

# **INDIAN SECULARISM THREATENED! A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE**

## **Statement of Indian Theological Association 2010, Bangalore**

### **Introduction**

1. On the occasion of the 33<sup>rd</sup> annual seminar of the Indian Theological Association, during April 24-28, 2010, about 50 of its members gathered to reflect on how Indian Secularism (as reflected in the Indian Constitution) is threatened today, and to formulate an appropriate Christian response. The threats come from various quarters: organizations espousing extreme right ideologies, communal parties professing fundamentalist agendas, persons and groups having recourse to violence rather than to judicial procedures, and those wanting to impose a so-called cultural nationalism on the people of India.

2. The Indian Constitution specifies the principles, their implications and directives for building a civil society that actively safeguards the human rights of all peoples irrespective of their religious affiliations. It encourages a secularism that is not antagonistic towards religion; on the contrary it acts proactively in fostering religion but without favouring any one religion above others. Unchecked threats to such secularism would result in the denial of human rights in Indian society, the destruction of Indian Secularism itself and ultimately the disintegration of the nation. The spirit and letter of the Indian Constitution stand for an individual's freedom of conscience and the fundamental right to belong to a religion of his/her choice.

3. Beginning with the actual context in which Indian Secularism is threatened, we then clarify the notion of the secular and study the implications of Indian Secularism. With the Indian Constitution and the Christian tradition as points of reference, Indian Secularism is considered and the threats to it are examined. Practical suggestions are proposed for meeting the threats and preserving the freedom of individuals and society that the Indian Constitution upholds.

### **A. The Context**

4. Communal riots have taken place in India before, during and after independence. With independence in 1947 came the partition that fuelled passions and brought death and destruction to thousands, if not millions, belonging to the majority and minority communities. Since then, communal riots of lesser magnitude have occurred from time to time.

Horrendous killings followed the assassination of Indira Gandhi in the 1984 riots and these were repeated after the Godhra incident in 2002. The State was seen abetting the violence unleashed on both the occasions.

5. More recently, the pogrom in Khandamal illustrated how a frenzied mob of communalists destroyed the houses and property of a community, forced people to leave their belongings and seek refuge in the forests. Many lost their lives. Even worse was the indignity suffered by individuals while the police looked on as disinterested spectators. During the past few years there is documented evidence of atrocities perpetrated against minority groups because of their religious affiliation. In Karnataka, cases have been recorded of radical groups beating up persons and destroying property under the pretence of protecting Indian culture. Frequently, religious minority groups have been the victims of terrorist actions, as in Gujarat. In many cases, law enforcement agencies have turned a blind eye to the sufferings borne by the victims and have refused to bring the perpetrators of such crimes to justice. In their efforts to act according to the wishes of their superiors, these agencies have betrayed their constitutional obligations.

6. Often, the members of the affiliates belonging to the Sangh Parivar have levelled trumped-up charges against members of religious minorities and orchestrated violence to instil fear in those belonging to minority groups. It is a matter of sadness and shame that even some state governments have neither defended minority groups and individuals from aggression nor have they protected their fundamental rights as guaranteed by the Indian Constitution. Time and again, the false charge of “forced conversions” is made against Christian groups conducting prayer services or performing rituals peacefully. Often, the fundamentalists who make these fraudulent charges then indulge in physical violence against such groups. The frequency of such happenings has increased in the state of Karnataka that is ruled by a political party with significant links to the Sangh Parivar. However, such occurrences also take place in other Indian states.

7. Against the background of such unlawful activities, atrocities and violence, the freedom and safety of minority groups and persons are seriously endangered. Through these happenings, a gradual erosion of values and safeguards found in the Indian Constitution is taking place and the noble ideals enunciated in the preamble and the guarantees specified in the articles of the Indian Constitution are gradually being disregarded or ignored.

8. The Indian Constitution anchored in Indian Secularism affirms unambiguously the fundamental, human rights of every person. Awareness of these rights enshrined in the Indian Constitution and the way of life it upholds and supports, lead us not only to appreciate the constitution’s articulation of Indian Secularism, but also to identify and suggest actions to counter successfully the threats to it.

## **B. Indian Secularism and the Indian Constitution**

### **a. *The Concept of the Secular***

9. Before entering into a serious reflection on Indian Secularism, an explanation of the word ‘secular’ and its cognates ‘secularisation’ and ‘secularism’ is offered,.

10. The concept ‘secular’ has a very old history. In the 4-5 century (C.E.), Augustine (C.E. 354-430) used it to refer to this world (Lat. *saeculum*) in contrast to the city of God. It stood for a temporal and historical world situated in space and time that was temporary as against the city of God that is eternal. During the European renaissance, the term ‘secular’ acquired the meaning of humanistic confidence.

11. The word ‘secularisation’ was used during the post-Westphalian peace process (1648) to stand for the transfer of Church properties to the princes as part of the agreement. This act of transfer was technically referred to as secularisation. However, in sociological literature, this concept acquired a wider meaning and referred to the ethos that is attendant upon such processes as modernisation, industrialisation, urbanisation, and democratisation. This ethos, as understood in the West, embodied a vision of life that sought to explain all reality in humanistic and empirical terms, without reference to supernatural realities. Secularisation is also understood as the process in which human beings themselves take responsibility for what happens in the world and do not attribute, without scrutiny, all events to chance or supernatural intervention.

12. The term ‘secularism’ – first used by George J. Holyoake (1817-1906), an English leader of free-thought movement – implies that the state should not be partial to or patronize any one religion and that a person could exercise freedom of choice without reference to the supernatural. Secularism is seen as an ideology that obliges a government or state to be neutral as regards the religious beliefs of its people. It was thought to free scientific thinking from the hold of religion.

### ***b. Indian Secularism and the Indian Constitution***

13. Western secularism is the result of Enlightenment philosophy, the settlements reached to avoid religious conflicts and wars, and an appreciation of all else that is not included in the category of the sacred. The problem occasioned by religious conflicts was solved by relegating religion to the private realm. Hence, in the West, secularism meant not only the separation of the state from religion but also the creation of a secure political order where citizens of a state could organize their daily life without being obliged by religious diktats. Some states professing secularism had been actively anti-religious but, in general, today's secularism in the West means that the state government keeps clear of any religion or religious activity. At present, the practice of secularism refers to the public domain in a state that is regulated by constitutional norms which are independent of confessional allegiance. These norms ensure a sense of tolerance and public order in society.

14. Indian Secularism does not exclude or marginalise religion from the public sphere but provides a political and social order wherein no one religion is preferred to the others. In India, secularism is one of the constitutive premises of the Indian Constitution and means equal respect for all religions. Hence, all religions are entitled to equal protection from the state and the state should not be discriminatory in giving aid or encouragement to religion. In this manner, the religiosity ingrained in the people of India is nurtured without a state-sponsored religion being imposed on any person or group.

15. Indian Secularism was not created merely to accommodate religious and other minority groups in the Indian Union. Rather, it expressed a way of life that viewed the individual person as a non-negotiable entity, possessing human dignity, and realizing his/her God-given potentials. An Indian citizen is one who practises this way of life irrespective of his/her religious affiliation. Religious pluralism is seen as a positive element in the process of attaining national integration and unity.

16. Indian Secularism can be viewed as humanistic secularism. The humanistic character of Indian Secularism derives from belief in the inalienable worth and dignity of the human person as a moral subject in his/her self-identity. In a pluralistic society, this belief rejects any ethnic or religious regimentation that reduces pluralism to homogenisation that ultimately leads to totalitarianism. Indian Secularism has less to do with ideology and more with providing an ambience for integrating the diversity that characterizes the nation. The Indian Secularist way of life

embraces religious pluralism, and, at the same time, preserves the right of a person to exercise freedom of conscience and to embrace the religion of his/her choice because of the person’s humanistic and political identity.

17. Present-day India has already opted for a constitution that professes a type of secularism particular to India and places great importance on the individual and social nature of the human person. It recognizes every person as a moral subject seeking the truth and organizing his/her way of life in consonance with the conviction of conscience. While it was only in 1976 that the word ‘secular’ was inserted into the Preamble of the Indian Constitution, the spirit of the constitution was already secular when it was framed. When in 1950, the Indian Constitution, not the Crown, became the basis for defining the Indian nation, pluralism was recognized as a positive value whose richness was to be respected, not reduced!

18. In India religion is central to the life of its people. Its age-old philosophy as expounded in the Upanishads has been ‘*Sarva dharma samabhav*,’ which means equal respect for all religions. The fact is that India has never been a mono-religious country. Even before the advent of Christianity and Islam, India was multi-religious by nature and offered hospitality to many religions.

19. The Indian Constitution supports a humanism that includes care for the other and concern for the oppressed while providing genuine space for each religion to be practised without detriment to the others. When the state is required to resolve conflict situations, it is done on the basis of a principled stand that eschews partiality to any religion. The state is empowered to intervene to ensure that secular practices associated with religion are directed to social reform in keeping with the values set down in the constitution’s preamble: Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. At the same time, religious freedom can also be regulated in the interests of public order, morality and health.

20. Christianity that espouses humanistic values and respects freedom of conscience and the right of a person to follow the religion of his/her choice recognizes that the Indian Constitution also affirms humanistic values, upholds the dignity of the human person and protects the pluralism that exists in the country.

### **C. The Secular in the Christian Tradition**

21. Christianity views the world (*saeculum*) and all that is contained in it as freely created by God. As such, the bible places an

implicit positive value on material reality as well as on time, temporal events and temporal goals. This positive value is manifested and known to humankind through the saving presence of God unfolding itself in the events of the world. The foundational event for the people of Israel was the Exodus experience as recorded in the bible. Before that event they found themselves as an enslaved people. With their entry into the Promised Land they came to know themselves as a people chosen by God to serve. Israel as a priestly kingdom was not merely for herself but for ministering to the other nations; blessing them was her mission, as in Abraham all the nations of the world were blessed. God is the God of all nations and every single nation or individual is accountable to God who is caretaker not only of God's favoured people but of all God's peoples and creatures.

22. The Christian religion enables men and women to recognize God's transforming presence as creator, saviour and sanctifier through the person of Jesus Christ. Christian faith believes that God's Spirit guides the world as a whole in space and time. Men and women are guided also by the same Spirit. Humankind, however, is very special when compared to the rest of creation. Only when speaking about the creation of the human race, do the Christian scriptures describe God as saying: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gen 1/26). Created in the image of God, and in God's likeness, men or women are called to participate freely in a unique relationship with God. To have communion with God and be a steward of creation give the human person his/her essential meaning and dignity.

23. In the biblical tradition, God is encountered in the world – of nature and of history (a series of events). The human person is an animated body (Gen 2/7) encountering God in the world of matter that itself is ordered by the Spirit of God (Gen1/2). Far from matter being opposed to God's Spirit, the bible tells us that God's Spirit is the vivifying principle of matter (Ezek 37/1-14). God is not to be simply identified with nature or with history, but is to be encountered through both. The sacred is located in the secular!

24. It is a distortion of fact to claim that the sacred is restricted to the sphere of formal religion and the secular to all else. Human destiny that is God-given is achieved in and through the world. The concrete reality of the world around us is not an obstacle to finding God and being transformed by God's Spirit; rather, it enables persons to become their true selves.

25. Persons who exist in the world are meant to form community. The sociological dictum that an individual becomes a person in a community receives religious and ethical validation in the words of Jesus – the “Great Commandment” – when he says that the condition for loving God is to love one’s neighbour (Mark 12/28-34). Human beings fulfil their purpose not only by seeking and encountering God in the silence of their hearts but also in the community of persons. Socialization is a condition for being human and it is also a means of encountering God.

26. Speaking about the dignity of the human person and of the intrinsic need of a person being in a community, the Church teaches the following: “(For) sacred Scripture teaches that man was created “to the image of God,” as able to know and love his creator, and as set by him over all earthly creatures that he might rule them, and make use of them, while glorifying God... But God did not create man a solitary being. From the beginning ‘male and female he created them’ (Gen 1/27). This partnership of man and woman constitutes the first form of communion between persons. For by his innermost nature man is a social being; and if he does not enter into relations with others he can neither live nor develop his gifts” (*Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, no. 12).

27 Some conclusions can be drawn from our reflection on the secular in the Christian tradition:

(1) Fundamental human rights derive from the dignity of a human person and his/her relational nature. Among these rights are those that refer to the freedom of conscience and the free exercise of religion. “The search for truth ... must be carried out in a manner that is appropriate to the dignity of the human person and his social nature, namely, by free enquiry with the help of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue ... his own social nature requires that man give external expression to those internal acts of religion, that he communicate with others on religious matters, and profess his religion in community” (*Dignitatis Humanae*, Declaration on Religious Liberty, no. 3).

28. (2) The state carries out its function in the light of its written or unwritten constitution. Founded on the social nature of people, the state is a natural institution to protect the basic rights of persons, to resolve conflict situations that may arise so that the common good is maintained. “The common good embraces the sum total of all those conditions of social life which enable individuals, families, and organizations to achieve

complete and efficacious fulfilment” (*Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, no.74).

29. (3) The right to religious freedom presumes that the state recognizes the political community as a plural society and extends protection to its plural character. “...the protection of the right to religious freedom is the common responsibility of individual citizens, social groups, civil authorities, the Church and other religious communities. Each of these has its own special responsibility in the matter according to its particular duty to promote the common good” (*Dignitatis Humanae*, Declaration on Religious Liberty, no. 6).

## **D. Indian Secularism and Emancipation**

### **a. *Indian Secularism and the Elites***

30. Indian Secularism was meant to benefit all sections of Indian society. It was surely meant to empower the subalterns in the country. As a secular state, India offered opportunities but for the marginalized (e.g., Dalits, Tribals, etc.) it offered a promise of future well-being. That promise has still to be fully redeemed. The *bhadralok* types of people who constitute today’s middle class in India have access to education, urbanization, industrialization, etc. For the Dalits and other disadvantaged groups, the success of Indian Secularism will be in enabling them to transform their lives and live with human dignity. The freedom movement that culminated in the formation of an independent India was supervised mostly by elites. The pattern continues even in the post-independence era.

31. There is need for a social and subaltern location for secularism in the Indian context. The elitist bias tends to keep the ideal of secularism tied to a mere relationship between state and religion. Communal upsurge is part of the game plan of some of the erstwhile hegemonic powers of the country that grow insecure at the growth and rise of the subaltern class. In order to be a substantive ideal and practice, secularism must endeavour to locate its discourse also in subaltern life contexts, and explore the possibilities of emerging as an ideal symbolizing emancipation.

32. An empowering secular civil society must be open to the role of religions. The liberative potential of religious traditions must be enlisted in the efforts to enhance civil society. Indian Secularism can act as the catalyst that allows the liberative, not the oppressive, aspects of religion to assert themselves.



**b. *Indian Secularism and Pseudo-Secularism***

33. Hindutva forces brand Indian Secularism as ‘pseudo-secularism’. They argue that the Indian Constitution, while holding on to universal citizenship rights, unnecessarily tampers with these rights by entertaining concessions for minority religionists, and this amounts to a violation of the universal rights of the citizen. These concessions are seen by such forces as the appeasement of minorities.

34. Those who refer to Indian Secularism as pseudo-secularism do not approve of structures (e.g., personal law, minority rights) to ensure that minorities are not discriminated against because of culture, language, religion, etc. However, in 1950 after much discussion, the Constituent Assembly decided that minority rights should be factored in the constitutional guarantees to make possible a level playing field for all Indian citizens. With these rights, minorities would enjoy freedom of conscience, human dignity and the opportunity to be educated and pursue careers like the others

35. The case of Indian society being pluralist has already been noted. Greater awareness has come about regarding the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic and multi-religious nature of society. Indian Secularism respects such diversity because of the importance it attaches to freedom of conscience and choosing one’s religion. In addition, the practice of *dharma* could make for an ideal serving the interests of the common good. However, *dharma* has a covert referral to a hierarchical social system, and its proponents (the elites) present it as a universal ideal in a historical contingency. Indian Secularism opposes such a system.

**E. Opposing Threats to Indian Secularism**

**a. *In general***

36. In responding to the threats to Indian Secularism, all are called to play their part for the benefit of every citizen in the country and to uphold the full legitimacy and validity of Indian citizenship for followers of every faith. As Indian citizens we need to engage actively in preserving human rights and civil liberties in our country, and ensure the right to protection of human life and property, the right to live without discrimination on the basis of religion, caste or class, and other related rights. We need to actively oppose the threats to individual freedom, freedom to practise and choose one’s religion, freedom of conscience and the general preservation of the freedom of individuals and groups that the Indian Constitution upholds.

37. At the same time, there is need to challenge attitudes of superiority towards other faiths within our own communities. While professing one's own religion, there is no justification for belittling the religion of another; rather, an active and public acknowledgement of another's religion is an affirmation that God does act in mysterious ways and reveals the Godhead in pluriform ways.

38. Programmes of education need to include short sketches of Indian history to expose the manufacturing of history by groups that support hate campaigns and stir up communal violence. Such programmes could examine critically and expose analyses of right wing economic-cum-military forces of several religions that collaborate to foster hatred in order to promote their own supremacy and selfish interests. People of all faiths and classes need to be taught how to critique and interpret media reports of communal tension, terrorism, nationalism, "development", globalization, which promote inter-group violence in subtle ways. In this way they will understand how the economically rich classes collude with the corporate forces, namely how the economic agenda of fundamentalism whether Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Jain, etc., incites communal hatred for its own ends and how religious fervour and symbols are manipulated to serve materialism and the destruction of other groups. There is a need for interfaith groups that will deconstruct images and metaphors of cultural paranoia, challenge distorted perceptions that create divisions and contradictions, and work to create new metaphors of solidarity and love.

39. We can learn to respond peacefully when we, though innocent, become objects of hatred. We need to verbalise our kind of patriotism, our commitment to the local and the regional (not in opposition to the national) but in the hope of larger unities. Our commitment must extend to India's peoples, to indigenous peoples, to Dalits, to all vulnerable peoples in our sub-continent, to Asian peoples in distress, to the oppressed worldwide, and to the damaged universe. We need to form 'peace clubs' throughout the country along the lines of Gandhi's *Shanti Sena* as a viable alternative for peace-building for both majority and minority groups in order to reach beyond survival and redressing of grievances.

40. Religious groups should make it their responsibility to teach their members about other religions and the positive function they perform in society. Fostering dialogue among the different religious groups that form the Indian nation is a means of building a united India in which all are in solidarity with each other. While conflicts have taken place in the name of religion, it is really the materialist and petty interests of persons or groups

that have falsified religion and stirred up hatred and violence in society. The practice of authentic religion will always be humanizing and fulfilling.

**b. *In particular***

41. In view of the increased risk of violence Christian communities need to be shaken out of pietistic passivity so that they do not succumb to panic but acquire competence in resisting threats and taking pre-emptive action. Training in alertness, in filing of FIRs, in legal procedures for redressing grievances as well as building connections with honest administrators, police officials, politicians and NGOs, are important measures not only for preventing violence and mitigating the impact of violence but also for strengthening Indian Secularism that the Indian Constitution upholds.

42. Engaging in interactive and effective dialogue between religions at theological and administrative levels through prayer meetings, joint community action and reparation for social and ecological injustices will help to deal with issues that tend to divide communities and create friction between them. Basic dialogue groups such as inter-faith study groups need to be formed on the pattern of basic communities. Such communities could be supported by the Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI), National and Regional Catholic councils, Women’s Desks, etc. The CBCI Gender Policy 2010 states that, “The Church has a duty to promote inter-faith dialogue and discussions to ensure harmony among the religious communities as a counter to the growing forces of fundamentalism.” Inter-religious integration at the level of local self-governance is important for building harmony between different religious and class groups.

43. The fostering of community healing techniques and strategies such as that of restorative justice, conferencing, youth workshops, work camps and study circles to discuss inter-faith rivalries and build inter-faith solidarity will help deal with wrongs that are real or perceived. Conferencing is a new victim-sensitive approach of restorative justice which is used to address wrongdoing on a long-term basis. A conference is like an open forum where those invited are facilitated to tell the events of trauma, express feelings and get healed. The conference includes a wide range of people from the neighbourhood, as well as family members, police, counsellors, and those affected by the trauma or connected with it. The perpetrators of the abuse are also included in the conference and they take the consequences of their actions.

44. We need new metaphors of love which will empower us in our enterprise for creating solidarity with social groups, building bridges between communities. Jesus gave us the law of love, “to love one’s neighbour as oneself” (Mk 12:33). He preached against retaliation. (Mt 5:38-48) Jesus said, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” (Luke 6:27-28) Mathew has “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven ...” (5:44-45). Jesus also forgave, “Father forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). We need healers and counsellors who will mediate the caring and compassion of a loving and forgiving, God.

### **Conclusion**

45. While actively affirming freedom of conscience and a person’s right to belong to a religion of his/her choice, Indian Secularism is committed to humanizing values and to uniting people. Implicit in the text of the Indian Constitution are values that manifest a relational anthropology. These values are clearly stated in the Preamble to the Constitution so as to secure for all citizens social, economic and political justice: liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; equality of status and opportunity, promotion of human solidarity (fraternity) among citizens with the aim of assuring the dignity of the individual as well as the unity and integrity of the nation.

46. For the many groupings that continue to suffer oppression and marginalization because of Casteism, class stratification and similar factors, the question of secularism cannot be one that merely creates a space for pluriform religiosity. Hence, if Indian Secularism does not take into consideration the societal dynamics at work in the subaltern classes and affecting the elites, it will have betrayed its purpose. Any consideration of Indian Secularism must be integrally linked not merely with the question of religion, but also that of social justice in the country.

47. India’s Secularism and its Constitution articulate the basic assumption of India’s people, namely, that religions are not contradictorily opposed but complementarily related, notwithstanding their serious differences. This assumption is in keeping with the ideal of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*. The wisdom of secularism in India is that it promotes true religiosity, as envisaged in the Indian Constitution, and as enunciated in the Preamble to the Constitution: Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. May we be empowered to affirm and practise such religiosity.

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