

## **The Distinctiveness of Indian Secularism\***

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Though the election of a Congress-led coalition has opened up new opportunities for secular space, only someone with a blinkered vision would assert that the growth of militant Hindu nationalism has been stalled and deny that secularism in India continues to be in crisis. However, an ambiguity lying at the very heart of this claim has not altogether been dispelled: is the crisis due primarily to external factors as when a good thing is undermined by forces always inimical to it, when it falls into incapable or wrong hands, when it is practised badly? Or, is it rather that the blemished practice is itself an effect of a deeper conceptual flaw, a bad case of a wrong footed ideal? Madan, Nandy and Chatterjee have all argued that the external threat to secularism is only a symptom of a deeper internal crisis.<sup>1</sup> Secularism in their view has long faced an internal threat in the sense that the conceptual and normative structure of secularism is itself terribly flawed. In different ways, each argues that secularism is linked to a flawed modernization, to a mistaken view of rationality, to an impractical demand that religion be eliminated from public life, to an insufficient appreciation of the importance of communities in the life of people and a wholly exaggerated sense of the positive character of the modern state. In what follows, I try to argue against this view. I do not wholly dispute their claims about modernity, nation-state or rationality and the importance of religion and community- in limited but significant ways their critique is valid. But I disagree both with the general implications of their claim as well with their understanding of Indian secularism as necessarily tied to a flawed modernist project. In particular, I contend that these critics fail to see that India developed a distinctively Indian and differently modern variant of secularism.

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<sup>1</sup> T.N. Madan, *Secularism in its Place*, Ashis Nandy, *The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Toleration*, Partha Chatterjee, *Secularism and Tolerance in Rajeev Bhargava (ed.) Secularism and its Critics*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1998.

Ideals are rarely if ever and never simply transplanted from one cultural context to another. They invariably adapt, sometimes so creatively to suit their new habitat that they seem unrecognizable. This is exactly what happened to secularism in India. Indian critics of secularism neither fully grasp the general conceptual structure of secularism nor properly understand its distinctive Indian variant. Indian secularism did not erect a strict wall of separation, but proposed instead a ‘principled distance’ between religion and state. Moreover, by balancing the claims of individuals and religious communities, it never intended a bludgeoning privatization of religion. It also embodies a model of contextual moral reasoning. All these features that combine to form what I call contextual secularism remain screened off from the understanding of these critics.

Though I do not agree with these critics that the conceptual and normative structure of secularism is flawed, I do agree that it faces an internal threat. However, I have a different understanding of the nature of this threat. Isaiah Berlin has reminded us that the history of ideas is replete with great liberating ideas slowly turning into suffocating straightjackets. One reason for this is that we forget that they need continual interpretation: no idea can flourish without its defenders finding better and better ways of articulating and formulating them. An idea faces an internal threat when its supporters, out of akrasia, willful or unwitting neglect, ignorance, confusion or delusion cease to care for it, or when its own proponents mistakenly turn against it. I have no reason to doubt secularism is threatened by forces fiercely opposed to it. But my focus in this paper is on the internal threats to secularism. The principal contention of my paper is that one such internal threat is the failure to realize the distinctive character of Indian secularism.

## I

### **Three Preliminary Points**

I cannot proceed further without making three preliminary points. The *first* is a clarification. The term ‘distinctive’ in the title of the paper may lead someone to

expect that I will unravel something startlingly uncommon about Indian secularism. If I believed so, I would have used the term 'unique'. I have not. This is because of my belief that, by now, the elementary formal constituents of secularism are the same throughout the world. Broadly speaking, secularism, anywhere in the world, means a separation of organized religion from organized political power inspired by a specific set of values. Just as without separation there is no secularism, just so a value-less separation does not add up to secularism. In this sense, secularism is a universal normative doctrine. But it does not follow that these elements are interpreted or related to each other in any one particular way or that there is a single ideal way in which they should be interpreted or related to one another. Many ways exist of interpreting these elements as do different ways of relating them. Each conception of secularism may unpack the metaphor of separation differently or select different elements from the stock of values that give separation its point. It may also place different weights on the same values. So when I talk about the distinctiveness of Indian secularism, I do not imply that it has a unique conceptual structure. I only mean that embedded in it is a specific and interestingly different way of interpreting and relating the basic constituents of secularism. Indeed this is why the distinctive character of Indian secularism does not make it non-universalizable. Indian secularism has trans-cultural potential.

My *second* point concerns a mistake not uncommon among those who write and think about contemporary secularism. They unwittingly assume that it is a doctrine with a fixed content. Frequently, it is wholly identified with one of its several current interpretations, as if that is the only one available. It is also believed to be timeless, as if it has always existed in the same form. But it does not take much to realize that secularism has multiple interpretations which change over time. All living doctrines evolve and therefore have a history. Secularism too has a history made at one time largely by Europeans, then a little later by North Americans and much later by non-western countries. Non-western societies inherited from their western counterparts specific versions of secularism but they did not always preserve them in the form in which they were received. They often added something of enduring value to them and, therefore, developed the idea further. Western theorists of secularism do not always recognize this non-western contribution. It may have been earlier adequate for western scholars to focus exclusively on that part of the history of secularism which

was made in and by the west. But today it would be a gross mistake to identify western variants of secularism with the entire doctrine, if the part was viewed as the whole. For a rich, complex and complete understanding of secularism, one must examine how the secular idea has developed over time trans-nationally.

There are other reasons why we must attend to the histories of secularism. The current crisis of secularism must compel one to ask why we need it at all. After all, one rarely mourns the loss of a useless thing. But it breaks one's heart to see a valuable thing decay. In such transitional moments, when a thing is born, is dying or in crisis, evaluative judgments become especially urgent and it is crucial to get them right. However, when a thing is in good health, when it is working well and effectively, such judgments appear to be redundant. In these periods of the stability and well-being of an entity, we bother little about its value and purpose. As it is taken for granted, its purpose recedes into the background.<sup>2</sup> Over time, its underlying point may even be forgotten. This may happen with material things as well as with institutions, ideas and doctrines. Now, something like this appears to have happened also to secularism. As it began to work well, its beneficiaries took it for granted, stopped showing interest in foregrounding its purpose, and eventually lost sight of it. This forgetting was not troublesome or threatening as long as there existed no serious challenge to secularism. But when a searching, discomfiting scrutiny of it commenced, this forgetfulness became a nerve-wrecking handicap. It is bad enough to let a rich and complex idea be reduced to a dead and monotonously repeated formula, but to know that an ideal is valuable and yet be groping in the dark about what precisely makes it worthwhile is deeply frustrating and debilitating. There is a pressing need to remember and retrieve the value-content of secularism.

But why must this be done with the help of a historical account? This necessity arises because at some remote point in the past, say at the time of its birth, the idea had to prove its worth to its potential beneficiaries. To make place for itself in a climate of fierce competition it had to marshal all forms of argumentative resources. It could not have survived without being explicit about its normative structure. In short, it could

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<sup>2</sup> I owe an understanding of this issue to my reading of Charles Taylor's *Philosophy and its History in Philosophy in History*, R. Rorty, J.B. Schneewind, Q. Skinner (eds), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984, pp. 17-30

not be in the state of inarticulacy in which it currently happens to be. This is why its retrieval from the background involves going back in time. We can no longer do without its history.

I think secularism in the single-religion societies of the west is beginning to be challenged not only from religious believers within but also from recently emigrated believers of other religions. This new multi-religiosity is threatening to throw western secularism into turmoil. Recall the controversy over the hijab in France. Western societies can no longer take for granted their own current interpretation of secularism, but must re-examine what separation means and what it is for. They must do so because reasons for secularism acceptable to the dominant religious majority are not automatically endorsed by religious minorities. For example, on the hitherto dominant interpretation of secularism, it means a strict separation of Church and state for the sake of religious liberty construed individualistically, or, at best, for individualistically construed citizenship rights. However, neither the idea of strict separation nor an individualist defence of religious liberty and citizenship rights may be acceptable to non-protestant, South Asian or Middle Eastern religions. To convince them of its need and importance, one needs to retrieve the complicated structure of values behind it. Thus, to meet this new challenge to western secularism, it may be necessary to reconstruct its history.

The condition of Indian secularism is no different, though some of the causes for its crisis certainly are. It is not a coincidence, however, that the external threat to Indian secularism has intensified precisely at a time of its degeneration into a meaningless formula (Perhaps the real crisis of Indian secularism began when the real meaning of secularism was forgotten and ritualistically, the word 'secular' was introduced in the Indian constitution!) or when it is viewed purely as a procedural doctrine that mechanically separates religion from the state and is foolishly innocent of its ties with substantive values. Critics of secularism are quick to point out its links with all kinds of things they dislike: the nation state, instrumental rationality, the hegemony of science, mindless industrialization and realist state-craft. But both its critics and its defenders appear to have forgotten its constitutive relation with substantive values. Undoubtedly, because of a history that it shares with the west, Indian secularism is at least partly western. But this history can also be told as a history of important values.

The distancing of religion from the state became necessary, both in India and the west, to protect individual citizens from their own oppressive religiously sanctioned social customs. Hence the connection of secularism with individualistically conceived liberty and equality. Unfortunately, Indian critics of secularism have developed an amnesia about these values. They also seem not to recall that 'separation' in the early constitutional history of India was never understood to mean the blanket exclusion of religion from the state.

It is important that we go back in time and to retrieve the complex purposes underlying it, to examine how Indian secularism was originally conceived. This would be beneficial not only for us, in India, but also for students of western secularism. For once we unearth the complicated conceptual structure of Indian secularism, we may find that it has the potential to shape the future of western secularism. If so, it is not enough for students of western secularism to look backwards, at the history of its own versions of secularism. They may need to look sideways, at the Indian variant and discover that in it is reflected not only a compressed version of their own history but also a vision of its future.

I have claimed that students of both Indian and western secularism will benefit from identifying the distinctiveness of Indian secularism. However, this is not always easy. To answer why brings me to my *third* point. In India, everything has begun to be seen in terms of an irritatingly dichotomous grid that divides the social world into two groups, the western modern and the indigenous traditional. Those who accept this grid are ineluctably inducted into a certain pattern of thinking. If secularism is modern, they believe, then it must be western. The whole of western secularism is then identified with one's preferred variant, usually that which is currently dominant. For example, the currently dominant western stereotype has it that secularism entails a strict separation of religion and the state for the sake of religious liberty and individual autonomy. This stereotype is uncritically also accepted in India by its defenders as well as its opponents. Thus those who defend secularism in India proclaim unstinting support for this western stereotype. Similarly, secularism is opposed in India because critics have good reason to be unhappy with this western stereotype. Since they also accept the view that to be Indian, a thing or an idea must be rooted wholly in home-grown traditions uncontaminated by the west, they seek to

replace secularism by ideas of toleration available within indigenous religious traditions. Much of the debate on secularism in India has been framed by this interpretative framework. But I wonder how useful it is to hold on to it, for it misses out on the simple point that something can be at once Indian and modern, that something that started out as western can overtime be transformed, and in responding to specific Indian problems and by being nurtured in an Indian context, can become distinctively Indian; different from both its western counterpart and from anything found within indigenous traditions. Unless those who defend secularism grasp this point, they will continue to defend a version that has little validity in the Indian context. Since they are seen to support a doctrine that can be legitimately criticized, the popular legitimacy of every version of secularism is bound to be eroded in the long run. Critics of secularism too fail to realize that a persistent attack on the very idea of secularism has grave practical consequence. In a context in which secularism is anyhow under threat from Hindu extremists, the mistaken occlusion of the distinctiveness of Indian secularism only ends up granting intellectual legitimacy to the larger political attack on the secular idea.

In these preliminary remarks, I hope to have drawn attention to the importance of grasping the distinctiveness of Indian secularism. In what follows I must try to show what this distinctiveness consists in. I argue that Indian secularism is distinguished from others versions by five features. First, its explicit multi-value character. Second, the idea of principled distance that is poles apart from one-sided exclusion, mutual exclusion and strict neutrality. Third, its commitment to a different model of moral reasoning that is highly contextual and opens up the possibility of multiple secularisms, of different societies working out their own secularisms. Fourth, it uniquely combines an active hostility to some aspects of religion with an equally active respect for its other dimensions. Finally, it is the only secularism that I know that attends simultaneously to issues of intra-religious oppression and inter-religious domination. In my view, these are path-breaking features of any model of secularism.

To sum up: A secular state is to be distinguished not only from theocracy but also from a state where religion is established. A non-theocratic state is not automatically

secular because it is entirely consistent for a state not to be run by priests inspired by 'divine laws', but to have a formal alliance with one or more religions. Nor is a state separated from church necessarily secular, because church-state separation is compatible with the establishment of religion. A secular state goes beyond church-state separation. To go beyond it is to refuse to establish religion or if it has been established earlier, to disestablish it. Therefore, a secular state follows what can be called principle of non-establishment. Furthermore, the non-establishment of religion means that the state is separated not merely from one but from all religions. (I shall call it feature-a). Thus, in a secular state, a formal or legal union or alliance between state and religion is impermissible. Official status is not given to religion. No religious community in such a state can say that the state belongs exclusively to it. Nor can all of together say that it belongs collectively to them and them alone. This does not mean that a secular state is anti-religious but it does imply that it exists and survives only when religion is no longer hegemonic. No one is compelled to pay tax for religious purposes or to receive religious instruction. No automatic grants to religious institutions are available.

What are the ends of a secular state? I have said that at the most general level, secular states aim to end religious hegemony, oppression and domination and to do so by separating them from their structure. But something more needs to be said about why we need to separate. Broadly there are two reasons. First, states may do so simply for self-aggrandizement, for example when states (political rulers) wish to maximize their own power and wealth. These states are not motivated by values such as peace, liberty or equality. They may moral have pretense but at root they have no commitment to any moral values. I shall call them self-aggrandizing amoral secular states. Usually, such states are imperial and autocratic. A good example of such a predominantly secular state, despite the not infrequent allegation of its biased, Christian character, is the British colonial state in India that motivated almost exclusively by power, wealth and social order, had a policy of tolerance and neutrality towards different religious communities. This is not surprising, given that empires are interested in the labour or tribute of their subjects, not in their religion. In multi-religious societies, for purely instrumental reasons, they may display characteristics of states that establish multiple



religions or have a hands off approach to all religions.<sup>3</sup>

### **Departures from Mainstream Western Secularism**

Does Indian secularism erect a similar ‘wall of separation’ for the sake of individualistically construed values? Is it a western idea on Indian soil? Articles 15, 16, 25, 29(2) and 325 support this interpretation. Though there is no direct reference to disestablishment, Articles 27 and 28(1) imply strict separation. By giving the President of the Republic the option of not taking oath in the name of God, Article 60 confirms the strictly neutral character of the Indian constitution. From the discussion so far, it appears that the state in India is constitutionally bound to follow Smith’s model of western secularism. However, further examination of the constitution reveals this impression to be mistaken. To begin with, Article 30(1) recognises the rights of religious minorities and therefore, unlike other Articles applicable to citizens qua individuals, it is a community-based right. Indeed, another community-specific right granting political representation to religious minorities was almost granted and was removed from the constitution only at the last minute. Second, Article 30(2) commits the state to give aid to educational institutions established and administered by religious communities. Also permitted is religious instruction in educational institutions that are partly funded by the state. These are significant departures from the ‘wall of separation’ view of the secular state. Even more significant are Articles 17 and 25(2) that require the state to intervene in religious affairs. Article 25(2)(b) states that ‘nothing in Article 25(1) prevents the state from making a law providing for social welfare and reform or the throwing open of Hindu religious institutions of a public character to all classes and sections of Hindus.’ Article 17 is an uninhibited, robust attack on the caste system, arguably the central feature of Hinduism, by abolishing untouchability and by making the enforcement of any disability arising out of it an offence punishable by law. Both appear to take away the individual freedom of religion granted under Section 1 of Article 25 and to contravene Article 26.

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<sup>3</sup> In his very interesting comments on my paper, Faisal Devji remarks that colonial secularism which meant the strict neutrality of the colonial state with respect to all religions was also a project of values, in particular the value of a civilizing mission. There is no doubt some truth in this and it is consistent with my own remark that state neutrality under British rule was always attacked for a hidden Christian agenda. Yet to forget the instrumental reasons behind the posture of neutrality would be a mistake. To me the secularity of the colonial state was amoral and self-aggrandizing. The difference, if at all, between Devji and me is one of emphasis rather than substance.

These features of the Indian constitution depart from the stereotypical western model in two ways. First, unlike the strict separation view that renders the state powerless in religious matters, they enjoin the state to interfere in religion. Second, more importantly, by giving powers to the state in the affairs of one religion, they necessitate a departure from strict neutrality or equidistance. This power of interference may be interpreted to undermine or promote Hinduism. Either way it appears to strike a powerful blow to the idea of non-preferential treatment.

In short, some Articles in the Indian constitution support an individualist interpretation and others a non-individualist one. Some conceive separation as exclusion, others as non-preferential treatment and, finally, some depart altogether from separation understood as exclusion or neutrality. At the end of the day, a confusing, somewhat contradictory picture on secularism emerges from a reading of the constitution. Critics could hardly fail to notice this and for many of them, Articles 17, 25(2), 30(1 & 2) compromise the secularity of the Indian state. For Donald Smith, any intervention in Hinduism – for example the legal ban on the prohibition of Dalit entry into temples or any protection of the rights of communities seriously compromises secularism. For others, like Chatterjee, the presence of these features in the Indian constitution shows why the Indian state cannot be really secular. The Indian constitution does not give an unambiguous criteria for maintaining the secularity of the state and, quite simply, given Indian conditions, it could never have.

By accepting community-based rights for religious minorities and endorsing state-intervention in religion, did the constitution depart from secular principles? I do not think it did. Rather, it developed its own modern variant. This distinctiveness of the Indian secularism can be understood only when the cultural background and social context in India is properly grasped. At least four such features of this socio-cultural context call for attention. First, there exists the mind boggling diversity of religious communities in India. Such diversity may coexist harmoniously but it invariably generates conflicts, the most intractable of which, I believe, are deep conflicts over values. Second, within Hinduism in particular and in South Asian religions more generally, a greater emphasis is placed on practice rather than belief. A person's religious identity and affiliation are defined more by what she or he does with and in

relation to others, than by the content of beliefs individually held by them. Since practices are intrinsically social, any significance placed on them brings about a concomitant valorization of communities. Together, these two features entail inter-community conflicts which are further exacerbated if fuelled by competing conceptions of democracy and nationalism. Third, many religiously sanctioned social practices are oppressive by virtue of their illiberal and inegalitarian character, and deny a life of dignity and self-respect. Therefore, from a liberal and egalitarian standpoint, they desperately need to be reformed. Such practices frequently have a life of their own, independent of consciously held beliefs, and possess a causal efficacy that remains unaffected by the presence of conscious beliefs. Furthermore, a tendency to fortify and insulate themselves from reflective critique makes them resistant to easy change and reform. It follows that an institution vested with enormous social power is needed to transform their character. Fourth, in Hinduism, the absence of an organized institution such as the Church has meant that the impetus for effective reform cannot come exclusively from within. Reform within Hinduism can hardly be initiated without help from powerful external institutions such as the state.

In such a context, India needed a coherent set of intellectual resources to tackle inter-religious conflict, and to struggle against oppressive communities not by disaggregating them into a collection of individuals or by de-recognizing them (and therefore, not by privatizing religion) but by somehow making them more liberal and egalitarian. A political movement for a united, liberal, democratic India had to struggle against hierarchical and communal conceptions of community but without abandoning a reasonable communitarianism. Besides, the state had an important contribution to make in the transformation of these communities; for this reason, a perennial dilemma was imposed on it. The state in India walked a tight rope between the requirement of religious liberty that frequently entails non-interference in the affairs of religious communities, and the demand for equality and justice which necessitates intervention in religiously sanctioned social customs. Secularism in India simply had to be different from the western liberal model that does not recognize communities, and dictates strict separation between religious and political institutions.

If we abandon the view, such as Donald Smith's, that political secularism entails a unique set of state policies valid under all conditions which provide the yardstick by

which the secularity of any state is to be judged, then we can better understand why despite ‘deviation’ from the ideal, the state in India continues to embody a model of *secularism*.<sup>4</sup> This can be shown even if we stick to Smith’s working definition of secularism as consisting of three relations. Smith’s first relation embodies the principle of religious liberty construed individualistically, i.e., pertaining to the religious beliefs of individuals. However, it is possible to make a non-individualistic construal of religious liberty by speaking not of the beliefs of individual but rather of the practices of groups. Here religious liberty would mean distancing the state from the practices of religious groups. The first principle of secularism can then be seen to also grant the right to a religious community to its own practices. Smith’s second relation embodies the value of equal citizenship. But this entails - and I cannot substantiate my claim - that we tolerate the attempt of radically differing groups to determine the nature and direction of society as they best see it. In this view, then, the public presence of the religious practices of groups is guaranteed and entailed by the recognition of community-differentiated citizenship rights. Smith’s version of secularism entails a charter of uniform rights. But it is clear that the commitment of secularism to equal citizenship can dictate community-based rights. In principle, this could easily accommodate a reasonable demand for community-specific political rights. In India, for reasons outlined above, it meant community-specific social rights, such as the right to administer and maintain educational institutions. What this shows is that Indian secularism is concerned as much with intra-religious oppression as with inter-religious domination. Smith’s third principle pertains to non-establishment and therefore to a strict separation of religion from state, under which religion and the state both have the freedom to develop without interfering with each other. Separation, however, need not mean strict non-interference, mutual exclusion or equidistance, as in Smith’s view. Instead, it could be a policy of principled distance, which entails a flexible approach on the question of intervention or abstention, combining both, dependent on the context, nature or current state of relevant religions. This theoretical interpretation of separation sits much better with its own best practice but perhaps also with the practice of other western secular states, something that is never properly recognized by western theories of secularism. But

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<sup>4</sup> For an interesting critique of Smith’s interpretation of Indian secularism as derived from the American model with an “extra dose of separation”, see Marc Galanter, ‘Secularism, East and West’ in Rajeev Bhargava, (ed.), *Secularism and its Critics*, OUP, 1998, pp. 234-267.

what is this idea of principled distance?

### **Back to Preliminaries**

This is an appropriate point at which to briefly elaborate two points I made at the very beginning. First, that it is inadequate if not mistaken to focus on current formulations of western secularism. To grasp the rich and complicated structure of secularism, it is extremely important to examine the history of the secular ideal. An idea begins to have a life much before its clear formulation and before human beings bring it to self-consciousness. Often what is taken to be the birth of an idea is partly a discovery, a re-articulation of older ideas and only in part an invention. And, as Hegel reminded us, we grasp this point only when that idea achieves a distinct and clear self-consciousness. This is certainly true of secularism. The complex set of values that coalesce around what later came to be called secularism began to live much earlier. For example, in a religiously diverse society, organized political power simply had to maintain some distance from the dominant religious group for the sake of stability and peace. The same motivation lay behind a partial acceptance and therefore the toleration of the less dominant religious groups and the half-hearted recognition of particular religious identities. States that promoted peace and toleration can certainly not be called secular but there is no doubt that they are historically connected to modern secular states and can be said to constitute the latter's pre-history. At best they may be seen to embody a local, customary and a much older conception of the secular.

This time-honoured 'secularism' is found in different societies and cultures. This is why the development of modern secularism cannot be understood as growing only in terms of the relationship between the Church and the state. The Church-state model is one variant of a time-honoured secularism. The presence in background cultural conditions of other variants such as the religious strife model is equally conducive to the growth of modern secularism. I have elsewhere written in detail about these two models.<sup>5</sup> Suffice here to say that it is sufficient for the Church-state model to be operating within a non-pluralist Christian society. However, a religious strife model

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<sup>5</sup> See my review of T.N. Madan's *Modern Myths, Locked Minds* in the *Book Review*, Vol.XXI-No.8, August, 1997, pp.11-13 and Bhargava, *What is Secularism For?*, Op cit.,

necessarily operates within a society in which there exist diverse and radically differing religions or religious denominations. The Church-state model is operative in societies in which separation is an internal feature of the dominant religion. The religious strife model of secularism, on the other hand, develops even if separation within some religions is not internally permissible but purely out of the contextual necessity in situations where there exist contending religions. In short, in the first model, the state wrenches away from the church of a single religion whereas in the other model, it must distance itself from all religions at once. And, as I mentioned, this distancing is dictated by the vulnerabilities experienced by every single religious group. Each one fears persecution from the other as well as the disorder resulting from religious conflict.

States moved further towards the ideal of the secular when, apart from securing peace and toleration, they protected the religious liberties of individuals, in particular by providing secure conditions in which individuals could lead a decent life even when they dissented from the orthodoxy or orthopraxy of their own respective religions. (of course political orders have given such a space to some individuals for many millennia. Or else there would be no Buddha or Mahavira, no Nanak or Kabir. But not as a normal, legitimate part of the social order) Secularism advanced further when many aspects of an individual's well-being began to be regulated not simply by a regime of toleration but rather by a formal and legal regime of rights, so that it became possible for individuals to make formal claims of entitlement against each other or against the state: to the protection of their life, or to a private sphere in which they were free to do what they want and were secure that any interference by the state in the life or private world of the individual could proceed only according to due process of law. Thus, a secular state comes into its own when it does not discriminate on grounds of religion in the distribution of passive citizenship rights.

It would be wrong however to identify secularism simply with the view for which the state must be separated from organized religion for the sake of peace, toleration, religious liberty and equality of passive citizenship rights. For over time at least two values have gradually become integral to the secular idea. First, that a state must not discriminate on grounds of religion in the distribution of active citizenship rights. For example, a state must not debar members of minority religious groups from standing

for public office. Second, in keeping with the spirit of inter-religious equality as well as equality of citizenship, a fully secular state extends rights to minority religious groups qua groups. In short, it grants community-based rights to religious minorities.

One can now see that over time the secular idea has both transcended already existing values and/or added to them. For example, after the advent of nationalism and democracy, the value of treating everyone as equal and therefore not discriminating in the distribution of active citizenship rights was added to existing conceptions of secularism. Similarly, there is a sense in which a regime of rights better articulates the point behind toleration. A rights-based secularism supercedes toleration because it incorporates all values served by toleration and adds something more and valuable to it. Yet, it would be wrong to think that a secular state has no need at all for a regime of toleration. The regime of rights to which it is attached cannot reach every social space and in such not-so-easily approachable spaces, the ones not covered by legal rights, there still remains a need for decent relations governed by the value of toleration.

This brings me to the second point. Western theories of secularism have tended to see it as a single-value doctrine. For them, the state is to be separated from organized religion for the sake of the fullest possible liberties of individuals including their religious liberty. More recently, this separation is seen to serve individual autonomy. Alternatively, as in France, they are guided solely by the value of equal citizenship. However, a history of the secular idea shows secularism to be a multi-value doctrine, as tied to several important values. The Indian variant of secularism more explicitly recognizes it to be a multi-value doctrine. Furthermore, western theories of secularism, quite in contrast to the internally variegated practice of western states, have tended to unpack the metaphor of separation to mean either exclusion or neutrality. To my mind, this has been a very limiting interpretation of what is meant by separation.

Thus, a proper study of Indian secularism shows not only that it shares a past with the west but also that it has its own distinctive past. Indian and western secularisms have their own distinctive pre-histories as well as a common history. But apart from and beyond these histories, the Indian version has taken forward the idea of secularism

because, from the very beginning, by virtue of an integral link with nationalism and democracy, it has had to be explicitly tied to citizenship rights, including to the rights of religious minorities. By doing so, it has never tried to completely annul particular religious identities.

To discover its own rich and complex structure, western secularism can either look backward, to its own past or else look sideways, at Indian secularism that mirrors not only the past of secularism, but in a way, also its future. Doing so will certainly benefit the secularisms of many western societies. For example, French secularism needs to look beyond its own conceptions of laicite in order to take into account its own multi-cultural and multi-religious reality. It cannot continue to take refuge in claims of exceptionalism. I feel that a good hard look at Indian secularism could also change the self-understanding of American liberal secularism.

I have argued that a recognition of its multi-value character, in particular its links with community-specific rights and ordinary life with dignity is one distinctive feature of Indian secularism. Its other distinctive feature is its commitment to the idea of principled distance. I have also argued that the multi-value character of secularism makes it inherently unstable and necessarily ambiguous but that this instability is inescapable and given the context in which it is meant to work, this vagueness is a virtue. I also argued that Indian secularism both encapsulates the history of western secularism and mirrors its future. Therefore, by examining the Indian version, the west can learn about its own history as well as see its own future direction. Interestingly, at an earlier time, Indian secularism was similarly positioned when it could see its own future in the trajectory of western secularism. The situation has now reversed. It is now the mainstream western countries that have much to learn by from attending to the distinctiveness of Indian secularism.

Ironically, this need to attend to the distinctiveness of Indian secularism is as pressing in India as it is in the west. Several critics of Indian secularism have identified it with one or the other western versions and have ignored its special character. This has been a source of gross misinterpretation and several problems. For example, it is frequently argued that secularism is purely a Christian, western doctrine and therefore, cannot adapt itself easily to the cultural conditions of India, infused as they



are by religions that grew in the soil of the sub-continent. This necessary link between secularism and Christianity is exaggerated, if not mistaken. It is true that a time-honoured conception of secularism is derived almost wholly from Christianity. The idea that to achieve religious integrity, peace or toleration, the state must be strictly separated from different denominational churches is part of Christianity and its internal history. It is also true that church-state separation is an integral feature of a legitimate form of secularism but as we have seen it is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the development of secularism even in societies with church-based religions. It is clearly not a necessary condition for the development of all forms of secularisms. This is so even when the term 'church' is interpreted to mean institutions that are authoritative centers in which power is wielded by a specialized religious personnel and that have been integral, in this sense, to many religions. (including, for example, Hinduism where certain kinds of Brahmins enjoyed political privilege and social power). Moreover, as I have argued, the mutual exclusion of religion and the state is not the defining feature of secularism. The idea of separation can be interpreted differently. Nor are religious integrity, peace and toleration (interpreted broadly to mean 'live and let live'), uniquely Christian values. Most non-Christian civilizations have given significant space to each. Therefore, none of them are exclusively Christian. It follows that, even though we find in Christian writings some of the clearest and most systematic articulation of this doctrine, even our time-honoured conception of secularism is not exclusively Christian. More importantly, this older, Christian secularism, must not be confused with its modern counterpart. As I said, this Christian secularism is a sufficient but not necessary part of the background condition of modern secularism. Modern secularism may be emboldened by its presence but it can also be nourished by other traditions of peace and toleration. Moreover, it means more than just church-state separation.

All right, one might say, secularism is not just a Christian doctrine, but is it not western? I have argued above that the answer to this question is both yes and no. Up to a point, it is certainly western. More specifically, as a clearly articulated doctrine, it has distinct western origins. Although elements that constitute secularism assume different cultural forms and are found in several civilizations, one cannot deny that the idea of the secular first achieved self-consciousness and was properly theorized in the west. This western theorization was linked to the birth of secular states in western as

much as in non-western societies. For example, one particular form of secular state was installed in India by the Queen's Proclamation of 1858 which guaranteed the Government's non-interference in Indian religions following the Mutiny of 1856-7.<sup>6</sup> One might then say that the middle history of secularism is almost entirely dominated by western societies. However, the same cannot be said of its later history. Nationalism and democracy arrived in the west after the settlement of religious conflicts, in societies that had been made religiously homogenous, or had almost become so. (with the exception of the Jews, of course who continued to face persistent persecution). The absence of deep religious diversity and conflict meant that issues of citizenship could be addressed almost entirely disregarding religious context; the important issue of community specific rights to religious groups could be wholly ignored. This could not be done in India. Both national and democratic agendas in India had to face issues raised by deep religious difference and diversity. In India, nationalism had to choose between the religious and the secular. Similarly, the distribution of active citizenship rights could not be conceived or accomplished by ignoring religion. It could be done either by actively disregarding religion or by developing a complex attitude to it. It also had to balance claims of individual autonomy with those of community obligations, and claims of the necessity of keeping religion 'private' with their inescapable presence and often valuable presence in the public. In addressing these complex issues, the very idea of the secular was taken further than had been evolved in the west. In the course of doing so, it also began to embody a form of contextual moral reasoning with which the notion of principled distance is associated. This distinguishes it from other variants of modern secularism that are grounded in more abstract, theoreticist and context-insensitive conceptions of rationality. Mainstream theories or ideologies in modern, western

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<sup>6</sup> See the instructive discussion of this issue in Faisal Devji's comments on my paper. Devji wishes to trace the distinctiveness of Indian secularism to the colonial period of which, he says, the Republic's Constitution is in many ways a juridical culmination. This claim is ambiguous. It could mean either that much of work makes Indian secularism distinctive was generated before India's independence from colonial rule or that the distinctiveness of Indian secularism is a product largely of colonial forces. I have no disagreement with the first claim. However, I disagree strongly with the second. As I have remarked in this paper the idea of a secular state, i.e. a state strictly neutral with respect to all religions was a feature of colonial modernity and came to India with British rule, specifically with the Queen's Proclamation of 1858. This idea was inserted within a cultural background suffused with the pre-history of secularism and once installed was transformed into something entirely different by the efforts of those struggling against the filth in their own traditions as well as against colonial rule. The product of these struggles, the model of secular state in the Indian Constitution was vastly different from anything that existed in pre-British India or under British colonial rule. Thus the distinctiveness of Indian secularism is not traceable to colonial sources.

societies have take little notice of these features. Hence, they are struggling to deal with post-colonial religious diversity of their societies. The later history of secularism is more Indian than western.<sup>7</sup>

It may still be argued that the Indianness of Indian secularism is derived entirely from its strong link with home-grown traditions and that therefore India had worked out its own conception of secularism that is neither Christian nor western. For example, secularism for many means ‘sarva dharma sambhava’: (a) religious coexistence or (b) inter-religious tolerance or finally (c) equal respect for all religions. Each of these interpretations of ‘sarva dharma sambhava’ point to a crucial ingredient of secularism but not only fails to capture its full richness and complexity but entirely ignores its relationship with extremely significant, internally constitutive values of secularism. I take religious co-existence to be equivalent to peace but to identify the secular state with a state that maintains peace between religions, that allows different religions to co-exist does little justice to the rich history and conceptual structure of secularism as a multi-value doctrine. Much the same is true of the interpretation of Indian secularism as inter-religious toleration. There are many good reasons why these two ideals should not be conflated but I shall mention only one. The mainstream idea of toleration is that it enjoins us to refrain from interfering in the affairs of others, even when one has the power to do so and additionally, even when one finds the beliefs and practices of others morally repugnant. In this sense, toleration is entirely consistent with a total refusal to respect the religion of others. It is also compatible with gross inequality and hierarchy. One may tolerate the religion of another person even as one treats him as inferior. Secularism, on the other hand, is grounded in notions of equality – equal concern and respect – and therefore goes far beyond the notion of inter-religious tolerance.

It is equally inappropriate to identify secularism with equal respect for all religions. Now it must be conceded that there is something valuable in this interpretation and something Indian about this idea. The internal plurality of Hinduism has the potential for a space where equal respect can indeed be accorded to all religions. Besides, a respect for other religions is entirely consistent with the development of their critique

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<sup>7</sup> And by implication, the history of secularism must include the history of other non-western societies that have sought to install and maintain secular states.

and the identification of local faults within them. Respecting other religions as equals does not entail their blind acceptance or endorsement. Indeed, it is precisely because respect is consistent with difference and critique that the idea of equal respect for all religions is closely linked with the proposal for an inter-faith dialogue. It is also this idea of deeper idea of respect or care for something that allows one to critically intervene in it. Indian secularism does in a way respect all religions but by embodying the idea of respectful transformation of religions. In doing so, it inherits a venerable tradition of religious reform.

Yet, even an important ingredient of secularism cannot become the whole of it. Indeed, to equate the two is to do gross injustice to secularism. This equation implies that one ignores the non-religious part of human existence that all modern states must confront and which are also an integral part of modern secularism. Let me take an example. The idea of equal respect for all religions is entirely consistent with the equal unavailability of active citizenship rights to all members of society. It is also consistent with a total indifference to the freedom of individuals within each religious group. A fruitful dialogue on equal footing is entirely possible between religious groups that sanction gender and caste-related injustices or remain indifferent to them. But sensitivity to such issues is the hallmark of modern secularism. If so, it would be a terrible mistake to identify secularism with equal respect for all religions or modern Indian secularism with 'sarva dharma sambhava'. As political attitude and practice, 'Sarva dharma sambhava' is more in tune with states that establish multiple religions than it does with states that are secular.

I have argued that it is wrong to identify Indian secularism with western secularism or with 'sarva dharma sambhava' No doubt, Indian secularism has some relationship with both but it is not one of identity. At the heart of such identification is a failure to notice that we developed a version of secularism that was at once modern and Indian. Those who identify Indian secularism entirely with home-grown traditional conceptions are able to grasp the pre-history of Indian secularism (even though they do not see it as such, as pre-history), but they entirely bypass its connection with a larger common trans-national history as well as with its later history towards which Indians contributed significantly. On the other hand, those who identify the Indian variant with western conceptions fail to notice both the pre-history and the later

history of secularism. As I mentioned above, like western theorists, they focus only on the middle history of secularism, one developed almost exclusively by western societies. This limited vision is shared by both advocates and opponents of secularism. For example, Indian critics of Indian secularism claim that it has privatized religion. Nothing could be further than the truth. Indian religion has a public presence that is ratified by the Indian constitution. The constitution gives official recognition to religious communities to maintain their own educational institutions. Such institutions foster particular religious identities and are sometimes even funded by the state. There could not be a more suitable illustration of the point that far from privatizing religion, the Indian constitution continues to support its publicisation.

To be sure, there is an important sense in which religion is meant to be de-politicised by the Indian Constitution. Indian secularism would not be a version of secularism if it did not support the some forms of de-politicisation of religion. But this de-politicisation of religion must not be confused with its de-publicisation. Indeed, the Constitution even allows a contextual politicization of religion, for example if such politicization advances the cause of equality and freedom. If justice ever required the local politicization of religion, then any defensible version of secularism must support it. For example, if the minority community in Gujarat is mobilized against the present government, then, even though it relies, at least implicitly, on distinctions and classifications made on the basis of religion, such mobilization would entirely be consistent with secularism. It is noteworthy that separate electorates for Muslims were rejected in post-independent India not by an appeal to a secularism of a strict separationist variety but on highly contextual grounds. The abandonment of separate electorates was supported because they were believed to have (a) started the awful habit of treating Hindus and Muslims as distinct and congealed political entities, (b) bolstered sectarianism and ghettoized minorities, and (c) strengthened the resolve of every community to care only for their own interests. In short, separate electorates were rejected keeping in mind not some general moral necessity of separating religion and state but because they had 'sharpened communal differences to a dangerous extent and prevented the development of a healthy national life'. The implication is that if they were compatible with or somehow fostered a healthy national life, then they could easily have been endorsed.

I have focused in this paper on internal threats to secularism. I have argued that a continuous failure to recognize the distinctiveness of Indian secularism strengthens this threat. I believe this problem afflicts the self-understanding of secularism in both India and several western countries. Western secular states need to improve the understanding of their own practices and to have a better theoretical self-understanding. Rather than get stuck on a model they developed at a particular time in their history, they would do well to learn from the original Indian variant. Equally, both the self-proclaimed supporters of secularism and some of its misguided opponents could learn from examining the original Indian variant. Indeed it is my conviction that many critics of Indian secularism will embrace it once they properly understand its nature and point.

No idea lives forever. But no good idea should be lost because its supporters are intellectually too lazy to properly defend it.