

Unit 20

Secularism and Secularization

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Learning Objectives

After you have studied this unit you should be able to:

- provide definitions of secularism;
- outline what is secularization;
- delineate theories of secularism; and
- describe the Indian and European experience of secularism and secularization.

20.1 Introduction

The word secular is derived from the Latin word *saeculum* which means century or age. *Saeculum* was the profane time and the time of ordinary historical succession, as opposed to sacred time. Time was interwoven with higher times variously called 'eternity', the time of the Ideas, or the time of the Origin, or the time of God. Human beings were living in all these times but only some acts, institutions, lives and social forms were more thoroughly directed towards temporal and non-spiritual goals. Government was more 'in the *saeculum*' in contrast with the Church (Taylor 1998: 31-2). The division of life in these two spheres was recognised as far back as Jesus Christ. In *circa* 30, legend has it, when he was asked whether taxes should be paid to Rome, Jesus replied, 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.' (Storey and utter eds 2002: 32).

The term secularism was coined in 1851 by George Jacob Holyoake, a socialist. In the background of 19th century liberalism, the term secularism was a by-product of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. While Renaissance asserted the dignity of the person, Enlightenment highlighted the autonomy of reason and science. Before proposing the term secularism, Holyoake had considered the terms 'netheism' (meaning neither theism nor an atheism) and 'limitationism' (probably hinting at limiting the religious influence). His first aim in proposing secularism was not to negate religion but to counter the irrationalism and supernaturalism of Christian theology. Holyoake's second aim in proposing secularism was to affirm the worth and dignity of a person and the autonomy of secular life (Jhingran 1995: 39-40).

20.2 Definitions of Secularism

Out of the commonly accepted three definitions of secularism one is people-centric, another is state-centric and yet another is India-specific. Firstly, the first people-centric definition emphasises the idea of separating religion from politics, economy, education, social life and culture. The purpose of this separation is not to stamp religion out from life but to contain it to the private lives of individuals. A secular state is not supposed to discourage the practice of religion but neither can it base its policies on religion. The ultimate goal is to make religion a personal affair. The initial steps in the containment of religious influence in society were taken at the end of the Thirty Years War in 1648 and during the French Revolution. In 1648 at the end of the Thirty Years' War in Europe, properties of the church were transferred to the exclusive control of the princes. Another significant moment in secularization came on 2 November 1789 when Talleyrand declared in the French National Assembly that all 'ecclesiastical goods', meaning religious institutions of which schools were prominent, were at the disposal of the nation (Mandan 1998: 298-9).

Most societies have followers of different faiths and this puts a great responsibility on the state to be neutral. The state-centric definition of secularism emphasises the need to keep the state neutral to all religions. Religious people would like to see the state to show equal regard to all faiths but others may demand the same respect for atheism. The demand normally is that the state must treat all its citizens equally. This means that the state must neither favour nor discriminate against citizens on grounds of their religion.

The containment of religion in life and the separation of state from religion are universally accepted definitions of secularism, even though these ideas had a distinctly European origin. The third India-specific definition of secularism underlines the importance of the unity of all people against colonialism and communalism. A secular state and society were a part of the social vision of the Indian national movement. Hence, despite the horrendous violence in 1947 and the making of Pakistan ostensibly on religious lines, secularism remained the abiding principle and opposition to communalism was the chosen policy in Independent India (Chandra 2004: 3-29).

20.3 What is secularization?

The process by which the sphere of influence of religion was contained in institutions and human consciousness is secularization. Secularism is no longer an active movement in the West and hence, scholars there prefer to talk about secularization of institutions and human consciousness. Bryan Wilson defines secularization as the process in which social institutions gain 'considerable autonomy' and religious consciousness declines whereby instead of being the pervasive, determinant influence, religion becomes 'a department of the social order'. Wilson mentions the following three features of a secular society, viz. the prevalence of instrumental values, rational procedures and technological methods (Wilson 1987: 159-60). In his *The Secular City* Harvey Cox maintained that secularization was a consequence of industrialisation and urbanisation and that its characteristics were urbanization, pragmatism or lack of interest in the mystery of life, profanity or this-worldliness, pluralism and tolerance due to which no world-view is imposed on anyone (Cox 1966:2-3). Peter Berger defined secularization as the 'process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols' (Berger 1973:113).

secularism minimises the role of religion in the social and political affairs of society. The important processes of change triggered by secularisation, which comes in tow with modernity, are:

- 1) withdrawal of religion from such social spheres as education and marriage following a differentiation in institutions, structures and functions;
- 2) the development of pluralisms at the level of social groups (including religion) and world views;
- 3) rationalisation as described by Max Weber which refers to the emergence of a scientific, rational world view which 'disenchants' society from myths, mysteries, miracle and magic; and
- 4) the development of critical consciousness that reveals the ideologies hidden in the institutional and belief structures of religion (Alam 2002:106).

Box 20.1 Process of Secularization

The process of secularisation was greatly aided by transformation of human consciousness triggered by the popularisation of scientific ideas among common people. Secularism was the product of the Enlightenment which emphasized the autonomy of reason and science. The contributions of the Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) who said the earth moves around the sun and was immediately condemned by the Church, the Italian Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) who suffered house arrest for life after the Catholic Church denounced him as a heretic because he endorsed the discovery that the earth moves around the sun, the German Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) who spoke of planetary bodies following some laws of motion and the English Issac Newton (1642-1727) who gave the laws of motion a sound footing by incorporating mass, force and gravity into them. Newton's book *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy) or *Principia* (1687) was popularized by Voltaire and its ideas that the world is governed by rational laws overflowed from science into philosophy and politics. *Principia*, therefore, became a major inspiration for the 18th century Enlightenment. All this together demolished biblical cosmology. Biblical worldview asserted that creation took place a few thousand years ago, that the earth was the centre of the universe, and that the entire creation was anthropomorphic (meaning human form was the measure for everything, whether God or animal). Astronomical time and space, on the other hand, reduced humans and their history to absolute insignificance.

Similarly, the theory about evolution demolished another dogma that the entire human species descended from one ancestor, viz. Adam and Eve. Charles Darwin (1809-1882), English naturalist, wrote to Karl Marx in 1880, 'It seems to me ... that direct arguments against Christianity or Theism hardly have any effect on the public; and that freedom of thought will best be promoted by that gradual enlightening of human understanding which follows the progress of science. I have therefore avoided writing about religion and have confined myself to science.' He is well known for his theory of evolution. He collected data during his round-the-globe trip on HMS *Beagle* in 1831-36 when he observed variations between related species on the Galapagos Islands. By 1837 Darwin had already concluded that species 'change' or 'evolve' over time through the appearance of new traits that slowly modify ancestral forms until their forms are distinctly different (Rohmann 1999: 89-90). There was opposition to the ideas of these scientists also around the same time. For instance, in USA, the state of Oklahoma passed the first anti-evolution law in 1923. This law

20.4 Theories of Secularism

Theories of secularism grew in a historical context of differing religious visions and acute strife among people having these differences. In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1776), David Hume asked, 'If religion is salutary to society, why are its consequences so pernicious (like factions, civil wars, persecutions, subversions of government, oppression and slavery) to public affairs?' (Lorenzen (ed) 1995) The point of origin of modern secularism in Europe is the Crusades or rather 'the search in battle-fatigue and horror for a way out' of religious wars. Crusades, as we know, were a series of eight holy wars that took place between 1095 and 1464 ostensibly to reclaim the holy lands in Palestine from the Muslims. 'Rules of peace, even with heretics, and of obedience to legitimate authority, even where schismatic, had to be put beyond revocation in the name of one or other version of orthodoxy.' Two approaches were devised in those days to overcome religious hatred. One was the *common ground strategy* to establish the ethics of peaceful co-existence and political order. In giving their different versions of natural law, Aquinas, Pufendorf and Locke subscribed to this strategy of secularism. This strategy downplayed confessional dogma and highlighted common beliefs, and it could manifest in Deism (or the belief in one God which is in contrast with polytheism or atheism). This strategy appealed to people with different commitments to converge on certain fundamentals.

The second way devised to overcome religious conflict was to evolve an independent political ethic. Outside warring beliefs, this strategy proposes a political morality which provides a common basis for living together. Certain norms of peace and political obedience were deduced from features of the human condition. It was said that humans were rational creatures who were sociable and they would not violate any solemnly given word. Grotius is the celebrated earliest explorer of this strategy. He said 'even if God didn't exist, these norms would be binding on us' (Tuck 1979 pp 33-4).

Secularism, as an ideology, consists of the following five ideas. Firstly, it stresses the role of human autonomy. This means that secularism recognises the right of an individual to order her life independent of authority. The *Secular Humanist Declaration* declares, 'Secular humanism places trust in human intelligence, rather than divine guidance. Sceptical of theories of theories of redemption, damnation and reincarnation, secular humanist attempts to approach the human situation in realistic terms; human beings are responsible for their own destinies.' (Kurt 3 (n.d.) p 12)

Secondly, secularism asserts that not only state and laws but family relations, education, morality, knowledge and values are also completely free from the dominance of religion. The specific point in India, according to Marc Gallanter, is not to keep religion out of politics but to keep it out of social relations (Gallanter 1998).

Thirdly, secularism seeks not just the autonomy of the individual but also the autonomy of reason. Reason is made the sole criteria of truth and this undermines the faith in religion and the authority of the church.

Fourthly, secularism makes room for the values of pluralism and religious toleration because it does not make any religion final, infallible and beyond rational scrutiny. A plurality of religious world-views is therefore considered natural by secularists and tolerance is an attitude they value towards other religions and value systems.

Fifthly, secularism is not anti-religion. Instead, it is concerned with the affairs of this world and considers that secular life and knowledge is autonomous (Jhingran 1995: 46-9) People's Republic of China officially has a policy opposed to religion and going strictly by the definition of secularism, it is not a secular state.

20.5 The European experience

Secularism was the conscious affirmation of the goals of Reformation and the Renaissance which asserted the dignity of the person. The individual person was the concern of Reformation in the 16th century. Martin Luther (1483-1546), the principal initiator of the Protestant Reformation, had advocated the individual's right to understand the word of God, independent of the Church. The problem, however, was that Reformation was basically a religious movement which later became quite reactionary. Two notable things about the Reformation were that it did not produce more toleration and religious liberty and that the popular masses/ illiterates were little influenced by the sophisticated controversies of the Reformation. Popular religion continued to be the folk religion. The biggest influence of Reformation was that Christianity was divided into several Churches, mostly into national churches. Political authorities tried not to formally recognize more than one Church but yet the universal Catholic Church gave place to several religious perspectives, bitterly opposing one another. The existence of different religious options did not entail a sense of toleration or religious liberty because all parties believed in the notion of objective truth and they claimed to be against the public expression of religious error (Hillerbrand 1987: 253).

The secularization process could be initiated only after non-metaphysical rational and scientific explanations were satisfactorily provided for the evolution of the universe and human life thereon. The Renaissance thinkers and astronomers, as noted above, challenged the theological visions of the cosmos. Darwin's theory of evolution through natural selection confronted the Christian dogma about the earth being a creation of God and Adam and Eve being our common ancestors. The ideas produced by the astronomers and naturalists were confined to a few. The secularization process popularized them among people through publicity, viz. mass education, free press and social movements. In the 19th century, the great secularist campaigner, Charles Bradlaugh believed that extensive propaganda would ensure secularization. He held that secular ideas could be spread better not by playing on flutes but by the beating of drums (Chadwick 1985: 103)

Secularization Process

The secularization process in the West, as also in India, took place in a specific social milieu. It had several distinctly national features. The struggle between feudal lords and the bourgeoisie took a religious form in England and in The Netherlands but not so in France (Havrilyuk 1984). It is necessary to take cognizance, howsoever briefly, of the social history of secularisation 'for we live not only in nature but in human society which has its history of development and science' (Engles and Marx 1976: 206). The feudal state had very close relations with religious institutions. Monarchs lavished revenue-free land grants on religious institutions and the latter endowed their feudal patrons with the 'Grace of God.' For a short duration in its fight with the feudal state, the bourgeoisie took recourse to science and rationality with an anti-religious edge. The demands of parishes were curtailed, a number of clerical establishments were liquidated, the staff of the clergy was reduced and the principle of election was instituted among clergy men. Practice of feudal privileges based on heredity,

oppression based on the will of the Sovereign and the 'Divine Right' of monarchs to rule was challenged on rational grounds. In the emerging modern nation-states, democracy was proclaimed and the rights of citizens were guaranteed through evolution as in England or through revolution as in France. One of these rights was the freedom of conscience.

Freedom of conscience is considered the 'voice of God within us' by theologians. Instead, the rationalists believe that conscience is a by-product of the development of society. They hold that freedom of conscience passed through three stages in its development. The first stage was when people struggled for religious tolerance in a confessional state. The second stage was when religious freedom of conscience was asserted in a liberal democratic polity. In the third stage genuine freedom of conscience was accomplished because atheism was freely allowed on the assumption that conscience is the yardstick of religion and not vice versa.

Action and Reflection 20.1

Talk to a cross section of people and ask them what is secularism and secularization. Note your discussion in your notebook.

Even before the current phase of globalisation, capitalist institutions, like the market, integrated vast areas and people in different parts of the world. But the capitalist social relations divided the large national states distinctly into what Disraeli called 'two nations', viz. the wage-earners and the capitalists. The wage earners were devoid of ownership of the means of production due to their poverty. After being paid a subsistence wage, these workers were alienated from the fruits of their labour due to the prevailing social relations. Hence, they grasped the conception of God and institutions of religion to compensate in imagination what they had lost in the real world. Religion was welcomed by them into their culture in order to make the conditions of the 'heartless world' slightly more bearable. On the other hand, capitalists needed religion to buffet the brutal uncertainties strewn in their lives, both as individuals and firms, busy with the task of accumulating capital. The capitalists may occasionally also need religion to be used as an instrument to pacify potential rebels among wage-earners. Ironically, therefore, the liberal state, dominated by the capitalists, also resorted to religion to bless its actions, crown its dictators, sanction its laws, define as just its war against its enemies or violence against its citizens and generally be the decorous master of national ceremonies.

Secularization and other Institutions

Secularisation also gave birth to a large mosaic of relations between socio-political institutions and religion in western Europe itself. Lutheranism is the established faith in the Nordic countries (like Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Finland) and Catholicism enjoys a privileged position, though is not the established faith, in Italy, Spain and Portugal. Church of England has never been the state church but it has enjoyed some privileges like 26 top most Anglican bishops have seats in the House of Lords and Anglican priests preside over most state ceremonies. Yet, the Church of England is subordinate to the British sovereign because s/he is also the supreme governor of the Church of England. France, though Catholic, has become rigidly secular since 1905 when the Catholic Church was disestablished. Now, the French Government shows no preference for any religious group and prohibits clerics from teaching in the public schools. Mexico, where Catholics formed 92% of the total population in 2000, has implemented the most anti-clerical legislation in the West. Here it is legislated that:

- Church property belongs to the state;
- Worship services outside the Church was forbidden till some years ago;
- The government can open any place of worship and determine the number of clerics permitted in it;
- The clergy cannot vote, participate in politics, wear vestments in public or criticize public officials; and
- The church cannot own radio and television stations (Storey and Utter eds 2002: XI-XII)

Capitalist societies can be divided into two main categories according to the nature of Church-State relations. The first category consists of those who have a declared State religion and in the 1980s their number was around four dozen or about a quarter of all countries of the world. In these countries only the adherents of the State religion could become the head of the State, member of high state institutions and participate in the management of State affairs. In the second category fall countries which have officially declared the separation of the State from any religion but in practice religion is present in the cultural life of the nations. Agencies of the State get involved with the religious ceremonies in the interests of public order, religious education is regulated in the interests of uniform educational standards and religious institutions are overseen in the interests of public good. The Indian case falls in this latter category where there is a formal separation but actual involvement of the State with religious affairs.

20.6 The Indian experience

Secularism is 'not an optional extra for a modern democracy,' it is a necessity. There are several religious and caste groups whose members wish to relate with each other on a pluralist but egalitarian basis. Pluralism existed in India during the medieval times as well but the challenge to pluralism in our times is different. In medieval times hierarchy, and not equality, was the norm. Hence, the diverse religions and cultures had to find their place in the social hierarchy. On the one hand, even a non-Hindu religious group like the Syrian Christians had to be fitted in the caste system as one more *jati* (Bayly 1989 Ch. 7). On the other hand, the prime source of legitimacy was the force of arms but the conquering groups (like Mughals, Marathas and Sikhs) also tried to exercise cultural hegemony. The ruling, dominant groups would tolerate, even subsidize, different faiths provided the others publicly accepted their power. Bayly found that, in the 18th and 19th centuries, the dominant cultural groups of UP (whether the Muslim gentry in small towns or the Hindu merchants in Benaras) set the limits within which other cultural groups found their rights (Bayly 1983: 335-8). In modern times, all seek equal rights and no one would like to exercise them as a courtesy showered on them after bowing to the power of some dominant cultural group. Hence, there is a demand that the rights of people be equal and that they be engraved in law formulated by popular vote.

Colonial Impact

The European marvel of secularism hinged on Renaissance thought and industrial capitalism. The Indian secular experience is different from the European marvel due to colonialism. Colonialism, as we know, was not chosen by Indians but was foisted on India aggressively since the 18th century. Colonialism had a debilitating impact on both the development of Renaissance-like thought and industrial capitalism in India. Sushobhan Sarkar

said the Renaissance in Bengal, which was the leader of India in the 19th century, was partial and artificial. He noted two vital differences between the Indian and European forms of Renaissance. Firstly, the European Renaissance flourished in free and independent states whereas the Indian Renaissance struggled to make its appearance in a colonial situation of foreign conquest and domination. Secondly, the European Renaissance liberated the mind but this liberation was a part of a magnificent process in which Europe 'discovered' the world. The world witnessed a revolution in religion, the foundation of modern science, the rise of centralised states, a beginning of the break up of the old social system in which the bourgeoisie limited the power of monarchs, and the reorganisation of trade, industry and agriculture. The Indian Renaissance did not have any such sweep or vitality (Sarkar 1970: 149-50).

Box 20.2 The Salad Bowl

In India, after the revolt of 1857, the colonial state pulled itself out of the Utilitarian inspired, William Bentinck-led social reforms. Instead, by playing one religion and caste against another, the colonial state tried to practice the policy of 'divide and rule' so as to kill the possibility of a united opposition to it. Hence, the anti-colonial nationalists became the torch-bearers of secularism, social reform, national unity and much else. In the context of secularism, these nationalists were inspired by three distinct ideals. Firstly, they drew inspiration from modern western thought and especially from the English industrial and French political revolutions. Secondly, the Indian religious reformation also helped the nationalists to initially draw people into public activity and to conceptualise a future better than the 'oppressive present.' Thirdly, India is and was a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual country. The nationalist strategy of 'unity in diversity' served the political ideal of national unity just as well as it gave a boost to the secular ideal of a society with tolerance towards differences and of a culture which was a composite 'salad bowl', not a melting pot. In a 'salad bowl' each item retains its uniqueness but is also a part of whole. Similarly, the different socio-cultural groups retain their respective identities but also form a part of a bigger politico-economic entity called the Indian nation.

Secularism and Religion

In the context of secularisation, there has been a considerable debate about the suitability of the concept and practice of secularism in India and the differences between Gandhi and Nehru on this issue. T.N. Madan in his 'Secularism in its Place' makes a guarded attack on modernization. He says that secularism and Indian culture are mismatched due to two reasons. He said the mainstream Enlightenment view was that religion is irrational. If secularism wants to remove religion from Indian public life and culture, this will not happen. Secondly, Madan says that no religion would go away on eviction. In fact there will be a strong cultural resistance if religion is forcibly evicted. Nehru did not adopt the forcible eviction model of Turkey but Nehruvian ideologues tried to use state institutions for attaining secular objectives. They failed and some of the responsibility for the eruption of religious bigotry and communal violence must be laid at their door, said Madan (Madan 1991: 398).

To counter bigotry and intolerance, Madan offers two incompatible proposals. First, he wants that nobody should demand the removal of religion from public life. He wants the resources of every religion to be used for spreading tolerance and fighting fanaticism. Second, Madan wants the available versions of secularism to be rejected and, in their place, he

would like to have 'a modern secularism appropriate to the cultural context of India' (Bhargava 1998: 524).

Ashis Nandy has made a flamboyant and sweeping attack on Modernization. He distinguishes religion as faith from religion as ideology. Religion as faith is 'a way of life, a tradition which is definitionally non-monolithic and operationally plural.' Religion as ideology, on the other hand, is a 'subnational, national or cross-national identifier of populations contesting for or protecting non-religious, usually political or socio-economic, interests' (Nandy 1991: 398). Modernization produces religion as ideology and then generates secularism to meet its challenge. Nandy says modern scientific nationalist secularism is in crisis. He says that in places where religion has immense importance it is not possible to make religion a matter of private preference. Religion inevitably enters public life through the back door and this leads to communalization of politics. On the other hand, Nandy observed, secularism has turned into an intolerant ideology with modernization, development, scientific growth and nation-building as its allies or constituents. This secularism alienates believers and breeds both old and new kinds of violence. Such secularism breeds old violence in the form of backlash of marginalized believers which in turn reinvigorates bigotry and fanaticism. Secondly, this secularism generates new violence between nation-state and religious communities.

Notions of Secularism

Like Madan, Nandy also wants the rejection of secularism and inclusion of notions of tolerance existing in different faiths of India. Nandy says that there exist two notions of secularism. One is the standard Western one which keeps religion out of politics. The second alternative, non-Western secularism must have space for continuous dialogue among religious traditions and among the religious and the secular. This Nandy felt might lead each of the major faiths in the region to include within it an in-house version of other faiths which in turn will encourage internal criticisms and remind one of the diversity in the theories of transcendence (Bhargava 1998: 524-5). Nandy has two versions of secularism but only one version of modernity and that too negative. Hence, while Nandy rejects modernity and the modern notion of secularism, he is left with tolerance of traditional religions to defend his secularism with.

Madan and Nandy make an effective critique of hysterical anti-religiosity and the hyper-substantive secularism which excludes religion from public life. They would not like to privatize religion and rationalize politics. They criticize secularism for being invalid in circumstances where religion is of immense importance to people. The fact is that modern secularism arose because tolerance of traditional religion was exhausted and religious beliefs had become a reason for conflict. When these religions are faltering again, we cannot return to religion whose resources have proven inadequate in the past.

Modern culture is a mixed bag and its outright rejection may not be the best way to have secularism. On the one hand, modern culture has some frightening flaws like a drive to control; a purely instrumental and destructive stance towards nature and human life, towards poor, marginalized sections and victims of the savage side of capitalism; disorientation and a felt lack of meaning; a trivialization of freedom in consumer choice; and a confused hedonism. On the other hand, modern culture also promises great goods like freedom, human rights, democracy, the right to be different, and great movements for peace and human welfare on a global scale (such as Amnesty International and Medecins Sans Frontieres) (Taylor 2006 p 7).

Box 20.3 Tradition and Secularism

This brings us to the question as to what differences did Gandhi and Nehru have on the question of modernity, tradition and secularism. Nehru is seen as the modern monster and Gandhi is portrayed as a blind propagator of tradition. Both were deeply involved with changing Indian society and none of them was unmindful of its vast cultural treasures. They were not satisfied with any textbook definition of secularism. Gandhi's definition of secularism included respect for all religions but neutrality towards all forms of spiritual beliefs, including atheism. He changed the proposition 'God is Truth' to 'Truth is God' and performed the marriage of the daughter of an atheist disciple, Prof. Gora, in the name of Truth. When objections were raised, Gandhi had the invocation to God dropped from the Congress pledge in 1925 (Chandra 2004:3-23). Nehru not only led the struggle for Indian Independence but also had to venture into nation-building. His conception of secularism included religious pluralism, full civil liberties and equal opportunities. Not just tolerance, Nehru emphasised equality and suggested that his task was to build a modern state within the framework of India's culture (Gopal 1996: 209).

It is thought that Gandhi would have wanted the sacred to pervade the secular sphere and Nehru would have nothing to do with it. Facts are very different from this impression. Gandhi was a deeply religious man but he did not want Hinduism to interfere with secular political matters, especially those of State policy. In his *My Experiments with Truth* he wrote, 'My devotion to Truth has drawn me into the field of politics... those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics, do not know what religion means.' (Gandhi, 1929: 591). Gandhi even called his Non-Cooperation Movement, in 1920-21, 'a religious, purifying movement' and as a 'religious effort' (Young India, 1929: 14). He believed that politics cannot be divorced from politics because he wanted religion to pervade every action of human beings. But, in 1940, Gandhi declared, '...Here religion does not mean sectarianism. It means a belief in ordered moral government of the universe...This religion transcends Hinduism, Islam, Christianity etc.' (Harijan, 1940: 177-8). But, with the experience of cantankerous debates and horrific violence in the name of religion, since the 1940s, the same Gandhi demanded that religion be kept out of politics. At the time of the Quit India Movement, in August 1942, Gandhi said, 'Religion is a personal matter and should have no place in politics' (Harijan 1942:402). In September 1946, Gandhi told a missionary, 'If I were a dictator, religion and state would be separate. I swear by my religion. I will die for it. But it is my personal affair. The state has nothing to do with it' (Harijan 1946). Less than three weeks before his assassination by a Hindu communalist, Gandhi told people at a prayer meeting on 11 January 1948 that 'he wanted all nationalists not to mix religion with politics. They were Indians first and last in all secular matters. Religion was a personal affair of the individual concerned' (Tendulkar 1969: 240).

20.7 Conclusion

Much is made of the agnosticism and anti-religiosity of Nehru. But it is often not understood that 'Nehru was without religious faith but not without religious feeling.' He praised sages and savants and agreed with Vinoba Bhave that the days of politics and religion had been replaced by the days of science and spirituality (Gopal 1996: 208-209). He appreciated the value of religious epics in the life and culture of India. In his foreword to N. Chandrasekhara Aiyer's *Valmiki Ramayana*, Nehru acknowledged that the epic 'must have peculiar virtue in it' because it had a 'powerful

influence on millions of people, during some millennia of our changing history.' Nehru underlined the importance of seeing the whole of India (and not just a part) to have a full picture of her and of appreciating the deep roots of her past (and not just see the present) to understand her. He said an intellectual understanding of history is necessary but 'we must have even more an emotional awareness of our past and the present.' Nehru added that to understand India and her people fully it is necessary to have a 'knowledge of the two magnificent epics that are India's pride and treasure' (Nehru 1954). Barely two days before his death, Nehru asserted that India should increase production by modern industrial processes 'but in doing so we must not forget that the essential objective to be aimed at is the quality of the individual and the concept of *dharma* underlying it' (Gopal 1996: 209).

20.8 Further Reading

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Unit 21

Communalism and Fundamentalism

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- 21.2 Definition of Fundamentalism
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Learning Objectives

After you have studied this unit you should be able to:

- define fundamentalism;
- define communalism;
- outline the nexus between fundamentalism and communalism; and
- locate the targets of fundamentalism and communalism.

21.1 Introduction

There is a recent tendency, quite wrong though, to equate religious fundamentalism with communalism or to treat one as the synonym of the other. In fact, the two are quite distinct and different though they can become correlated and have many ideological and political elements in common.

21.2 Definition of Fundamentalism

Let us first take up the definition and basic tenets of fundamentalism. I am indebted to Sadik J. Al Azim's brilliant articles in South Asia Bulletin for my understanding as also delineation of fundamentalism. [the Bulletin, Vol. XIII, Nos. 1-2, 1993, and Vol. XIV, No. 1, 1994]. Though fundamentalism is not monolithic, it has enough common elements for us to try to define it. It is also not confined to the followers of any one religion and is to be found among Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus and Sikhs, though its strength among followers of different religions varies for historical reasons in terms of time and space and the formation and structure of different religions.

First of all, the fundamentalists argue for return to the fundamental tenets of a religion, for return to the original formulations and meanings given to a religion at the time of its foundation in its first texts. These texts have, moreover, to be literally understood, applied or implemented. There is to be no interpretation of or debate about their meanings. Consequently, all later developments, exegeses, interpretations, etc., are to be rejected and wiped out. Since the texts are seen as God's own

actual words, their meaning is bound to be clear and unambiguous as also changeless. How can then they be interpreted? And, of course, the question of later generations thinking originally does not arise. Thus for Christian fundamentalists, God's words are permanently given in the Old and New Testaments and for the Muslim fundamentalists in the Koran and the Sunnah (The Prophet's sayings). Some Hindus regard the Vedas as God's immutable words. Similarly, many Sikhs so regard the Gurbani. In fact the fundamentalists regard all efforts to interpret, not to speak to amend, the original texts in the light of modern social conditions and state of human knowledge as blasphemous, as acts of enemies within. And, of course, any effort to read them as mytho-realities or allegories is damned as worse than heresy.

Second, fundamentalists assert that all aspects and areas of life are to be governed by the true, revealed religion as embodied in the original texts. God's words and law are to be the basis of society, economy, polity, culture, and law and the entire domestic and personal life of the believer.

Some Examples

As Gary North, one of the American fundamentalists, has put it, the Bible contains answers to all problems a person faces today including "the concrete, day-to-day problems of economics, family relationships, politics, law, medicine, and all other areas of life". Similarly, Judge Abdul-Jawed Yasin rejects the modern secular notion that religion pertains only to one area of a person's life, that is, his personal spiritual life. It is wrong to hold, he says, that "just as there are economic affairs, social affairs, political affairs, foreign affairs, family affairs, legal affairs, administrative affairs... there are religious affairs too... confined to rituals and piety." This, he says, reduces religion to "a mere aspect among life's many aspects" and to "a mere specific need among man's many other needs". "Religion," he argues, "is not a side affair among life's many affairs, but the divine 'way' according to which man runs his individual and collective affairs of life. It is the method drawn by God for the community: for its economic affairs, social affairs, political affairs, legislative affairs, psychological affairs, internal affairs, external affairs and any other affairs that it may have." A Muslim fundamentalist has put this view as follows: "God's final religion contains all the legislations required

Essays 'on Contemporary India by any society, any place, any time and in all spheres of life". The fundamentalists consequently totally reject the pluralist principle of "many Gods, many moralities, many laws"

21.3 Politics Religion and Education

More specifically, the fundamentalists attack the separation of religion from politics and state, and therefore the idea of the secular state. If God is supreme over all, then the political rule is also His domain, and how can then the state be outside the religious realm? The state, in fact, has to be a theocracy.

Similarly, the fundamentalists insist on religious control over education so that not only is true religion taught in schools and colleges but nothing contrary to it is taught. The famous encyclical, The Syllabus of Modern Errors, issued by Pope Pius IX in 1864, and one of the first modern statements of religious fundamentalism, after damning the view "that from civil law descend and depend all the rights of parents over their children, and above all, the right of instructing and educating them", condemns those "most false teachers" who "endeavour to eliminate the salutary teaching and influence of the Catholic Church from the instruction

and education of youth, and miserably to infect and deprave by every pernicious error and vice the tender and pliant minds of youth". The fundamentalists, therefore, advocate boycott of modern state-run or state-supported schools and their replacement by schools where the traditional religious system of teaching is followed. Some even argue that only that much education is needed as is sufficient to read and follow religious texts or to meet "a practical and real need" in terms of worldly affairs.

In particular, all laws have to be derived from the earliest or founding texts. The Muslim fundamentalists, in particular, demand that all laws must be derived from the Koran and the Sunnah. Even here, the fundamentalists tend to emphasize primarily the harsh ancient penal codes, such as amputation of hands and feet, stoning of the guilty, public flogging, and death punishment for a large number of crimes, some quite petty. For example, some of the American fundamentalists advocate death penalty for the following crimes, among other crimes, on the basis of Mosaic, i.e., God's Laws in the Old Testament: "murder, adultery, unchastity, sodomy, bestiality, homosexuality, rape, incest, fornication, incorrigibility in children, Sabbath breaking, kidnapping, apostasy, idolatry, blasphemy, sacrificing to false Gods, propagating false doctrines, false pretension to prophecy, witchcraft and sorcery".

21.4 Fundamentalism and Equality of Religions

The fundamentalists do not believe in the equality of all religions or even the grant of liberty to all religions to exist, for how can false religions be treated as equal to the true religion or be given the liberty to preach and practise falsehood? The same logic leads the fundamentalists to oppose the concept of the unity of all religions. In fact, most of them urge the prohibition and suppression of religions other than their own in countries where 6 followers of their religion constitute the majority. One slightly different but in fact the same aspect of this is the demand of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad that all Islamic religious or cultural influences should be removed from the country. Of course, missing the irony or the absurdity of the situation, the fundamentalists demand the liberty to preach and practise their own religion where they happen to be in a minority. They also, in that case, often demand separation of the state from religion, i.e., the religion of the majority.

We may also take note of a few other features of fundamentalism. It is opposed to reason and rationalism, humanism and secularism. It is anti-science and denies the validity of all human knowledge which is outside the religious realm. As Prof. SadikJ.Al-Azim has pointed out: "Both (Christian and Muslim fundamentalists) invest efforts in what they call the re-Christianization and/or re-Islamization of human knowledge. As a consequence, both find themselves compelled to elaborate theories about and concoct recipes of Biblico-Christian and/or Koranico-Muslim foundations and principles of natural science, economics, history, law, government, politics, sociology, psychology, and so on." In India, the Hindu fundamentalists have been, in the last few years, making claims for Hindu mathematics and so on.

Sovereignty and Religion

The fundamentalists are also opposed to the idea of popular sovereignty and the resulting practice of democracy and

constitutional government. This is, in a way, inevitable, for if sovereignty belongs to God and all laws and policies should be based on God's words as

revealed in the holy texts, then where is the scope for constitutions and for the people to determine

Box 21.1 The True Believers

There can also not exist more than one party—the party of God or the true believers. In general the fundamentalists attack the basic ideas and values of the Enlightenment, especially modern science, reason and the idea of progress, often for being western, and, in the case of Christian fundamentalists, for being pagan in origin and for their claim to be independent of faith.

Before I take up the question of communalism I would like to enter a few caveats, though without elaboration. Even though sharing some common features, fundamentalism is different from devout belief, or religiosity or religious orthodoxy, or belief in the fundamental beliefs and values of one's religion. For the religiously orthodox are not intolerant of others' religious beliefs. Take, for example, both the firmness of religious belief and the high degree of catholicity towards others' beliefs among the Sufis and Vaishnavites in our own country. In fact, both would be declared to be 'practitioners of error' by the fundamentalists of their own religions.

21.5 Definition of Communalism

Let us now define communalism. This is best done historically, that is by a study of its development in modern India. Communalism in India developed through three stages, each stage providing its own definition of communalism and merging into the next stage.

Communalism developed during the last quarter of the 19th century when the view was put forward that followers of a religion in the whole of India have in common not only their religion and religious interests but also some political, economic, social and cultural interests. This view led to the notion that in India, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians form distinct communities and that India or the Indian nation is formed by these distinct communities. These communities have their own leaders, for example, Hindu leaders and Muslim leaders, who defend and fight for the interests of their communities. Unfortunately many nationalists accepted and began to use the terminology of religion-based communities even when they did not accept its basic communal content. Thus they talked and wrote about Hindu community, Muslim community, etc. Communalism entered a second stage in the beginning of the 20th century, when communalism proper made an appearance.

Action and Reflection 21.1

Differentiate between fundamentalisms and communalism on the basis of newspaper and media reports. Put down your findings in a notebook.

The communalists now argued that followers of a religion have, as a community, some interests separate from those of the followers of other religions; that is, many of the economic and political interests of the followers of different religions diverge and are sometimes opposite because of their following different religions. At the same time, the communalists agreed that Indians, belonging to different religions, also have many common economic and political interests, in particular vis-à-vis the colonial rulers. Thus, these communalists, who may be described as liberal communalists, accepted that Hindus and Muslims have common interests; but, they argued that, as communities, they have additional and separate interests of their own. They usually held that Indians can and should fight together for political freedom and economic development, once their

separate communal interests are recognized and adjusted or settled through mutual compromise and give and take.

Two Nation Theory

Communalists of the third stage argued that the secular interests of the followers of different religions were not only different, but mutually totally antagonistic. What was good for Hindus was bad for Muslims, what was good for Muslims was bad for Hindus and so on. Hindus and Muslims could never form one nation or live together as equals and fellow-citizens—there was nothing in life to unite them. Thus was born the two-nation theory in its two communal versions. According to the Muslim League and Mohammed Au Jinnah, Hindus and Muslims in India formed two different nations because they followed two different• religions—and the two must separate and form two separate nation-states because their interests clashed totally.

21.6 Fundamentalism and Communalism

As pointed out in the beginning, fundamentalism and communalism have certain ideological elements in common. On the other hand, they also differ from each other. Both attack the concept of separation of religion from politics and the state. Both oppose the concept of equal truth in all religions or the unity of different religions. Both advocate control over education by the followers of the dominant religion. Both believe in restoration of the past values and 'greatness' rather than in progress towards the unknown so that 'greatness' and progress lie in the future. Both share the notion that their societies had achieved near-human perfection in the very early centuries when their religions were founded and were practised in their pristine purity and then declined and 'fell'. Both oppose secularism and believe that it corrupts society. Both oppose secular nationalism and the anti-imperialist and nationalist view of his

But these common features do not make the two the same. To take a very different example, it is clear that indigenism and post-modernism have many ideological positions in common with fundamentalism, especially opposition to science, reason, progress, secularism and nationalism, but they are basically poles apart.

Differences of Perception

The communalist and the fundamentalist differ in many ways, though in a multi-religious society a fundamentalist tends to be communal while communalists are quite often not fundamentalists. For example, in India, the Hindu Mahasabha, the RSS, the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Muslim League, and the Akali Dal were and are communal parties but they were not and are not fundamentalist. Similarly, Pakistan and to a certain extent Bangladesh are communal states but they are no fundamentalist states. If we look at the programmatic, policy or ideological statements and propaganda of the communal parties, the difference becomes clear, for not many of the fundamentalist tenets would be found in them.

Box 21.2 The Manusmriti

Let me take up a few examples, Modern science is quite compatible with communalism, though the fundamentalists see it as an enemy. The fundamentalists oppose any notion of reform or further development of religious beliefs and tenets or social structure, practices and institutions based on them. The communalists can and often do favour reform of inherited religions. and social structures. This is, in particular, true of Hindu communalists. The basic, fundamental tenet of Hinduism is the caste system and the basic social text is Manusmriti. There is little in the Vedas or Upanishads or Geeta on which a fundamentalist can build a full structure. Manusmriti is perhaps the only such text. Yet hardly any Hindu communalist is committed to it or to the caste system in a fundamentalist manner. In fact, except for a handful of die-hard priests, hardly any Hindu communalist today defends the caste system and its basic inequitable features or claims to live by the dictates of the Manusmriti.

The fundamentalists seriously urge the actual revival of the pristine past and its religious, social, cultural, legal and political practices. This is not the case with the communalists who may appeal to the past as ideology or nostalgia but whose gaze is clearly fixed on the modern world.

The relationship of the fundamentalists and the communalists to religion is also only superficially similar. The former are deeply religious, their entire ideology relates to religion and they want to base the state, society, and daily life of the individual on religion. The communalists, on the other hand, have hardly much to do with religion, except that they base their politics on religious identity and thus use religion for the purposes of struggle for political power. The communal state is thus not necessarily a theocratic state. For example, even when declared to be Islamic states, Pakistan and Bangladesh are communal states and not theocratic states. Interestingly, only a minority of the communalists in Pakistan or Bangladesh demand the literal application of the ancient laws (according to the Shariah), and hardly any Hindu or Muslim communalist does so in India.

Action and Reflection 21.2

Talk to some knowledgeable people about fundamentalism and communalism with reference to religion. Note down your findings and then compare with 21.6 above.

Similarly, the fundamentalists want to Christianize or Islamize or Hinduize the whole world. Not so the communalists; they only want to communalize and can only communalize their own society.

It is, therefore, not accidental that in our country the communalists have often not only not been fundamentalists but have not been even religious. Thus M.A. Jinnah or Liaquat Ali Khan or Feroze Khan Noon were not very religious; In pre-independent India only the followers of Maulana Maudoodi among the Muslim communalists were fundamentalists, and, interestingly, they were opposed to the demand for the partition of India.

21.7 Targets of Fundamentalism and**Communalism**

The targets of fundamentalism and communalism are also very different. The fundamentalists basically target fellow believers who do not agree with them, while the targets of the communalists most often are the other religious communities.

There is a major critical reason why the communalists are seldom fundamentalists and can even oppose the latter. They make every attempt to communalize and unite the members of their religious community. That alone can bring them into political power, especially in a democratic polity. But it is in the very nature of fundamentalism to divide and constantly fragment the followers of a religion. This is for two reasons. First, not many can adopt fundamentalism in practice or even in belief. Second, by rigid definitions, they tend to exclude rather than include. Anyone who does not agree with their definition of true religion becomes a nonbeliever and, therefore, sooner or later an enemy. When they talk of annihilating the infidels, they are often referring to their own co-religionists. In fact, such is their extreme religious fanaticism that they constantly divide among themselves to split and fragment.

21.8 Conclusion

21.9 Further Reading

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