/>
- In May 2014, the BJP party won the national elections and formed government. Since then. It has gained more power in state elections, including the recent March 2017 win in India’s most populous state, Uttar Pradesh.

b. Hindutva and Saffronisation

- Leaders of the BJP party, in effect have called for India to become a Hindu theocracy, with a special place being given to this Hinduisation (often called saffronisation after the colour of the garments of Hindu religious devotees) in education – along with fascinating revisions of education and history (see Tripathi quotation above). Secularism, and its defence of religious freedom, is out. Hindutva, and its partisan policies, is in.
- The Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, has his popularity grounded in communalism and the Hindutva movement, though he may be uncomfortable with the radicalism of some Hindutva proponents.

3. Contemporary Consequences – The Rise of Religious Intolerance and Religious Persecution

- Since the 2014 elections and the effective replacement of secularism with Hindu nationalism, religious violence against minorities in India has increased. Churches have been burned, and even elderly nuns have been raped.
- Sanskrit, more of a liturgical Hindu form of writing rather than an India-wide type, is being advocated by the BJP government as another nationalism recovery tool, but it is criticised by some as a mere mask for yet another Hindutva imposition – especially given that Sanskrit is not India's official language, is spoken by less than 1% of the country (mainly Hindu priests), and there are almost no speakers/writers of Sanskrit in many Indian states.
- Compassion International, a Christian aid group that for over 50 years has provided help to tens of thousands of impoverished Indian children through a network of local Indian personnel, closed its operations in India in March 2017. The BJP government blocked Compassion from receiving overseas donations (its primary funding source), forcing it to close. Indian human rights watchers have accused the Indian government of selectively targeting non-Hindu charities because, "Hindu organisations are somehow [seen as being] more objective and non-religious than Muslim or Christian - which is ridiculous," reports a major news source. [ABC News, 10 March 2017]
- India has risen to No 15 on the 2017 World Watch List of countries that persecute Christians, up from 31 four years ago. It is estimated that a church was burnt down or a cleric beaten on average 10 times a week in India in the year to 31 October 2016, a threefold increase on the previous year. [The Guardian, 11 January 2017]
- We note however, that this persecution has not stopped the growth of Christianity in India. For example, the Calvary temple, an evangelical non-denominational church in Hyderabad, has over 150,000 weekly attendees, and has been claimed by some to be the fastest growing church in the world!

Conclusion: Depending on the national context, secularism can be seen as both the protector (India) and destroyer (the West) of religious freedom. In India secularism has been a bulwark against religious extremism, but in the West, secularism is an example of religious extremism.