

SECULARISM AND THE HINDU WORLDVIEW

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1. Introduction

“Secularism” and “worldview” are both concepts that emerged from outside of the territorial context of the Vedic faith. The tools of thought and analysis that we use could be a limiting, sometimes misleading, factor. This is especially true in the spiritual domain. The tendency to fit spiritual ideals into secular framework has limitations, not less than its practical uses.

2. Vedic Faith and Secularism

The Vedic faith was not designed to be secular. It antedates the birth of secularism. In fact, the Vedic faith would have averted the need for evolving secularism. Historically, the secular worldview developed in the heat of the religious wars in Europe. These wars were due in part to the dogmatic and dominating spirit that Christianity happened to acquire within the western culture. The conversion of Constantine to Christianity was the turning point here. A reform spiritual movement within Judaism got totally transformed into a state religion and got mixed up with the instruments of power. Christianity, in its western models, is yet to recover from this spiritual setback. The comparison between Jesus of Nazareth, who had nowhere to lay down his head, and the pomp and power of Papacy borders on the grotesque.

In contrast, the Vedic faith – which should not be equated with the sum total of the popular version of Hinduism we see today – is by nature a pluralistic vision that accommodates a variety of spiritual quests and manifestations. The emphasis here is on spiritual values rather than religious elaborations and prescriptions. The Vedas do not recognize the hegemony of the priestly class. Pandits and Pontiffs would seem strange creatures within its enlightened vision. The Vedas do not see truth and justice as the monopoly of any class, caste or race. It is quintessentially a universal vision that sees the whole of the human species as comprising one family. In that respect it is also in harmony with the vision in the Bible that sees creation as

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originating from the divine source and all humankind, therefore, belonging together in the plan of God.

In the West, the secular worldview had to be engineered to enable people to live with and rejoice in the riches of plurality. But in India, thanks to the Vedic culture, the ability to cope creatively with religious and cultural plurality has been an integral part of the Indic Soul from time immemorial. In that sense, it could be argued that the seminal patterns and principles of secularism lie embedded in the Vedic vision, to an extent.

3. Vedic Faith Does not Separate the Secular from the Spiritual

The Vedic faith can never accept the split between State and Church, or the secular and the spiritual. It cannot countenance the privatization of spirituality. The spiritual is the overarching framework within which everything in this world has to cohere. God is the cause of creation and can never be confined to any part of it. Therefore, spirituality and politics are as sacred as prayer is. God must be as central to the political and economic processes in a country as (s)he is in the sphere of religion. The split between politics and religion has exiled reforming and redemptive values from public life and turned politics into a domain of corruption. This cannot but undo the secular apparatus sooner or later.

4. Secularism and Democracy

The Indian incarnation of secularism has equal respect for all religions; has also not succeeded in delivering the goods. In a democratic situation, where the majority is omnipotent, this ideal of "equal distance" or "equal respect" for all religions is more theory than practice. At any rate, it is time that we questioned this idea of respecting all "religions", especially in the light of the death-dance of communalism in our midst. As of today, "equal respect for all religions" amounts in practice to unequal support for a variety of communalisms. The secular state is being infected with the virus of communalism. This must be a cause of great anxiety for all right-thinking people.

5. Dharma: the Meeting Point between Hinduism and Secularism

The time is now for us to work towards a radical shift in focus. For me dharma should be the meeting point between Hinduism and secularism. Dharma in the political and economic contexts becomes a commitment to

social justice. It mandates the creation of the conditions necessary to help all people to develop and attain optimum quality of life. This also includes the sacred duty to fight against the forces of injustice, oppression and exploitation. Spirituality is the only source of empowerment for this sacred mission.

It is an indictment of our secular-socialist political apparatus that in the last 50 years very little progress has been made towards making social justice a reality for millions of our citizens. This was largely because we have been preoccupied with the trapping of religions. As a result we have become blind and deaf to the demands of true spirituality. Escapist and ritualistic religious establishments can close their eyes to the cry of the people; but spirituality, which is a transforming engagement with the human predicament, cannot do so without contradicting itself.

It is not for nothing that Ram is greatly revered in the Hindu pantheon. He is the embodiment of dharma, or righteousness. In him we find the self-surrender of the righteous ruler to the demands of dharma as well as the refusal to compromise with the forces of evil. This sort of moral activism, even absolutism, is essential for the health of a secular society. Secularism should never mean the banishment of spirituality from the affairs of the State or the life of the people. It should mean, on the other hand, the elimination of religion-based conflicts and competitions that mar social harmony and dissipate the energies of a nation. Communalism should be privatized; whereas spirituality should be affirmed and propagated. The situation at the moment is quite the reverse, though.

This was indeed the fundamental Vedic position, till it got mixed up with the class interests of the rising priestly class on the one hand, and the dogmatism and exclusiveness of other faiths. It was for this reason that Swami Dayananda Saraswati issued the clarion call: "Back to the Vedas!"

Our approach towards creating a healthy secular society has been partial and naïve. Lack of a sense of history made us blind to the fact that the secular society could work reasonably well in western societies because the fundamental values of justice, equality and accountability had been already well-entrenched in the culture and collective psyche of the people. Though in theory secularism claimed to privatize religion, in actual practice the instruments and institutions of secularism continued to function on the value

foundations created by Christian spirituality (which is different from Church-centered Christianity).

6. Conclusion

In the Indian context we are in a superior situation, potentially. Unlike in the West, India has had a religiously pluralistic heritage. This sub-continent has been a crucible for different religious traditions for centuries. Out of this should have emerged a new spiritual vision to fortify and empower our people. But that did not happen mainly for two reasons. First, religions themselves were inundated by the floods of ritualism, obscurantism and communalism. Second, religions were situated in a model of mutual conflict and suspicion so that the possibility of entering into any constructive cooperation in the service of the people was totally ruled out. Needless to say, this was the conspiracy of the vested interests and it has not done any good to our country and her masses.

What needs to engage our attention at the present time is not the question as to how and to what extent each religious tradition separately and independently corresponds to the prescription of secularism. The need of the hour is for various religious communities to come together and enunciate a shared spirituality conducive to healing and transforming our secular culture by imbuing it with a passion for truth and social justice which are the essence of dharma.