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Secularism in Its Place

T. N. MADAN

This is the text, with a few verbal modifications, of a lecture delivered by T. N. Madan at the President's Panel in Honor of the Fulbright Fortieth Anniversary Program, on the occasion of the 1987 meeting of the Association of Asian Studies in Boston. T. N. Madan has invigorated the social sciences in India for many years by his research, writing, and teaching. As an author he has written on such themes as Hindu culture, culture and development, ethnic pluralism, family and kinship, and the professions. As editor of *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, he has attracted to its pages distinguished research and writing from an international pool of contributors. This achievement is related to his capacity to combine discriminating intellectual taste with a friendly capacity to insinuate the journal into the publishing program of outstanding social scientists. It is also related to the fact that his anthropological understanding is combined with a wide-ranging methodological sympathy for other social sciences as well as the humanities.

The paper was delivered at a moment when the idea of secularism, entrenched in the Indian Constitution by legislators who had experienced the chaos of communal conflict in 1946–47, is again being raised. The secular settlement, elaborated in the shadow of partition, deprived the politicization of religious identities of legitimacy. But this settlement has weakened. Contrary to the expectations of a rationalist social science, economic growth and the breakdown of previously settled relations among local communities and classes have led to the revival of religious identities and to their expression in public and conflictual forms. These circumstances have led to a vigorous debate about how to understand and how to address the new conflicts.

The debate follows, to an extent, earlier channels of argument elaborated in the nationalist era. Jawaharlal Nehru's secularism rested on the notion that religion is an erroneous view of the cosmos that will yield to more rational understanding as scientific thinking and economic growth advance. This position entails the construction of an edifice of public law that is applicable to all persons and an edifice of politics that recognizes individual, not group, identities. Mohandas Gandhi's secularism rested on the notions that all religions are true, that they give meaning to the moral life, and that Indian society can be built on a community of religious communities. The policy implications of this position are more responsive to group identities. Although Professor Madan's argument does not rest on the same ontological premises as Gandhi's, his position is closer to Gandhi's than to Nehru's. He

argues that where religion persists as a powerful element in personal identity, secular
policy cannot build on a rationalist avoidance of religious community but must take
it into account.

Susanne Hoeber Rudolph

By asking me to speak to you here this evening, you have done me an honor, and
I am grateful for it. I also know that you expect me to say something worthy
of discussion: of my ability to do so I am doubtful, but I will try. You will have to
show me great indulgence, for the theme I have chosen, namely the prospects of
secularism in India, is not only of immense significance but also very complex, and
the time at my disposal is very limited. I will take a great deal for granted and plunge
straight into my subject.

We live in a world which we call modern or which we wish to be modern.
Modernity is generally regarded as both a practical necessity and a moral imperative,
a fact and a value. When I say this I am not using the word "modern" in one of
those many trivial senses which I trust we have by now left behind us. Thus, by
modernity I do not mean a complete break with tradition. Being modern means
larger and deeper things: for example, the enlargement of human freedom and the
enhancement of the range of choices open to a people in respect to things that matter,
including their present and future life-styles. This means being in charge of oneself.
And this, you will recognize, is one of the connotations of the process of secularization.

You will recall that the word "secularization" was first used in 1648, at the end
of the Thirty Years' War in Europe, to refer to the transfer of church properties to
the exclusive control of the princes. What was a matter-of-fact statement then became
later, after the French Revolution, a value statement as well: on November 2, 1789,
Talleyrand announced to the French National Assembly that all ecclesiastical goods
were at the disposal of the nation, as indeed they should have been. Still later, when
George Jacob Holyoake coined the term "secularism" in 1851 and led a rationalist
movement of protest in England, secularization was built into the ideology of prog-
ress. Secularization, though nowhere more than a fragmentary and incomplete process,
has ever since retained a positive connotation.

As you know, "secularization" is nowadays generally employed to refer to, in the
words of Peter Berger, "the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed
from the domination of religious institutions and symbols" (1973:113). While the
inner logic of the economic sector perhaps makes it the most convenient arena for
secularization, other sectors, notably the political, have been found to be less amenable
to it. It is in relation to the latter that the ideology of secularism acquires the most
salience.

Now, I submit that in the prevailing circumstances secularism in South Asia as
a generally shared credo of life is impossible, as a basis for state action impracticable,
and as a blueprint for the foreseeable future impotent. It is impossible as a credo of
life because the great majority of the people of South Asia are in their own eyes active
adherents of some religious faith. It is impracticable as a basis for state action either
because Buddhism and Islam have been declared state or state-protected religions or
because the stance of religious neutrality or equidistance is difficult to maintain since
religious minorities do not share the majority's view of what this entails for the state.
And it is impotent as a blueprint for the future because, by its very nature, it is
incapable of countering religious fundamentalism and fanaticism.

Secularism is the dream of a minority which wants to shape the majority in its
own image, which wants to impose its will upon history but lacks the power to do
so under a democratically organized polity. In an open society the state will reflect

the character of the society. Secularism therefore is a social myth which draws a cover over the failure of this minority to separate politics from religion in the society in which its members live. From the point of view of the majority, "secularism" is a vacuous word, a phantom concept, for such people do not know whether it is desirable to privatize religion, and if it is, how this may be done, unless they be Protestant Christians but not if they are Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, or Sikhs. For the secularist minority to stigmatize the majority as primordially oriented and to preach secularism to the latter as the law of human existence is moral arrogance and worse—I say "worse" since in our times politics takes precedence over ethics—political folly. It is both these—moral arrogance and political folly—because it fails to recognize the immense importance of religion in the lives of the peoples of South Asia. I will not raise here the issue of the definition of religion: suffice it to say that for these peoples their religion establishes their place in society and bestows meaning on their life, more than any other social or cultural factor.

Unable to raise the veil of its illusions, the modernist minority in India today is beset with deep anxieties about the future of secularism in the country and in South Asia generally. Appeals are made day in and day out to foster a modern scientific temper, of which Jawaharlal Nehru is invoked as a principal exponent. Books are written and an unending round of seminars held on the true nature and significance of communalism and how to combat it. In fact, there is much talk these days in the highest political quarters about the need for stern legislative and executive measures to check the rising and menacing tide of majority and minority fundamentalism and revivalism, and this even as the so-called Hindu society continues splintering.

An astonishing (or should one say impressive?) consensus among Indian Muslims about preserving the Shariʿa, or "holy law," against what they consider the legislative onslaught of a godless state but others call the indispensability of a common civil law as a foundation of the modern state, was witnessed in 1986 in connection with the rights of Muslim divorced women (the Shah Bano case). This has now been followed by the biggest-ever public protest by Muslims since Independence forty years ago, held at New Delhi on March 30, 1987, to demand full possession of a sixteenth-century mosque in the city of Ayodhya in north India, which was built after Babar's invasion at what Hindus believe to have been the birthplace of god-incarnate Rāma. The whole country held its breath, fearful of a counter demonstration of strength by the Hindus; it took place but luckily there was no major communal flare-up. Meanwhile, Sikh and Hindu fundamentalists continue to face one another in Panjab, and innocent people are killed every day by Sikh terrorists. Social analysts draw attention to the contradiction between the undoubted though slow spread of secularization in everyday life, on the one hand, and the unmistakable rise of fundamentalism, on the other. But surely these phenomena are only apparently contradictory, for in truth it is the marginalization of religious faith, which is what secularization is, that permits the perversion of religion. There are no fundamentalists or revivalists in traditional society.

The point to stress, then, is that, despite ongoing processes of secularization and deliberate efforts to promote it, secularism as a widely shared worldview has failed to make headway in India. Obviously what exists empirically but not also ideologically exists only weakly. The hopes about the prospects of secularism raised by social scientists in the years soon after Independence—recall the well-known books by Donald Eugene Smith (1963) and Rajni Kothari (1970)—have been belied, notwithstanding the general acceptability of their view of "Hinduism" as a broadly tolerant religion. Acute observers of the sociocultural and political scenes contend that signs of a weak-

ening secularism are in evidence, particularly among the Hindus. Religious books, a recent newspaper report said, continue to outsell all the others in India and, one can be sure, in all the other South Asian countries. Religious pilgrimages attract larger and even larger congregations counted in millions. Buildings of religious worship or prayer dot the urban landscape. New Delhi has many new Hindu temples and Sikh *guruwara*s, and its most recent modern structure is the Bahai temple facing the old Kalkaji (Hindu) temple, thrown open to worshipers of all faiths late last year. God-men and gurus sit in seminars and roam the streets, and American "Hare Krishnas" take the initiative in organizing an annual *ratha yātrā* (chariot festival).

While society seethes with these and other expressions of a vibrant religiosity, the feeble character of the Indian policy of state secularism is exposed. At best, Indian secularism has been an inadequately defined "attitude" (it cannot be called a philosophy of life except when one is discussing the thought of someone like Mahatma Gandhi or Maulana Azad) of "goodwill towards all religions," *sarvadharma sadbhāva*; in a narrower formulation it has been a negative or defensive policy of religious neutrality (*dharma nirpekshtā*) on the part of the state. In either formulation, Indian secularism achieves the opposite of its stated intentions; it trivializes religious difference as well as the notion of the unity of religions. And it really fails to provide guidance for viable political action, for it is not a rooted, full-blooded, and well-thought-out weltanschauung, it is only a strategem. It has been so self-confessedly for fundamentalist organizations such as the Muslim Jamāʿat-i-Islāmī (see Mushir-ul-Haq 1972:11–12). I would like to suggest that it was also so for Jawaharlal Nehru, but let me not anticipate: I will have more to say about Nehru's secularism in a short while. Just now, let me dwell a little longer on the infirmity of secularism.

Now, what exactly does the failure of secularism mean? For one thing, it underscores the failure of the society and the state to bring under control the divisive forces which resulted in the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. Though forty years have passed and the Midnight's Children are at the threshold of middle age, tempers continue to rage, and occasionally (perhaps too frequently) blood even flows in some places, as a result of the mutual hostility between the followers of different religions.

What produces this hostility? Surely not religious faith itself, for even religious traditions which take an uncompromising view of "nonbelievers" (that is, the followers of other religions) speak with multiple tongues and pregnant ambiguity. The Qur'an, for example, proclaims that there should be no coercion in the matter of faith (2:256). Even an agnostic such as Nehru acknowledged this before the burden of running a secular state fell on his aging shoulders. As long ago as 1936 he said, "The communal problem is not a religious problem, it has nothing to do with religion" (1972–82, 7:82). It was not religious difference as such but its exploitation by calculating politicians for the achievement of secular ends which had produced the communal divide.

It is perhaps one of the tragedies of the twentieth century that a man who had at the beginning of his political career wanted above all to bridge religious differences should have in the end contributed to widening them. As is well-known, the young Muhammad Ali Jinnah was a nonpracticing Muslim in private life and a secularist in public, but later on he (like many others, Hindus and Sikhs as well as Muslims) played with the fire of communal frenzy. Inevitably, perhaps, he became a victim of his own political success, of, as Ayesha Jalal puts it, "an unthinking mob, fired by blood lust, fear and greed" (1985:216). I should think he too realized this, for, without any loss of time, four days before the formal inauguration of Pakistan, he

called upon his people to "bury the hatchet" and make common citizenship, not communal identity, the basis of the new state (see Sharif ul Mujahid 1981:247). And within a month he reiterated: "You may belong to any religion, or caste, or creed—that has nothing to do with the business of the state" (Jinnah 1947–48:8). How close to Nehru he was, and, though he pulled himself far apart for the achievement of his political goals, he obviously remained a secularist.

* * *

Tolerance is indeed a value enshrined in all the great religions of mankind, but let me not underplay the historical roots of communal antagonism in South Asia. I am not wholly convinced when our Marxist colleagues argue that communalism is a result of the distortions in the economic base of our societies produced by the colonial mode of production and that the "communal question was a petty bourgeois question par excellence" (Bipan Chandra 1984:40). The importance of these distortions may not be minimized, but these analysts should know that South Asia's major religious traditions—Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism—are totalizing in character, claiming all of a follower's life, so that religion is constitutive of society. In the given pluralist situation, both tolerance and intolerance are expressions of exclusivism. When I say that South Asia's religious traditions are "totalizing," I am not trying to argue that they do not recognize the distinction between the terms "religious" and "secular." We know that in their distinctive ways all four traditions make this distinction. I wish I had the time to elaborate on this theme, but then there is perhaps no need to do so here. What needs to be stressed, however, is that these religions have the same view of the relationship between the categories of the "religious" and the "secular."

My studies convince me that in Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism this relationship is hierarchical (in the sense in which Louis Dumont uses this term). Thus, though Buddhism may well be considered as the one South Asian religious tradition which, by denying supernatural beings any significant role in human life, has the most secularist potential, yet this would be an oversimplified view of it. What is important is not only what Émile Durkheim so clearly perceived, namely the central importance of the category of the "sacred" in Buddhism, but also (and more significantly in the present context) the fact, so well documented for us by Stanley Tambiah (1976) that the *bhikkhu*, or the world renouncer, is superior to the *chakkavatti*, or the world conqueror, and that neither exists by himself. Similarly, in every Sikh *gurudwara*s the sacred sword is placed for veneration at a lower level than the holy book, the *Granth Sāhab*, which is the repository of the Word (*shabad*), despite the fact that, for the Sikhs, the sword too symbolizes the divinity or, more accurately, the inseparability of the spiritual and the religious functions.

I trust you will allow me to speak at a little greater length about Hinduism and Islam. I would have liked not to go all the way back to the *Rig Veda* of three thousand years ago, were it not for the fact that it presents explicitly, employing a fascinating simile, the hierarchical relationship between spiritual authority and temporal power. It would seem that originally the two functions were differentiated, but they were later deliberately brought together, for the regnum (*kshatra*) could not subsist on its own without the sacerdotium (*brahma*) which provided its principle of legitimacy. Says the king to the priest: "Turn thou unto me so that we may unite . . . I assign to you the precedence; quickened by thee I shall perform deeds" (see Coomaraswamy 1978:8). The very word used for the priest, *purohita*, points to precedence. What is

more, the priest and the king are united, as husband is to wife, and they must speak with one voice. This is what Dumont would call hierarchical dyarchy or complementarity. Even if one were to look upon the king and the *purohita* as dissociated (rather than united) and thus contend that kingship had become secularized (see Dumont 1980:293), the hierarchical relation between the two functions survives and is even emphasized. The discrete realms of interest and power (*artha*) are opposed to and yet encompassed by *dharma*.

Let me move on to the *Kautilya Arthashāstra* (? fourth century B.C./A.D., which has been said often enough to present an amoral theory of political power. Such a reading is, however, contestable. What I find more acceptable is the view that the *Arthashāstra* teaches that the rational pursuit of economic and political ends (*artha*) must be carried out in fulfillment and not violation of *dharma*. More broadly, "*artha* must be pursued in the framework of *kama, dharma* and *moksa* . . . the principle remains that *artha* to be truly *artha* must be part of a larger totality, individual and social" (Shah 1982:72).

I might add here parenthetically that in traditional Brahmanical political thought, cultural pluralism within the state was accepted and the king was the protector of everybody's *dharma*: being *that* was *his dharma*. Only in very exceptional circumstances, apprehending disorder, might the king have used his authority to abrogate certain customs or usages (see Lingat 1973:226). Hence the idea of a state religion was not entertained.

I will say no more about the ancient period but only observe that some of these traditional ideas have reverberated in the practice of Hindu kings and their subjects all the way down the corridors of time into the twentieth century (see Mayer 1982). Even today, these ideas are relevant in the context of the only surviving Hindu monarchy of the world, Nepal, where the king is considered an incarnation of God and yet has to be consecrated by the Brahman royal priest.

In our own times it was, of course, Mahatma Gandhi who restated the traditional point of view in the changed context of the twentieth century, emphasizing the inseparability of religion and politics and the superiority of the former over the latter. "For me," he said, "every, the tiniest, activity is governed by what I consider to be my religion" (see Iyer 1986:391). And, more specifically, there is the well-known early statement that "those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means" (Gandhi 1940:383). For Gandhi religion was the source of absolute value and hence constitutive of social life; politics were the arena of public interest; without the former the latter would become debased. While it was the obligation of the state to ensure that every religion was free to develop according to its own genius, no religion which depended upon state support deserved to survive. In other words, the inseparability of religion and politics in the Indian context, and generally, was for Gandhi fundamentally a distinct issue from the separation of the state from the church in Christendom. When he did advocate that "religion and state should be separate," he clarified that this was to limit the role of the state to "secular welfare" and to allow it no admittance into the religious life of the people (see Iyer 1986:395). Clearly the hierarchical relationship is irreversible.

Let me now turn briefly to Islam. Traditionally Islam postulates a single chain of command in the political domain: God-Prophet-caliph-king. God Almighty is the ever-active sovereign of His universe, which is governed by His will. In his own life Muhammad symbolized the unity of faith (*dīn*) and the material world (*dawla*). His successors (*khalīfa*) were the guardians on whose authority the kings ruled. They (the kings) were but the shadow of God on earth, holding power as a trust and answerable

to their Maker on the Day of Judgmnst like everybody else. In India, Ziya-ud-Din Barni, an outstanding medieval (mid-fourteenth-century) theologian and political commentator, wrote of religion and temporal government, of prophets and kings, as twin brothers, but without leaving the reader in any doubt about whom he placed first (see de Bary 1970:459–60).

In the twentieth century, Muhammad Iqbal occupies a very special place as an interpreter of Islam in South Asia. Rejecting the secularist program of Turkish Nationalists, he wrote: "In Islam the spiritual and the temporal are not two distinct domains, and the nature of an act, however secular in its import, is determined by the attitude of mind with which the agent does it. . . . In Islam it is the same reality which appears as Church looked at from one point of view and State from another" (1980:154). Iqbal further explains: "The ultimate Reality, according to the Quran, is spiritual, and its life consists in its temporal activity. The spirit finds its opportunities in the natural, the material, the secular. All that is secular is therefore sacred in the roots of its being. . . . There is no such thing as a profane world. . . . All is holy ground" (ibid.:155). In short, to use the idiom adopted by me, the secular is encompassed by the sacred.

An autonomous ideology of secularism is ruled out. This is how Fazlur Rahman (a most distinguished South Asian scholar writing on such subjects today) puts it: "Secularism destroys the sanctity and universality (transcendence) of all moral values" (1982:15). If secularism is to be eschewed, so is neo-revivalism to be avoided for its "intellectual bankruptcy" (ibid.:137). Rahman argues that a modern life need not be detached from religious faith and should indeed be informed by it, or else Muslims may well lose their very humanity.

This excursus into South Asia's major religious traditions was important for me to make the point that the search for secular elements in the cultural traditions of this region is a futile exercise, for it is not these but an ideology of secularism that is absent and is resisted. What is important, therefore, is the relationship between the categories, and this is unmistakably hierarchical, the religious encompassing the secular. Louis Dumont recently reminded us that the doctrine of the subordination of the power of the kings to the authority of the priests, enunciated by Pope Gelasius around the end of the fifth century, perhaps represents "simply the logical formula for the relation between the two functions" (1983:15). Indeed, the world's great religious traditions do seem to speak on this vital issue with one voice. Or they did until the Reformation made a major departure in this regard within the Christian tradition.

Scholars from Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch to Peter Berger and Louis Dumont have in their different ways pointed to the essential linkages among Protestantism, individualism, and secularization. You all know well Max Weber's poignant statement that "the fate of our times is characterised by rationalisation and intellectualisation and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world.' Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal relations" (see Gerth and Mills 1948:155). Or, to put it in Peter Berger's succinct summing up, "Protestantism cut the umbilical cord between heaven and earth" (1973:118).

This is not the occasion to go into the details of the well-grounded idea that secularization is a gift of Christianity to mankind, but it is important for my present concern to note that the privatization of religion, through the assumption by the individual of the responsibility for his or her own salvation without the intervention of the Church, is very much a late Christian idea. The general secularization of life

in the West after the Reformation is significantly, though only partly, an unintended consequence of this religious idea. Luther was indeed a man of his times, a tragic medieval figure, who ushered in a modern age that he would hardly approve of.

But let us not stray too far. How does all this bear upon my present theme, namely the prospects of secularism in India? I put it to you for your consideration that the idea of secularism, a gift of Christianity, has been built into Western social theorists' paradigms of modernization, and since these paradigms are believed to have universal applicability, the elements, which converged historically—that is in a unique manner—to constitute modern life in Europe in the sixteenth and the following three centuries, have come to be presented as the requirements of modernization elsewhere, and this must be questioned. Paradoxically, the uniqueness of the history of modern Europe lies, we are asked to believe, in its generalizability.

To put what I have just said in other words, secularism as an ideology has emerged from the dialectic of modern science and Protestantism, not from a simple repudiation of religion and the rise of rationalism. Even the Enlightenment—its English and German versions in particular—was not against religion as such but against revealed religion or a transcendental justification for religion. Voltaire's "dying" declaration was of faith in God and detestation of "superstition." Models of modernization, however, prescribe the transfer of secularism to non-Western societies without regard for the character of their religious traditions or for the gifts that these might have to offer. Such transfers are themselves phenomena of the modern secularized world: in traditional or tradition-haunted societies they can only mean conversion and the loss of one's culture, and, if you like, the loss of one's soul. Even in already-modern or modernizing societies, unless cultural transfers are made meaningful for the people, they appear as stray behavioristic traits and attitudinal postures. This means that what is called for is translation; mere transfer will not do.

But translations are not easily achieved. As Bankim Chandra Chatterji (that towering late nineteenth-century Indian intellectual) put it, "You can translate a word by a word, but behind the word is an idea, the thing which the word denotes, and this idea you cannot translate, if it does not exist among the people in whose language you are translating" (see Chatterjee 1986:61). It is imperative, then, that a people must themselves render their historical experience meaningful: others may not do this for them. Borrowed ideas, unless internalized, do not have the power to bestow on us the gift and grace of living.

In this regard, I should like to point out that once a cultural definition of a phenomenon or of a relationship (say, between religion and politics, or society and the state) has crystallized, it follows that subsequent formulations of it, whether endogenous or exogenous, can only be re-definitions. Traditions posit memory. Given the fact of the unequal social distribution of knowledge and the unequal impress of social change, it is not at all surprising that some elements of tradition should survive better and longer among the ordinary people, who may not think about it but live it, and others among the intellectuals.

In short, the transferability of the idea of secularism to the countries of South Asia is beset with many difficulties and should not be taken for granted. Secularism must be put in its place: which is not a question of rejecting it but of finding the proper means for its expression. In multi-religious societies, such as those of South Asia, it should be realized that secularism may not be restricted to rationalism, that it is compatible with faith, and that rationalism (as understood in the West) is not the sole motive force of a modern state. What the institutional implications of such a position are is an important question and needs to be worked out.

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I am afraid I have already spoken enough to invite the charge of being some kind of a cultural determinist, which I am not. I am aware of the part that creative individuals and dominant minorities play in changing and shaping the course of history. As a student of cultural anthropology I know that even in the simplest of settings cultures, ways of life, are not merely reproduced but are also resisted and changed, more in some places and times and less in others, more successfully by some individuals or groups than by others. In this connection, I must now return to Jawaharlal Nehru as the typical modern Indian intellectual.

It has been argued well by many scholars that while Gandhi put his faith in the reformed, ethically refined individual, in creating a better if not ideal society, Nehru considered the shaping of suitable institutions as the best means to achieve the same goal. And of all the modern institutions it was the state which he believed would be the principal engine of social change. Hegel, you will remember, said that the Hindus were a people and did not constitute a state: this judgment (and similar others) have informed Western social science thinking about India, expressed recently, for instance, in the contrast between primordial bonds and civic ties made by Edward Shils and Clifford Geertz, and others.

Nehru, like many other modern Indians, imbibed the same point of view and obviously wanted to remove the deficiency. The Nehruvian state was first and foremost democratic, but in an economically poor and culturally diverse country it could hardly be truly democratic without being socialist and secularist. I am not here concerned with the course of democracy and socialism in India, but I must make some observations about the difficulties encountered by the secular state established under the Constitution.

I will not enter into the controversy whether the Indian state is at all secular in the sense in which, say, the American state is. But that is only jurisdictionalist (see Luthera 1964). We do not, of course, have a wall of separation in India, for there is no church to wall off, but only the notion of neutrality or equidistance between the state and the religious identity of the people. What makes this idea important is that not only Nehru but all Indians who consider themselves patriotic and modern, nationalist and rationalist, subscribe to it. What makes it impotent is that it is a purely negative strategy. And as you know, in the history of mankind, nothing positive has ever been built on denials or negations alone.

An examination of Nehru's writings and speeches brings out very clearly his conviction that religion is a hindrance to "the tendency to change and progress inherent in human society" and that "the belief in a supernatural agency which ordains everything has led to a certain irresponsibility on the social plane, and emotion and sentimentality have taken the place of reasoned thought and inquiry" (Nehru 1961:543). Religion, he confessed candidly, did not "attract" him for "behind it lay a method of approach to life's problems which was certainly not that of science" (ibid:26). But, then, he did not worry too much about religion or its political expression, namely communalism, because he passionately believed that these epiphenomena would "vanish at the touch of reality" (1980:469). Hence his insistence that, quoting from a 1931 speech, "the real thing to my mind is the economic factor. If we lay stress on this and divert public attention to it we shall find automatically that religious differences recede into the background and a common bond unites different groups. The economic bond is stronger than the national one" (1972–82, 5:203).

Nehru insisted that his conclusions were not speculative but based on practical experience. Many years later, after mature reflection, he wrote that once the national state came into being it would be economic problems that would acquire salience; there might be "class conflicts" but not "religious conflicts, except insofar as religion itself expressed some vested interest" (1961:406). It is not, therefore, at all surprising that until the very end Nehru was puzzled and pained by Muslim separatism and was deeply distrustful of politicians who exploited religion for political purposes; and yet he was contemptuous of those who took the religious question seriously. Not for him Iqbal's insistence that the cultural question was as important as the economic (see Malik 1963:253). The irony of it is that Iqbal too considered himself a socialist!

In the end, that is in 1947, Nehru knew that the battle at hand, though not perhaps the war, had been lost, that the peoples of the subcontinent were not yet advanced enough to share his view of secular politics and the secular state. A retreat was inescapable, but it was not a defeat. Sorrowfully he wrote in 1961, just three years before his death: "We talk about a secular state in India. It is perhaps not very easy even to find a good word in Hindi for 'secular.' Some people think it means something opposed to religion. That obviously is not correct. . . . It is a state which honours all faiths equally and gives them equal opportunities" (see Gopal 1980:330).

Having thus described Indian secularism, he proceeded in line with his own earlier thinking on the subject: "Our constitution lays down that we are a secular state, but it must be admitted that this is not wholly reflected in our mass living and thinking. In a country like England, the state is . . . allied to one particular religion. . . . Nevertheless, the state and the people there function in a largely secular way. Society, therefore, in England is more advanced in this respect than in India, even though our constitution may be, in this matter more advanced" (ibid.:330–31). It is obvious that Nehru had not given up his trust of the secularization process, that his view of religion remained unchanged.

What is noteworthy, therefore, is Nehru's refusal (or failure) to use the coercive powers of the state in hastening this process. In this regard he invites comparison with Lenin and Ataturk, and, if you allow dictatorship, suffers by it. I do not have the time to discuss in any detail this instructively fascinating comparison or pose the question as to the conditions under which a part (state) may dictate to the whole (society), but let me say a few words about it, very briefly.

Take Lenin's position. Continuing the Feuerbach-Marx line he asserted that the religious question must not be advanced to "the first place where it does not belong at all" (see Dube and Basilov 1983:173). To match this by action, he played an active and direct part in the formulation of the 1918 decree on "the separation of the church from the state and of the school from the church." While every citizen was in principle free to profess any religion, or none at all, he could not actively propagate it; what is more, the educational function of the Communist party ensured that "senseless ideas" arising from a false consciousness would be countered.

Similarly, Ataturk proceeded by one deliberate step after another, beginning with the abolition of the Caliphate in 1924, of the religious orders in 1925, of Shariʿa courts in 1926, and of Islam as the state religion in 1928. The process of secularization was continued thereafter, and the changes effected were enforced strictly, with Kemal himself often setting the example in even minor points of detail (see Lewis 1968:239–93).

Contrast the internal coherence and sense of urgency of these two experiments with the uncertainties of the 1949 Indian Constitution, which sought to establish a secular state (article 15) in a society which it allowed and even encouraged to be

communally divided (articles 25–30). Under the rubric of "freedom of religion," it allowed citizens not only the profession and practice of their respective religions but also their propagation. Besides, it allowed the establishment of educational institutions along communal lines. A direct reference to secularism had to wait until 1976, when it was introduced into the preamble of the Constitution by the Forty-fourth Amendment.

It must be admitted here that the pluralistic situation which Nehru and the other framers of the Constitution faced was immensely more complex than anything that Lenin, and far less Ataturk, faced; yet the fact remains that Nehru did not use his undoubted hold over the people as a leader of the freedom movement and his vast authority as the head of government to bring communal tendencies under strict control. It is often said that he was too much of a liberal and a cultured aristocrat to think of strong-arm methods; I think he was also too optimistic about the decline of the hold of religion on the minds of people. He did not seem to take into consideration the fact that the ideology of secularism enhances the power of the state by making it a protector of all religious communities and an arbiter in their conflicts.

No wonder, then, that secularism as an alien cultural ideology, which lacks the strong support of the state, has failed to make the desired headway in India. What have done so are, apparently and by general agreement, Hindu revivalism and Muslim and Sikh fundamentalism. This brings me to the last of the observations I want to make, and I will also do this briefly.

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Contrary to what may be presumed, it is not religious zealots alone who contribute to fundamentalism or fanaticism, which are a misunderstanding of religion, reducing it to mere political bickering, but also the secularists who deny the very legitimacy of religion in human life and society and provoke a reaction. This latter realization has been slow in coming to Indian intellectuals, but there are some signs of change in this regard. It is thus that old, familiar questions begin to be reformulated. The principal question of this address could be considered to be not whether Indian society will eventually become secularized as Nehru believed it would but rather in what sense it should become so and by what means. The limitations of secular humanism (so-called) and the falsity of the hope of secularists—namely, that all will be well with us if only scientific temper becomes generalized—need to be recognized. Secularized man can confront fundamentalism and revivalism no more than he may empathize with religion.

Maybe religion is not a fake as Marx asserted; maybe there is something eternal about it as Durkheim maintained. Perhaps men of religion such as Mahatma Gandhi would be our best teachers on the proper relation between religion and politics— values and interests—underlining not only the possibilities of interreligious understanding, which is not the same as an emaciated notion of mutual tolerance or respect, but also opening out avenues of a spiritually justified limitation of the role of religious institutions and symbols in certain areas of contemporary life. The creeping process of secularization, however, slowly erodes the ground on which such men might stand. As Ashis Nandy puts it, "There is now a peculiar double-bind in Indian politics: the ills of religion have found political expression but the strengths of it have not been available for checking corruption and violence in public life" (1985:17). My question is, Is everything lost irretrievably?

I must conclude; but I really have no conclusions to offer, no solutions to suggest. Let me hasten to say, however, that I am not advocating the establishment of a Hindu state in India—not at all. It simply will not work. Should you think that I have been skeptical about the claims that are made for secularism, scientific temper, etc., and that I have suggested a contextualized rethinking of these fuzzy ideas, you would be quite right. You would also be right in concluding that I have suggested that the only way secularism in South Asia, understood as interreligious understanding, may succeed would be for us to take both religion and secularism seriously and not reject the former as superstition and reduce the latter to a mask for communalism or mere expediency. Secularism would have to imply that those who profess no religion have a place in society equal to that of others, not higher or lower.

Should you think further that the skepticism to which I have given expression has been easy to come by, cultivate, and accept, you would not be, I am afraid, quite right. Secularism has been the fond hope of many people of my generation in South Asia. But, then, that is my personal problem, and therefore let me say no more about it. I will end simply by recalling the following words of the young Karl Marx, spoken, of course, in a very different context: "Ideas which have conquered our minds . . . to which reason has welded our conscience, are chains from which we cannot break away without breaking our hearts; they are demons which man can vanquish only by submitting to them" (see Lowith 1982:23).

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