



Religion and the roots of secularism

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1. Definitions of Religion

Anthropology of religion is the study of religion in relation to other social structures. By analyzing the corresponding social structure it compares different religious beliefs and practices among cultures.

Initially, anthropology was more concerned as to how social structures evolved. Keeping in line with this, anthropologists tried to understand religion on a time scale. Religion was categorized as 'primitive' and 'modern' and efforts were made to explain how it evolved from the former to the later. The anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor explained religion as belief in spiritual beings and stated that this belief originated as explanations of natural phenomena.¹ They were of the view that as society became more complex, it searched for complex answers as explanation of the unknown and thereby developed the modern religion. Later anthropologists unlike the evolution anthropologists focused more on how religion reflected the social, political and economic conditions of the people who practiced such religion.

Another anthropologist, Clifford Geertz defines religion by its effects. According to him, '*religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence*'.² His

¹ Charles Joseph Adams, "Classification of Religions", Encyclopedia Britannica on March 13, 2018, available at <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/classification-of-religions/Morphological#ref420218>> (visited on February 25, 2020)

²Michael Stausberg (ed.), *Contemporary Theories of Religion: A Critical Companion*, 235,236 (Routledge 2009)

definition of religion made religion almost synonymous to culture³. This definition is so broad that even political ideals of a society may well be considered as part of religion.

Emile Durkheim, a prominent sociologist, in his book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* defined religion as ‘a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say things set apart and forbidden; beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them.’⁴ Emile Durkheim, considered religion ‘a projection of the social values of society’, ‘a means of making symbolic statements about society’, ‘a symbolic language that makes statements about the social order’. As he was a sociologist, it was natural that he did not see religion just as a personal relation of an individual with a higher value. What he was interested in was what society considered as religion. According to him the reflection of the society partly appears in religion and religion has to be studied to understand the nature of the society which follows it.

Sigmund Freud, looking from a perspective of psychology, studied religion as an individual practiced religion. He saw religion as an illusion created by individuals for themselves. As per him, it is merely a belief that people wanted to be true. Freud argued that religion is a primarily a neurotic response to repression and the mind unconsciously creates a religion for the individual.⁵ While explaining such repression, Freud stated that in a civilized society, demands of an individual are not fulfilled immediately and to prevent chaos in the mind that they have to be repressed. Religion thereby is a mere psychological response of the surroundings of a person. The religious conviction of a person will not change due to rational arguments as it is not created on a rational basis. It is a neurotic response of a person and response cannot be changed without changing the factor which created that response, namely the surrounding environment. This is in a sharp contrast to anthropological definition given by Tylor where he saw religion as a rational and conscious, though primitive and mistaken, attempt to explain the natural world.

³Jaco Beyers, ‘Religion and Culture: Revisiting a Close Relative’, (HTS Online 2017), available at <http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0259-94222017000100010> (visited on April 29, 2020)

⁴ Robert Alun Jones, *Emile Durkheim: An Introduction to Four Major Works*, 115-155, (Sage Publications, Beverly Hills, 1986), available at <<https://durkheim.uchicago.edu/Summaries/forms.html>> (visited on March 26, 2020)

⁵ Nickolas P Roubekas, “Sigmund Freud’s Theory of Religion and the Sacrament of the Eucharist in the Orthodox Church”, *Ekklesiastikos Pharos* 226-282 (2013)

William James, another psychologist, states that ‘*religion ... shall mean for us the feeling, acts and experience of individual men in their solitude so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider to be divine*’⁶.

James is not concerned whether the divine exists or not. Neither has he said that religion is a mere response to several other factors. According to him it is an expression of very person experience of an individual about the divine. The motivations of his engagement with the question may be due to outside factors but the actual experience still remains his own.

Paul Tillich, a leading theological philosopher of the 20th century, stated that ‘Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of life.’⁷

As noticed, the above definition lacks God and concerns itself with an ‘ultimate concern’. This makes the definition too broad, but without such broadness religions like Buddhism and sects of Hinduism which are not concerned with God, may not be religions.

Marx gave a materialistic explanation of religion. He saw religion as a product of alienation that was functional to relieving people's immediate suffering. Here it seems to be in agreement with Freud. He further says it to be an ideology that masked the real nature of social relations. Here, he goes into the sociological evolution of religion. He deemed it a contingent part of human culture, that would have disappeared after the abolition of class society. He says, ‘*Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a world without heart, as it is the spirit of an era without spirit. It is the opium of the people*’.⁸ His explanation of religion is starkly different from the way it is explained by theologians and mystics. He not only refuses to counter them on the use of it but also accuses them to use religion to delude the masses into oppression. Marx is right to the extent where he points out the slippery slope where religion sometimes stands but does not explain religion in a landscape where it might exist without oppression.

⁶ As cited in <https://www.reonline.org.uk/subject-knowledge/16-plus-philosophy/the-psychology-of-religion/> (visited on April 29, 2020)

⁷ William Wainwright, Concepts of God, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (2017), available at <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/concepts-god/>> (visited on March 28, 2020)

⁸ Christian O. Uchebue, “A Critical Evaluation of Marx’s Theory of Religion”, Vol. 1(2) *AJSIH* 50-81 (2011) accessible at <http://52.172.159.94/index.php/ajih/article/view/16558/14489> (visited on April 29, 2020)

2. Enlightenment: Roots of Modernity and Secularism

The term ‘Enlightenment’ came into prominence in the 1890s in to explain the ideological phenomena of the preceding century. The term itself therefore was not used by the people who pioneered the ideals of enlightenment but was a later construction by others to categorize and understand it.

In the 15th century, Europe underwent a renaissance which lead to the rejection of the then existing philosophical order. This rejection was not a total rejection of everything traditional but only a new way to see the things already around them. In fact, it also led to a major revival of the Greco-Roman art, literature and philosophy. This started changing the thought processes of the people of Europe and brought man at the center of all things. ‘Man (became) the measure of all things’⁹. The intellectual revolution that renaissance brought affirmed the dignity and power of human beings. It led to the rediscovery of the man. This rediscovery is common to many places and times of human history but the European Renaissance, due to the subsequent influence of European hegemony all over the world, has a wider impact at present. It marked the end of ‘the dark ages’. the prevailing social structures started becoming weak and were ultimately replaced by the Age of Enlightenment. These social structures included both the church and feudalism. The sense of ethics of the then Europeans started to change and coupled with the inventions like the printing press, discovery of the two Americas in the West and the new sea routes to the East gradually led to the new social order.

Inspired from the renaissance, the ideals of Enlightenment led to the change of hierarchies of modifiers which influenced human behaviour. ‘Emotion’ and ‘reverence’ were brought down from high pedestal and ‘reason’ was given their place. Having noticed the achievements of Copernicus, Galilei, Kepler and Newton it was concluded that human reason was sufficient to discover the natural laws of nature.¹⁰ And the logical end of human reason was capable enough and actually the only legitimate means to find answers to questions of social and political life as

⁹ Lyman A. Baker, “Immanuel Kant’s ‘What is Enlightenment’” (1997), available at, <<http://www-personal.k-state.edu/~lyman/english233/Kant-WIE-intro.htm>> (visited on April 2, 2020)

¹⁰ Mathew White, “The Enlightenment”, (June 21, 2018), available at <<https://www.bl.uk/restoration-18th-century-literature/articles/the-enlightenment>> (visited on April 2, 2020)

well. This awakened a sense of confidence about the correctness of the conclusions based on bare reason.¹¹

Reason was applied to human nature and socio-political patterns to deduce natural rights of liberty, equality and prosperity of the entire mankind.¹²

French philosophers opined that the church and the state have colluded to hinder the march of reason and rationality among the masses to maintain their stronghold over them. Rousseau in *The Social Contract* stated that, 'Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains'. The individual enters into the contract with the state and such contract ideally should not be contrary to his interests, and it will be in his interest only when he sees it through the eyes of reason. The intellectual trends of those times along with the social turmoil lead to the French Revolution (1789-1799). The Revolution put an end to the supremacy of nobility and the clergy in France. Revolution in France led to the spread of these ideas in the entire Europe. In the short run, the effects of the revolution were countered politically by the monarchies of rest of the states but in the longer run it marked a sea change in the political landscape of the continent. That is to say that Napoleon adopted the title of Emperor as opposed to the King and later Louis Philippe had the title of King of French as opposed to the King of France. But the reign of terror which followed the revolution and homogenization of society into believing a single set of principles and ideals, left many disenchanted from the ideals of enlightenment. This discourse continues as anti-Enlightenment and Post-Modernism to this day.

Enlightenment, influencing the world in a more substantial form, paved the way for modern Individualism and a new form of relationship between the state and the individual. This led to the debate about the relation of the state with religion and the development of the concept of secularism.

Most modern political trends are a result of the Enlightenment in Europe. It has led to the recognition of inalienable Human Rights in almost all present day societies. The more a society moves towards these ideals the more 'modern' it is said to be. Due to the huge positive appeal that it has, modernism became an aspirational state to be achieved for most societies. The

¹¹ William Bristow, 'Enlightenment', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (2017), available at <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/enlightenment/>> (visited on April 2, 2020)

¹² *ibid*

positive effects of Enlightenment and modernism may be substantial. But it has also led to a large number of ‘modern’ problems. The emphasis of increased use of reason also led to distorted versions of it. Scientific concepts were used to fabricate theories like Social-Darwinism¹³ and were used to justify hate crimes by use of naked reason. The modern notions of ‘development’ are accused of undermining the traditional ways of life and to coerce them into changing to a single parameter of growth leading to unsustainable environmental and other issues.

As the *zeitgeist* of the society changes, the ideals of the society also undergo a huge change. Today, the society or at least sections of it, no longer face the same problems as it did in the period preceding the Enlightenment. This naturally has the effect on how it perceives the institutions that were abhorred during the enlightenment. The United Kingdom, Canada and Australia still retain Monarchy and even are attached to it because it no longer threatens them and also gives them a sense of nostalgia about their past. Similarly the theory of secularization, which propounded that as the society progress materially and educationally it will become less religious, is also being challenged. This might be due to the reason that sections of people might not find the same faults with religion as they did two centuries prior as religion, along with religious institutions, have changed their roles in the society. The idea of individualism finding one of its manifestations in free market capitalism has led to huge inequalities. Enlightenment valued both individualism and equality, but when these might take contrary positions to each other, it did not offer much solution. Similar to this, the concept of secularism as developed in the period following the age of enlightenment is also being challenged.

3. Introduction to Secularism

In the broad trend of ‘Enlightenment’, the particular reason which warranted for the emergence of a new political structure redefining the relation between the state and religion was the historical experience Europe had with the church. The peculiarity of the concept of secularism lies in the Christian theology. It classifies the world into two realms namely the spiritual and temporal. In the Bible, Jesus Christ states, ‘Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s’. So, the fields of governance were clearly

¹³<https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2005/3/9/98104/>- (visited on April 3, 2020)

demarcated between the state and the religion. For such reason, Christianity during the Roman Empire refused to believe in the divinity of the Non-Christian Emperor. When Constantine converted to Christianity, a new age began where the Christian theology started to reign and Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire as well as other Kingdoms of Europe. This created a dual authority over the people, one of the king and the other of the church. But between these two the authority of the church was higher.

But, this categorization of fields of influence was not smooth at all. The lives of the people were heavily dependent on both these authorities and whenever either of them was weak the other used to assert its power over the other.

The church and the state struggled hard for power against each other throughout the medieval times. The ideas of tolerance and religious freedom were unknown and going against the dictates of the church was a crime. After the renaissance and the consequent ideological changes in the society, several prominent religious reformers came up and challenged the authority of the church. Likes of Martin Luther and Calvin attacked the church for the unbridled power it exercised upon the lives of people. They advocated that religion is merely one facet of state policy and is not outside the pale of the state as a parallel power. Religion and clergy was asked to be made subordinate to the state. It has to be kept in mind that the reformation that the reformers sought was only limited to renegotiate the relation between state and religion. The reformation was not in any way extended to grant religious rights to dissenters of religion. The state was still supposed to have religion and actively punish the heathens and heretics.

But the major change that the Reformation brought was that the right to rebel against the established system of religious authority was accepted, but it could only be exercised for purging the impurities of the religion and not to undermine its relevance in state policy¹⁴. Thereby, it led to subsequent movements which used the Reformation as a precedent but not necessarily for the same purpose. For example Henry VIII broke with the authority of the Church not because he wanted to undermine church per se but only to undermine the Catholic Church. He established the Church of England, which had the effect of legitimizing a precedent of rebellion against the established church.

¹⁴ The Editors, *Encyclopedia Britannica* (November 5, 2019), available at-
<<https://www.britannica.com/event/Reformation>> (visited on April 3, 2020)

The above mentioned attitude along with Enlightenment and the growing number of religious minorities led to the ‘conception of citizenship not dependent on a common religious faith’.

In the above intellectual and social context, the concept of secularism emerged. The term was coined by Holyoake in 1851 in Britain. He postulated secularism in the following words,

‘Secularism is not an argument against Christianity. It is one independent of it. It does not question the pretensions of Christianity; it advances others. Secularism does not say there is no light or guidance elsewhere, but maintains that there is light and guidance in secular truth, whose conditions and sanctions exist independently, and act forever. Secular knowledge is manifestly that kind of knowledge which is founded in this life, which relates to the conduct of this life, conduces to the welfare of this life, and is capable of being tested by the experience of this life.’¹⁵

He explained secularism with following principles¹⁶,

1. Secularism is not synonymous with atheism.
2. Secular principles do not offer an alternative to religious principles but morality is secular and not religious in origin.
3. Secularism deals with matters of this life and owing to the “uncertainty of survival” we should direct our efforts to this life only.
4. Secularism does not accept an external authority as its source or basis and reason the only authority. Only Science is the true guide of man.
5. Secular principles are open to critique and debate in the public sphere (one of the precursors to Freedom of thought, speech and expression).

Partha Chatterjee enumerates three essentials of a secular state¹⁷. The first is the principle of liberty, which requires the state to permit the practice of any religion whatsoever. This liberty is

¹⁵ George J Holyoake, *The Principles of Secularism Illustrated*(Austin & Co., London, 1871), as quoted in Tony Meacham, *The Constitutional Context of Secularism, Religious Freedoms, and the State* (University Of Southern Queensland, 2015)

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷Partha Chatterjee, “Secularism and Tolerance” in Rajiv Bhargava(ed.), *Secularism and its Critics* 358 (Oxford University Press, 1998)

not absolute and the state may restrict the practices of any religion which might affect the rights of the individual which the state is bound to protect. Second is the principle of equality which requires the state to treat all religions equally. The third is the principle of neutrality which means that the state gives no preference to the religious over the non-religious. These are the three principles which the Constitution of the United States of America envisages in totality. Various other democracies of our interest like UK and India do follow the same principles as the USA does. The principle of liberty is followed by the Constitution of all the three countries. The principle of equality is not followed at all in the UK as it maintains an established church. In India, this principle is followed in a different spirit than the USA. In India minority religions are given additional protection in the Constitution and the majority religion has been termed as a *way of life* of India. The third principle of neutrality is the one that keeps on changing as the society changes. It is not strictly followed in UK and India. In the UK the Monarch holds power and authority not because of popular will but through the divine sanction. The Members of Parliament and the Judiciary is also theoretically appointed through the Monarch upon a religious oath. Indian Constitution mandates the prohibition of cow slaughter on the stated ground of economy and scientific grounds but it appears to have been created and standing on the religious requirements of the majority community. Additionally the Constitution though asks for a Uniform Civil Code to be created, it still allows the existence of personal religious laws.

It is worth repeating that the above mentioned structures are either a result of, or are heavily influenced by, the 'Enlightenment Ideals'. The state structure and the meaning of religion as understood today in most of the world can only be properly understood in the context of 'Enlightenment'. For the societies that do not subscribe to these ideals, the terms and concepts may not entirely or aptly apply. Their problems of social organization will be different and their solutions peculiar. America and France adopted these ideals by completely changing the structure of their political organization. UK adopted these ideals while maintaining some of the old political structures and conventions. India at the social level did not mold itself to the ideals of European Enlightenment. The constitution while accepting them partially allows a wide discretion for the society to decide the relationship of the state with religion. A nine judge bench of the Supreme Court is hearing arguments to lay down the law regarding that relationship. Constitutions change as the society changes. The forever new interpretations of such relationship

bore a frequent testimony this fact. As the political ideas are applied to different societies, they change the form in which they are applied. The change is sometimes so much that it becomes difficult to say whether the idea remains the same. The same is also true for 'secularism'. Giving a very concrete meaning to secularism will render all the other versions, which do not fall within that meaning but call themselves that, to be non-secular.