

SACRED SYMBOLS AND PRACTICES ACROSS THE RELIGIOUS-SECULAR DIVIDE

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Abstract: There is no unanimity of opinion among scholars on what is considered as sacred. While there are scholars who argue that religion has the exclusive control over the sacred, there are also others who argue that the process of secularization has taken the sacred outside the control of organized religion. This paper is an attempt to challenge the polarity between religious and secular in the context of the discussion of the sacred. By drawing examples from the arena of modern politics I will try to show how the solemn in modern societies is closely associated with or resemble the sacred in religion. The political symbolisms, rituals and practices of modern nation states get their sanctity and solemnity by being associated with or by resembling religious symbols, rituals and practices. I argue that the idea of solemn in modern societies is neither restricted to the obviously religious nor to those cases where religion and politics mix but is also found in outwardly non-religious or secular contexts, thus prompting us to take a relook at the so-called secular.

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1. Introduction

Richard Fenn states that “The Sacred is always full of an uncanny potency.”¹ The social significance of the ‘sacred’ in a

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¹Richard K. Fenn, “Religion and the Secular, the Sacred and the Profane: The Scope of the Argument” (Editorial Commentary) in *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion*, Malden: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2001, 8.

society is a widely recognized fact. Any object, occasion, or space, which is considered sacred, gets a privileged status and protection in the public sphere. In other words, they become inviolable. Any violation of the sacred, symbolic or otherwise, is dealt with strict punishments. Alleged violation of sacred symbols has resulted in gruesome violence across the world. One of the most recent examples would be the killings associated with a cartoon published in a French Magazine *Charlie Hebdo* on Prophet Mohammed. This potency associated with the sacred makes it a significant area of enquiry.

While there are scholars who argue that religion has the exclusive control over the sacred, there are also others who argue that the process of secularization has taken the sacred outside the control of organized religion. French philosopher Emile Durkheim was one of the pioneers to draw a distinction between the realms of the sacred and the profane. According to him, there are sacred things and profane things in every society.² Durkheim defined the sacred as “that which is inviolable – that which is impossible to go beyond, for it relates to the ultimate – the ultimate as determined by society.”³ The notion of the sacred was central to Durkheim’s understanding of religion. He defines profane as “that which is not sacred.”⁴ For example, it includes activities which are mundane and trivial. For Durkheim, the polarity between the sacred and the profane worlds is central to religious thought.⁵ Views like that of Durkheim which deemed the sacred as belonging exclusively to the realm of religion

²Alexander T. Riley, “‘Renegade Durkheimianism’ and the Transgressive Left Sacred,” in Jeffrey C Alexander and Philip Smith, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Durkheim*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 274.

³W. S. F. Pickering, “Religion,” in W. S. F. Pickering ed., *Durkheim Today*, New York: Bergahn Books, 2002, 32.

⁴Riley, “‘Renegade Durkheimianism’ and the Transgressive Left Sacred,” 274.

⁵Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, New York: Dover Publications, 2008, 37.

tended to enjoy monopoly over the ‘sacred’ in academic discussions for a long time.

However, this tendency to look at the sacred as belonging exclusively to the domain of religion is undergoing a big change in recent times. Scholars are increasingly arguing that it is important to understand the sacred outside the purview of organized religion. Richard Fenn says: “the more complex and diverse a society becomes, moreover, and the more varied become the expressions of the sacred, the more abstract and formulaic become the beliefs and values of religion, and the more distant they are from the decisions and contexts that constitute everyday life.”⁶ In his view, notions of sacred are no longer restricted to the rigid boundaries of religion. In other words, religion cannot solely hold in its fold the different expressions of sacred in a society. Fenn argues:

Proliferation, diversification, and dispersion, dissension and disruption: these are some of the forms taken by the sacred in societies undergoing the sort of social changes that are associated with the growth of cities, the spread of industry, the movement of people and capital, and the interchange of ideas and symbols across the borders of communities and nations.⁷

The decline of organized religion and the process of secularization have led to a situation where there is a proliferation of the sacred to avenues, which do not have any links with religion. Thus, elements of the sacred are found in popular culture, political practices, and even sport events.⁸ As a result, some spaces and objects deemed profane for a long time have, later, achieved the status of the sacred.

⁶Fenn, “Religion and the Secular, the Sacred and the Profane: The Scope of the Argument” (Editorial Commentary), 5.

⁷Fenn, “Religion and the Secular,” 16.

⁸For an analysis of the sacred in sports, see John M. Goodger, “Collective Representations and the Sacred in Sport,” *International Review of the Sociology of Sport* 20 (1985), 179-188, DOI: 10.1177/101269028502000303, (7 June 2015).

The sharp line of divide between the religious and the secular as representing the sacred and the profane, respectively, becomes blurred on careful analysis of different instances. By drawing examples from the arena of politics, I try to show how the sacred in modern societies is neither restricted to the obviously religious nor to those cases where religion and politics mix but is also found in those outwardly non-religious or secular contexts, thus, prompting us to take a relook at the so-called secular.

I would like to present six categories, which show different levels and degrees of interaction between religion and politics through the medium of symbols and ritualized practices in the public sphere.⁹ They are the following: (i) The Case of Theocratic and Quasi Theocratic States, (ii) Nationalism as Religion, (iii) Religious Symbolism in Political Mobilization, (iv) State-Religion Nexus in Public Sphere, (v) Informal Evocation of Religious Symbolism in Public Sphere, and (vi) Sacredness of the Secular State. With the help of this categorization I hope to raise some relevant questions such as, Is there a problem with the diffusion of sacred symbols in different spheres? Should all kinds of sacred symbolism be presented under one banner, either of religion or of politics? Is it possible to do that? Is there a problem with our understanding of the secular? And, finally, how does one understand the relationship between the sacred and the secular? While it is not possible to conclusively answer these questions, raising them is pertinent to understand the complex nature of modern political symbolisms and practices. These questions, I hope, will alert us to the need for a deeper reading of the practices of secular politics, especially the ideas of solemnity and sanctity present in them.

⁹The public sphere mentioned here varies from highly institutionalized spaces to the non-institutionalized ones.

2. The Case of Theocratic and Quasi Theocratic States

According to Jean Jacques Rousseau, theocracy was the first form of government known to humankind.¹⁰ In his opinion, initially, people “had no other kings than Gods,” and “nor any other government than theocracy.”¹¹ In the case of a theocracy or even a quasi theocratic state, there is explicit interaction between religion and politics in public sphere. There is no separation between religion and politics on principle. There is unambiguous use or presence of religious symbolism in the affairs of the state. Use of religious symbolism in such states is a way of asserting the inseparability of religious and state power.¹² In such societies, there is an obvious identity of the religious and the sacred. The symbols in the public sphere are religious and, hence, sacred.

The case of Iran is an illuminating example. Iran has a hybrid constitution consisting of theocratic and democratic elements. If we look at the national flag of Iran, the statement “God is Great” is written on it in white Kufic script for 22 times.¹³ The Emblem on the Flag is designed by blending various Islamic Elements. Four crescents on the flag of Iran are symbolic of the growth of

¹⁰Jean Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, ed. Roger D Masters, trans. Judith R. Masters, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1978, 124, cited in Lucas A Swaine, “How Ought Liberal Democracies to Treat Theocratic Communities,” *Ethics* 111 (2001), 303, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/233475>> (2 January 2015).

¹¹Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, 124.

¹²According to a Pew Research Centre Report 64, countries have religious symbols on their national flags, which is one third of the total 196 countries in the world. While national flags of 31 countries have Christian symbols, 21 countries have Islamic symbols on their national flags. Hindu and Buddhist symbols are present on 5 national flags. However, we cannot consider all these countries to be theocratic or quasi-theocratic. <<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/11/25/64-countries-have-religious-symbols-on-their-national-flags/>> 4 March 2015.

¹³Charles Wills, ed., *Complete Flags of the World*, New York: DK Publishing, 2005, 189.

Islam.¹⁴ Iran also has many powerful religious leaders in different government posts. In spite of having all the “paraphernalia of a modern state,”¹⁵ Iran continues to maintain the undeniable influence of religion in the affairs of the state. The head of the state is a *faqih*,¹⁶ who possesses more power than the Iranian President. The leader is elected by the *Majles-e-Khobregan* (Assembly of Experts or Council of Experts).¹⁷ Thus, the clergy in Iran function as leadership symbols both for the religion and for the State. As noted by Jahangir Amuzegar, “the ruling clerics self-assuredly boast about their unshakable staying power, due to their ‘God-sanctioned’ legitimacy.”¹⁸

By the close association of religious symbolism to the affairs of the state, the state, its leadership, and its symbols go through a process of sacralisation, thus, questioning the profanity associated with it by many in other scenarios. In other words, the state is no longer something merely profane. It has sanctity; its the sanctity and the authority are entirely based on its religious character and expressed through religious symbolism. Although it is not surprising to note the presence of religious symbolism in theocratic polities, it is crucial to note how the machineries and mechanisms of *modern*¹⁹ politics continue to depend on religious symbolisms for legitimacy. This is crucial because most of the time modernity professes a marked break from tradition and religion. However, avowedly religious elements and particular practices of the modern state operate together in a theocratic country. While I have elaborated only the

¹⁴Wills, *Complete Flags of the World*, 189.

¹⁵Jahangir Amuzegar, “Iran’s Theocracy under Siege,” *Middle East Policy* 10 (2003), 139, DOI: 10.1111/1475-4967.00097, (7 June 2015).

¹⁶A *faqih* is a scholar or an expert in Islamic law.

¹⁷Islamic Scholars who are competent in Interpreting *Shariah* law.

¹⁸Amuzegar, “Iran’s Theocracy under Siege,” 136.

¹⁹My emphasis.

case of Iran, there are other countries like Saudi Arabia and Yemen, which follow a similar model.²⁰

3. Nationalism as Religion

That nationalism resembles religion is not an entirely new idea. It is found in the writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau and Alexis De Tocqueville. In recent times, authors like Emilio Gentile²¹ and Anthony Smith have tried to address this issue in some detail. In this section, I try to explain how certain kinds of nationalism attain the status of an organized religion through the use of certain symbolisms.

Nationalism, when manifested in highly intense forms, attains the characteristics of an organized religion. Anthony Smith says:

Considered strictly as a political doctrine, nationalism may be secular; but, seen as a set of reiterated cultural practices, it appears in a new guise, as a form of religion, one that is of this world and human centered, certainly, and thus secular, but a religion nonetheless, with the nation as its exclusive divinity, the sovereign people as the elect, a distinction between sacred national and profane foreign objects and symbols, a strong conviction of national history and destiny and, above all, its own national rites and ceremonies.²²

Symbols and symbolic practices play a crucial role in building sacredness around the idea of the nation. Similarly, the symbolism associated with nationalism has different roles to play and evokes multiple meanings in different contexts. The degree of sanctity and religiosity associated with symbols of

²⁰Although Saudi and Yemen follow a system of monarchy, theocratic elements are dominant in their respective legal-administrative systems.

²¹See Emilio Gentile, “Political Religion: A Concept and Its Critics,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 6 (2005), 19-32, DOI:10.1080 /14690760500099770, (7 June 2015).

²²Anthony D. Smith, *Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach*, New York: Routledge, 2009, 76-77.

nationalism vary according to the differences in context. In order to elaborate this, we shall look at two examples.

The symbols and rituals associated with National Socialism or Nazism offer us an excellent case. Simon Taylor, in his work titled "Symbol and Ritual under National Socialism," argues that for Nazism "symbol and ritual were important means of ideological presentation and reinforcement."²³ In his opinion, the Nazi political ritual should be seen as the central component of an ideological system that constantly sought expressions in mysteries of myth and symbolism.²⁴ In Nazi Germany, there were extraordinary adulation and deification of the leader Hitler and systematic performance and participation in rituals exalting the Nazi ideology. Hitler and his party extensively drew upon Christian symbolism and used it in a way that stimulated allegiance to the leader Hitler. For example, Simon Taylor says:

... Bloodflag, as the holiest relic of the National Socialist movement, projected its significance and power to all other flags through the medium of the sacrificial blood, in the same way as the Christian crucifix, derives its thaumaturgical²⁵ significance from the original Cross of Golgotha.²⁶

The flag carried in front of Hitler during the Flag dedication ceremony was further sanctified by his touch. Here, Hitler becomes a sacred symbol of national unity commanding respect and fear. Taylor says: "Just as the flag derived its 'sacred' character from its analogy to the Christian cross, so Hitler derived a significant part of his status by appropriating the messianic qualities of Christ."²⁷ Hitler was presented and revered both as a skilful political leader and a leader with

²³Simon Taylor, "Symbol and Ritual under National Socialism," *The British Journal of Sociology* 32 (1981) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/59013>> (3 March 2015).

²⁴Taylor, "Symbol and Ritual under National Socialism," 504.

²⁵Thaumaturgy is the capacity or the power to work magic or miracles. Several Christian Saints were referred to by the terms 'thaumaturge', translated in English as 'wonder worker'.

²⁶Taylor, "Symbol and Ritual under National Socialism," 509.

²⁷Taylor, "Symbol and Ritual under National Socialism," 510.

messianic qualities. Thus, using various sacred symbols and elements of mythology the Nazi nationalist agenda itself achieved a sacred status.

Yet another case is that of Bharat Mata, the Indian Nation imagined as a goddess. The presentation of Bharat Mata as a goddess was a common practice during the Indian freedom struggle. According to Suruchi Thapar, poetry, literature, and movies played a significant role in propagating the idea of the Bharat Mata.²⁸ There were different ways in which Bharat Mata was imagined and represented. In many instances, the goddess was pictured as suffering in the shackles of evil foreigners. Sacrifice was demanded for liberating the goddess. As Suruchi Thapar points out, “... the deified image of a ‘single’ mother for the whole nation, whose honour had to be protected, aroused the national sentiments of the population as a whole.”²⁹ It was the duty of Indians to liberate her from the clutches of colonial power.

In other examples of similar symbolism, Bharat Mata, the goddess, was presented as the all powerful ultimately vanquishing all the conquerors. Thapar says: “Invariably, the image was of a crowned and beautiful woman in ‘shackles’ weeping ‘tears of blood’, or of the same woman holding aloft a trident and leading her countless sons and daughters to battle.”³⁰ According to Charu Gupta, “the symbols of mother was [sic] effective especially because it could take on different meanings in different contexts.”³¹ Charu Gupta cites the case of the Bharat Mata temple in Banaras, where the object of worship is ‘a huge relief map of the country’.³² The sanctity associated with Bharat

²⁸Suruchi Thapar, “Women as Activists, Women as Symbols: A Study of the Indian Nationalist Movement,” *Feminist Review* 44 (1993), 88, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1395197>> (4 March 2015)

²⁹Thapar, “Women as Activists,” 88.

³⁰Thapar, “Women as Activists,” 88.

³¹Charu Gupta, “The Icon of Mother in Late Colonial North India,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 36 (2001), 4291, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4411354>> (4 March 2015).

³²Gupta, “Icon of Mother,” 4291.

Mata is extended to different realms when a temple is constructed for the Nation imagined as a deity. Gupta says: "The Hindu nationalists, through a detailed and precise mapping of the nation in a temple, with the emotive name of Bharat Mata, were able to combine (or hybridise?) science with emotion and modernity with traditional beliefs."³³ Gupta's analysis is an attempt to explain how the map, considered as a "metonym for colonial modernity" devoid of the influence of religion, is used in such a way that it attains sanctity similar to that of any religious icon.³⁴

Both these cases show how emulation of religious symbols, rituals, and practices gives a 'nation' and its agendas a sanctity and solemnity similar to that of religion.

4. Religious Symbolism in Political Mobilization

In understanding the relationship between the sacred and the secular, it is pertinent for us to consider the importance of religious symbols in political mobilizations. Religious symbols have often been used for political mobilizations across the world. They are used for mobilizing public in favour of those in authority or in favour of dominant groups; similarly, it is also employed in counter movements which challenge the power of dominant groups.

Donald Smith argues that use of religious symbols for political mobilization is prominent in transitional societies. For, "in traditional societies, religion is a mass phenomenon, politics is not: in transitional societies religion can serve as the means by which masses become politicized."³⁵ Smith's argument finds resonance with William Safran who says that "Modern nation-

³³Gupta, "Icon of Mother," 4291-4292.

³⁴Gupta, "Icon of Mother," 4291-4292.

³⁵Donald Eugene Smith, *Religion and Political Development*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970, 124, cited in Barbara Southard, "The Political Strategy of Aurobindo Ghosh: The Utilization of Hindu Religious Symbolism and the Problem of Political Mobilization in Bengal," *Modern Asian Studies* 14 (1980), 353, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/312137>> (12 December 2014).

builders may invoke religion and use selective religious symbols for purposes of social and political mobilization...”³⁶ Both their views could be substantiated by examining the case of Indian Freedom struggle.

In India, religious symbols were used for political mobilization during freedom struggle by different groups. Suchitra Vijayan writes:

Mobilizing the Gods for political ends has a long chequered history in the subcontinent. As the political movement for Indian independence took shape, mobilizing the masses through use of religion and religious symbols became an important political strategy employed by various factions. This included Gandhi, who understood the value of powerful political symbols that can [sic] be used to mobilize the country’s disparate population. He actively employed Hindu symbols, phrases and icons towards nationalist ends – bonfires; the image of India as a Hindu goddess; and invoking Ram Rajya as the ideal form of governance.³⁷

Apart from Gandhi, there were other leaders who used religious symbolism for mobilizing the masses during national movements. For example, it is said that “... the nationalist rhetoric of Aurobindo Ghosh and other leaders of the political movement protesting the decision of the Government of British India to partition Bengal province in 1905 contained frequent allusions to Hindu Myths and symbols.”³⁸ One of the prominent religious symbols used was that of goddess Kali. Southard says:

³⁶William Safran, “Comparing Visions of the Nation,” in Mitchell Young, Eric Zuelow, and Andreas Sturm, eds., *Nationalism in a Global Era: The Persistence of Nations*, New York: Routledge, 2007, 34.

³⁷Suchitra Vijayan, “Rewriting the Nation State,” *The Hindu*, 17 March 2015, <<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/rewriting-the-nation-state/article7000964.ece>> (6 May, 2015).

³⁸Barbara Southard, “The Political Strategy of Aurobindo Ghosh: The Utilization of Hindu Religious Symbolism and the Problem of Political Mobilization in Bengal,” *Modern Asian Studies* 14 (1980), 353, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/312137>> (12 December 2014).

“the nation was described as the incarnation of the goddess Kali, and the nationalists were considered as her devotees.”³⁹

Sometimes political mobilization with the use of religious symbols can be part of or to generate fascist tendencies. Numerous communal riots in India in the post-independence era offer us examples in this regard.

A prominent example is that of the riots associated with the destruction of Babri Masjid in 1992 and the consequent political developments. In 1992, Babri Masjid, a mosque in the city of Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh, was destroyed by a group of Hindu fundamentalists. In the ensuing riots, thousands of people were killed. According to K. N. Panickar,

a dispute which had remained dormant for about forty years was enlivened by the BJP and turned into a ‘national’ issue, imbuing it with cultural and political significance. An important factor which made this transformation possible was the mobilising potential of religious symbols constantly brought into play by the Sangh Parivar.⁴⁰

In 1991, the BJP based its election campaign on the demand for the construction of a temple in Ayodhya. As noted by Panickar, this nexus between religion and politics proved to be extremely rewarding to the BJP as it won as many as 118 seats in the Indian Parliament and emerged as the main opposition. More importantly, it came to power in four north Indian states – Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh – and recorded its presence in almost all other states. The Ayodhya movement enabled the BJP to expand its electoral base rather quickly.⁴¹

Religious symbols are not only used in political mobilisations with nationalist or communal agendas. There are also instances where the weaker sections have made use of religious symbolism to mobilize themselves against oppression. The

³⁹Southard, “Political Strategy of Aurobindo Ghosh,” 353.

⁴⁰K. N. Panickar, “Religious Symbols and Political Mobilisation,” *Social Scientist* 21 (1993), 63-64, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3520346>, (9 April 2015).

⁴¹Panickar, “Religious Symbols and Political Mobilisation,” 63.

backward castes in India organising themselves around the symbols and identity of Buddhism to fight upper caste domination is a good example for this.⁴²

The potential of religious symbolism for powerful political mobilisations of different kind becomes well evident from the above examples. Manjari Katju says:

It has been the effort of all national and other identity-based movements to focus on certain universally held beliefs of their group, and to initiate political mobilisation through publicly visible and easily accessible symbols which embody them. These beliefs and mobilisation around symbols are the basis on which unity of political action is built.⁴³

Thus, from the colonial period to contemporary times, religious symbols have been successfully used by different political groups with specific agendas.

5. State-Religion Nexus in Public Sphere

Even in states which claim to be explicitly secular and devoid of the influence of religion, there are apparent instances of unwarranted nexus between the state and religion. A few examples from India are worth considering. These instances show how certain functionaries of the state adapt the sacred symbolism of religion to a space and purpose, which, at least in theory, does not hold any bias in favour of any religion.

Sometimes the inaugurations of state sponsored buildings have Brahmin priests officiating the laying of foundation and undertaking of *Bhoomi Puja* (Worship of Earth). Similarly, most public functions have lighting of lamps, garlanding, and so on. Sometimes there are statues of Goddess *Saraswati* kept on the stage where events take place and they are usually garlanded before the functions begin. State has also been providing the funding for construction of various religious places of worship.

⁴²For more on this see Johannes Beltz, *Mahar, Buddhist, and Dalit: Religious Conversion and Socio-Political Emancipation*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2005.

⁴³Manjari Katju, *Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Indian Politics*, Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2003, 43.

In fact, it interferes in religious matters considerably. For example, there are government appointed members on the Boards of various Hindu temples. Ministers attending the inaugurations of temples, churches, and mosques has become a routine phenomenon in India.

In an article "The Hinduisation of Public Sphere in India," Meera Nanda gives the example of Shri Hari Mandir, a temple in Porbandar in Gujarat.⁴⁴ The temple was inaugurated on 4 February 2006, by the then Vice-President of India, Bhairon Singh Shekhawat and the then Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi. An excerpt from Nanda's description of the temple inauguration is insightful.

The elected representatives of "secular" India, in their official capacity, prayed before the temple idols - something so routine that it hardly evokes any response from anyone anymore. The prayer was followed by national anthem sung before gods, followed by the recital of the Vedas by student priests, followed by a Gujarati folk dance. This was followed by speeches that liberally mixed up the gods and nation, with quite a bit of rhetoric about the greatness of Hindu "science" thrown in for good measure.⁴⁵

There are also other examples of the state appropriating the language and symbolism of religion. Recently, the Chief Minister of the newly formed Telengana state, K. Chandrasekhar Rao, was actively part of the renaming ceremony of a Hindu Hill shrine. The hill was renamed into Yadadri from Yadagirigutta. The State government is actively supervising the construction and design of a new temple complex at the shrine and has directly appointed chief designers and architects.⁴⁶ According to newspaper reports, the Chief Minister has even asked the architects in charge to install replicas of 32 Laxminarasimha

⁴⁴Meera Nanda, "Rush Hour of Gods," *New Humanist*, 3 March 2008, <<https://newhumanist.org.uk/1731>> (10 April 2015).

⁴⁵Nanda, "Rush Hour of Gods."

⁴⁶T. Karnakar Reddy, "Yadarigutta Is Yadari Now," 6 March 2015, *The Hindu*, <<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/yadagirigutta-is-yadadri-now/article6965276.ece>> (3 June 2015).

Swamy temples across the country near the shrine for the benefit of devotees.⁴⁷

State and religion nexus in India is not visible not merely in the case of religious buildings. K. K. Kailash, in his article “The New Normal in Madhya Pradesh,” analyses the strong connection between Hindu religion and the ruling BJP government of Madhya Pradesh. He writes:

Over the last decade, the government has unabashedly endorsed (Hindu) religion, religious beliefs and practices. Chouhan (Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh) has personally participated in a variety of yagnas and pujas, including a som yagna in Ujjain, designed to induce rains, and annual shastra pujas on the occasion of Dussehra.⁴⁸

In addition, the government had taken various measures to familiarize the schoolchildren with ‘Bharatiya’ values. Kailash gives the example of “surya namaskar drill and the recitation of bhojan mantra,” which were made compulsory before providing the mid-day meals sponsored by the government.⁴⁹

The state and religion nexus is not limited to Hinduism. Ministers and other functionaries of the state take part in various religious functions and festivals. A prominent example is the *Iftar* parties hosted by different representatives of the government. A report in the national daily *The Hindu* states: “The President of India, Vice-President, heads of the states, Ministers and political leaders form a long queue who regularly host the *Iftar* parties, and they always evoke good response.”⁵⁰ In

⁴⁷Reddy, “Yadarigutta Is Yadari Now.”

⁴⁸K. K. Kailash, “The New Normal in Madhya Pradesh,” 20 February 2015, *The Indian Express*, <<http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/the-new-normal-in-madhya-pradesh/>> (10 April 2015).

⁴⁹Kailash, “New Normal in Madhya Pradesh.”

⁵⁰“Iftar Parties Strengthen Social Fabric,” *The Hindu*, 20 August 2012, <<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-editorial/features/iftar-parties-strengthen-social-fabric/article3797173.ece>> (8 June 2015).

these parties, ministers and others are seen very ostensibly wearing the skull caps, an attire generally identified with Islam.

While there is apparent nexus between state and religion in India through various symbolic rituals and practices, they evoke different meanings in different contexts. While some practices throw light on the communal biases of the state, some can be seen as part of tolerance and harmony exercised towards various communities. How one makes that distinction is open to debate.

6. Informal Evocation of Religious Symbolism in Public Sphere

We have seen how the nexus between state and religion works in the public sphere. Apart from the explicit appropriation and acknowledgement of religious rituals by the state, there is another prominent way in which religious symbolism enters spaces that are as such not religious. Sometimes the individual beliefs and religious rituals of citizens may enter the public space in a non-explicit manner. We will discuss a few examples in this section.

One good example is the Pujas or religious rituals organized by citizens for inaugurations. In Berhampur in Orissa, the citizens inaugurated a flyover constructed by the government when the concerned authorities failed to open it for public use on time.⁵¹ *The Hindu* reports that this inauguration was accompanied by a Puja for the safety of the travellers. In this case, citizens took the assistance of religious rituals to sanctify their action. *Ayudha Puja* conducted on the ninth day of *Dussehra* festival is another example. In simple terms, *Ayudha Puja* can be understood as the worship of implements, weapons, and tools. In contemporary times, Pujas are performed even on computers and tablets. Sometimes we can see this happening within the premises of a government office done by individual government employees. These are indeed religious acts. Most of the time the role of this religious symbolism and these rituals, in such circumstances, does not go beyond the immediate ritual, i.e., it is

⁵¹"Inauguration with a Difference," *The Hindu*, 9 March 2009, <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-other_states/inauguration-with-a-difference/article327098.ece> (3 June 2015).

not done with a political intent, as in the case of the previous example where religious symbols and rituals are employed for conscious political mobilization.

In a judgment given on 13 February 2012, The Madras High Court pointed out: “[I]n government offices, if an individual shows respect and reverence to the materials, books, files or records which are being handled by the individual, it will be referable to his individual freedom, and there is nothing to show that it affects the secular nature of the state.”⁵² The court associated such religious acts with an individual’s right to Freedom of Conscience, permitted in Article 25 of the constitution.⁵³

In this manner, religious symbolism forms part of a secular polity’s public sphere and, in some occasions, serve as a tool rendering sanctity to a given setting.

7. Sacredness of the Secular State

Liberal democracies encourage or practice a clear separation of religion and politics. This is not surprising as one of the important characteristics of modernity itself is a break from traditional beliefs and liberation from the multifarious influences of religion. As Joseph R. Gusfield and Jerzy Michalowicz point out, “Modern life is viewed by many as being dominated by a secular, matter-of-fact, rational culture and social organization in which human responses are governed by attention to means and ends.”⁵⁴

⁵²A. Subramani, “Pujas in Govt Offices Won’t Hurt Secularism: HC,” *The Times of India*, 18 January 2012, <<http://timesofindia.india.com/city/chennai/Puja-in-govt-offices-wont-hurt-secularism-HC/articleshow/11534022.cms>> (3 June 2015).

⁵³However, this judgment has been challenged and whether this affects secularism is a contested matter. It is beyond the scope of this presentation to go into this matter.

⁵⁴Joseph R. Gusfield and Jerzy Michalowicz, “Secular Symbolism: Studies of Ritual, Ceremony, and the Symbolic Order in Modern Life,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 10 (1984), 418, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2083183>> (23 December 2014).

Some of the most powerful and prominent democracies in the contemporary world profess their allegiance to secular ideals. The process of secularization has been practised and promoted by many. In this context, a discussion on the sacred in secular spaces may seem invalid and unnecessary. Such a conclusion is drawn when one subscribes to the older understanding of the sacred as belonging only to the realm of religion. As I have pointed out in the introduction, this view of the sacred has been critiqued and challenged by later scholars.⁵⁵

At this stage, it is important to elaborate the presence of sacredness in secular symbols and rituals. Let us take the case of India. The Preamble to the Constitution of India declares India to be a “sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic, republic.”⁵⁶ The state does not adhere to or support any particular religion. In spite of its professed secular ideals, we see that in the institutional practices of the Indian state, certain symbols and rituals lend sacredness to those practices in tune with the religious rituals and practices. This happens regardless of the political party in power. To illustrate this point, I would like to point to three examples from the Indian context: the National Pledge, the National Flag, and The Oath of Office.

A very good example of sacredness attained by a secular symbol can be elucidated with the case of the Indian National

⁵⁵A very good example of such shift in scholarly work on symbolism is Gusfield and Michalowicz’s work, “Secular Symbolism,” 417-435.

⁵⁶The term secular was included in the constitution by a later amendment. However, the secular nature of the Indian polity was emphasised by the constituent assembly and by the prominent leaders from the time of freedom struggle. It is beyond the scope of this article to go into the debates on Indian secularism. For more on this see Partha Chatterjee, “Secularism and Toleration,” in *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, 228-263. Also see Neera Chandhoke, “Secularism,” in *The Oxford Companion to Politics in India*, ed. Niraja Gopal Jayal and Pratap Bhanu Mehta, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010, 333-347.

Flag.⁵⁷ There are elaborate and rigid guidelines regarding the use of the national flag.⁵⁸ Use of national flag for profane purposes is strictly prohibited and invites severe punishment and fine. On occasions when it was perceived by some that the national flag was used for objectionable purposes, it has resulted in massive public outrage and court cases. Recently, a case has been filed against Bollywood actor Amitabh Bachchan and his son Abhishek Bachchan for insulting the national flag.⁵⁹ It is alleged that they covered their bodies with the national flag in a disrespectful manner during a cricket match. The outrage in the case of Flag Desecration has been similar to that of the outrage when the images and symbols of certain gods and goddesses are desecrated.

Another interesting example is that of the Indian national pledge. A perusal of the national pledge will bring out the careful phrasing of the pledge with words like ‘solemnity’, ‘devout’, etc., which are closely associated with religion, and are used to enhance the feeling of sacredness around the act. The idea behind the use of such words is to ensure that taking the pledge is a solemn act and not an ordinary or a casual one. It adds to the seriousness of the pledge and gives the act of taking the pledge a quality of a sacred ritual.

Swearing-in ceremonies are other occasions where the ceremony enjoys the sanctity given to religious rituals. The oaths taken by the incumbents of different institutional positions before taking the office usually has the following phrases: “... do swear in the name of God” or “... solemnly affirm that I will bear

⁵⁷For more on the evolution of the Indian National flag See Arundhati Virmani, *A National Flag for India*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2008.

⁵⁸“Flag Code of India 2002,” Press Information Bureau, <<http://pib.nic.in/feature/feyr2002/fapr2002/f030420021.html>> (8 April 2015).

⁵⁹“Case against Amitabh Bachchan, Son Abhishek over Tricolor Insult,” *The Indian Express*, 18 June 2015, <<http://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/bollywood/case-against-amitabh-bachchan-son-abhishek-over-tricolour-insult/>> (19 June 2015).

true faith and allegiance to the Constitution of India..."⁶⁰ The persons elected or appointed are usually given a choice between taking the oath in the name of God or are guided to "solemnly affirm" based on their spiritual or religious affiliations. However, these options, regardless of the incumbents' choice, do not suggest a difference in the degree of sanctity associated with the event.

Apart from the three crucial instances mentioned above, the Indian Republic has numerous such symbols and rituals that give the state a status different from ordinary organizations, including the national anthem, national emblem, and so on. The following description provided in the National Portal of India is useful in understanding the value of these symbols and rituals: "These symbols (the national symbols) are intrinsic to the Indian identity and heritage. Indians of all demographic backgrounds across the world are proud of these National Symbols as they infuse a sense of pride and patriotism in every Indian's heart."⁶¹ The vocabulary, the rituals, the symbols, and the settings⁶² together bring in sacredness to the secular institutions. The sanctity associated with these symbols and rituals is similar to the sanctity associated with religious symbols and practices. India is not the only secular country with such practices. The United States of America is another good example. For example, the USA also has elaborate guidelines for the use of its national flag, regarding the wording of oath of office, the national pledge, and the settings for all these.⁶³

⁶⁰"Forms of Oaths or Affirmations," *Constitution Society*, <<http://www.constitution.org/cons/india/shed03.htm>> (9 April 2015).

⁶¹"National Symbols," in *National Portal of India*, <<http://india.gov.in/india-glance/national-symbols>> 7 February 2015.

⁶²Settings include the symbols used, the spaces where ceremonies take place and the respective protocols expected to followed in each official function.

⁶³For the debates on national pledge in America, see Sheldon Nahmod, "The Pledge as Sacred Political Ritual," *William and Mary Bill of Rights Journal* 13 (2005), 797-820, <<http://scholarship.kentlaw>.

The above-mentioned examples of quasi-religious ceremonies in liberal democracies show that the symbols and rituals at work in these contexts are very similar in their functions to that of the symbols and rituals in a religious context and lend secular practices the same kind of sanctity.

8. Conclusion

In spite of the marked differences among scholars regarding the domains of the sacred, the potency of the sacred in varied contexts is a generally accepted fact and this is evident in the above analysis as well. The potency of the sacred and the special status accorded to it in societies reinforce the need for continued and rigorous academic engagement with this concept. The idea of solemn in modern societies is neither restricted to the obviously religious nor to those cases where religion and politics mix but is also found in outwardly non-religious or secular contexts, prompting us to take a relook at the so-called secular.

There is some degree of overlapping in the categories that I have presented above. Yet, these categories throw some light on the diffusion of sacred in the public sphere, where notions of the sacred are not solely associated with religion anymore.

Four factors become well evident from the above analysis: (1) there is a continued need for solemnity and sanctity in societies; (2) Although sacred increasingly finds newer expressions and avenues, the reverence and respect commanded by the sacred have not changed; (3) Societies continue to depend on different symbolisms, rituals and practices to accord solemnity and sanctity to different objects, occasions and spaces of importance; (4) More importantly, our ideas of the sacred and our ideas of the solemn in modern political practices seem to have taken inspiration from religion. The examples presented above substantiate these points.

Even in the most avowedly secular spaces, there arises the need for solemnity and sanctity on special occasions. Solemnity and sanctity are granted to these occasions by symbolism and

iit.edu/cgi/view_content.cgi?article=1430&context=fac_schol (9 April 2015).

rituals which are either directly connected with religion or by new symbolisms and rituals emulating the ones from the realm of religion. Thus, a discussion of the sacred or the solemn in modern politics should take into account the influence of religious rituals and practices.