

## Role of Religions in the Fabrication of Secularism in India

<sup>1</sup>Dr. Reji Sam, <sup>2</sup>A.P. Christal Jayaraj

<sup>1</sup>Dr. Reji Sam, Associate Professor, Department of History, Holy Cross College, Nagercoil.

<sup>2</sup>A.P. Christal Jayaraj, Associate Professor, Kerala United Theological Seminary, Kannammoola, Trivandrum.

Email - [apcraj@gmail.com](mailto:apcraj@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** Religion has something to say about economic, social and political dimension of life. Religion touches the source of their values in a situation of Religious Pluralism they may not impose their convictions on other believers. But they cannot be expected to keep them private. Secularization is a dimension of modernity. Secularism is its adventitious and unnecessary off-shoot. People of course have a right to be secularist. However, often they cannot pretend to be neutral to religions. There anti religious attitude disqualifies them from such a role.

### 1. Religion :

The word 'Religion' comes from the Latin word 'religio' which describes the religious act the verbs 'relegre' and religra being to possible derivations. 'Cicero' derives 'religio' from the adjective 'relegere' with the implication that a religious person gathers carefully what (or) whom he/she should worship. 'Cicero's' derivation attempt to distinguish religion from superstition, as the former implies the worship of the true and the latter of the false Lactantius rejects Cicero's views on the ground that piety turns not on the subjective questions of how people worship, but rather on the objectives one of whom, that there are real obligations to be fulfilled, and this is the root of the matter.<sup>1</sup>

#### 1.1 Religion and Secularism

It is not easy to say, what religion is. The understanding may differ from religion to religion. But in general, one can say that for the believers religion put them in touch with the ultimate of life like God, death and salvation and seeks to answer questions that deal with issues like unmerited suffering, the problem of evil and the meanings of life. The answers to these questions are contextualized, but they also transcend the context. They have given rise to philosophical and theological reflection. If one wants to understand what religion is, he/she should ask people who believe in it and practice it, not social scientist who seeks to explain it a social or psychological or economic contrast. One has a right to his/her opinion, but that is not decisive in the relation between people who believe. Serious believers will be the first to admit that religious symbols and structures have been abused that they need constant re interpretation and reformation. But they would not agree to throw their beliefs and practices.

No one is freed to believe, but that is no reason not to take believers seriously. Post - modernist will point out that even science is a matter of symbolic construction though it may be based on some observation and experiment. Most believers agree that religion does not have a monopoly over knowledge but they would not reduce it to mere emotion and ignorance. This resurgence of religion seems to be taking a extreme forms in the emergence of religious fundamentalism.<sup>2</sup>

#### 1.2 Religion and Politics

The attempt to build nation-state has had only partial success. At least as far as religions are concerned every nation-state is pluralistic. Even in nation-states where people belong predominantly or exclusively to one religion, there are various sects in the same religion which do not see eye to eye. The Shias and the Sunnis, the Bohras and the Almadias

<sup>1</sup> W.C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of the Religion*, ( New York; A Mantor book, 1964), 184

<sup>2</sup> Micheal Amaladoss S.J, *Making Harmony Living in a Pluralist World*, (Delhi; IDCR and ISPCK, 2003), 44-45.

characters Islam. Christianity has many groups. Buddhism adopts itself easily to the local context. Hinduism is an umbrella that covers a variety of religious systems.

Through migration, there are minority religious groups everywhere. India is a multi-religious nation. Democratic Liberalism is the political theory of the multi-religious nations. Liberalism in politics is based on the respect for the individual and his/her freedom and equality, appreciating his/her capacity to reason. In a group, an individual can enjoy freedom only in so far as he/she respect freedom of others. Therefore to live as a group is to co-operate in such a way that everyone's freedom is privileged without detriment to the freedom of others. This is called "procedural liberalism".<sup>3</sup>

### 1.3 Liberalism and Pluralism

Some scholars like Isaiah Berlin, think that such an "overlapping consensus" is not possible<sup>4</sup>. He sees, freedom, not merely as freedom from coercion, but as autonomy to be creative. In creativity, not only reason, but also the emotions and imaginations may be involved. This is a sure recipe for a pluralism that eventually proves mutually incompatible. It is difficult to see how a political order can be built on this principle. All that one can manage this a kind of functioning anarchy. While the rich and elite may thrive in such an atmosphere, the weak, the poor, the oppressed and those suffering any sort of discrimination like the Women and Dalits, for example, will be able to enjoy neither freedom nor equality. What controls society is no longer a moral perspective, but mutual self-interest.

### 1.4 A Political order for Religious Pluralism

The political order must be strictly neutral to all religions and ideologies, while it must be opened to the pluralism of religious and ideologies and not linked to any one religion or ideology. It is problematic today whether this neutrality must be described as secular, since there has been confusion between Secularization and Secularism. Some people who are favouring a secular political order are actually asking for a political order that is independent of and even prior to all religions, based solely on reason. This is ideological not merely procedural or political secularism. They have a right to their secularist ideology. But it can count only as one ideology among others and not as somehow having a priority over others. Therefore a constitutional, not an ideological, secularism is needed.

The Indian Constitution is neutral and positive towards all religions. It is not linked to one particular religion. It protects the freedom and autonomy of religious minorities. On the other hand, it protects the fundamental human rights and of public order. The religions therefore should be allowed to play their role in public life, though the political order must be protected from them<sup>5</sup>. The state has the duty of protecting the fundamental rights of the citizens, even against their unjust curtailment by one or other religious group. But the state must be aware of its limits in bringing about socio-cultural change. Liberal democracy insists on the freedom and role of the individual. But in reality, a majority can promote its self-interest and domination over a minority. As communal riots show, minorities cannot be protected by legal safeguards of minority rights against the brute force of the majority and a conniving government, both in and out of the legislature. One may have to rethink the functioning of democracy. The value of a democracy should be judged by the way the majority treats the minorities. A majority itself should not be assessed purely in terms of numbers or ideology but in terms of a commitment to the common good and of the suitable ways to achieve it<sup>6</sup>.

## 2. The Common Good :

Ideally, the people who are responsible must think of the whole country and the common good and more particularly the good of the poor and weak. The common good is achieved when the good of every individual making up the community is achieved. On the other hand, it is the focus on the common good that provides the space required for each individual to strive for the achievement of his/her own good. If this focus on the common good is not there, it will not be helpful to have special representatives of particular groups in the legislature through reserved constituencies. In a multi-religious society, such conflicts between groups can be transcended only when a religious group feels they are not treated as human beings. Only such a common vision can be the context for a happy multi-religious living. The concept "Common Good" is relevant in this context. One's cultural identity is his/her religious identity. In a democratic

<sup>3</sup>Micheal Amaladoss S.J, *Making Harmony Living in a Pluralist World*,...46.

<sup>4</sup>C.F. Isaich Berlin, *Four Essays on liberty* (New York; Oxford, 1969); John Gray , "*Where Pluralists and Liberals past company*", in Maria Baghramain and Attraeta Ingram (eds.), "*Pluralism, The Philosophy and Politics of Diversity*", (London, Routledge, 2000), 85-102.

<sup>5</sup>Ashish Nandy, "*Traditions, Turanny and Utopias, Essays in the Politics of Awareness*", (Delhi, Oxford, 2001), 177-194.

<sup>6</sup>Micheal Amaladoss S.J, "*Making Harmony Living in Pluralist World*", 54-55.

society, cultures to enjoy rights and freedoms and autonomy as individuals, because culture is an element of personal and social identity.

When a culture identifies with a religion, the problems become very complicated. So cultures have to be distinguished from religions. Cultural identity, dignity and freedom should be recognized and respected. The multicultural community and its overall well being should offer the context in which the different cultures must keep conversing in order to arrive at, if not a total consensus on perspectives and values, at least an agreed programme of action<sup>7</sup>.

### **3. God: In a Multi-Religious Society :**

Religions are one of the reasons for conflict between groups of people today. the question of identity and its defense paved the way to religious fundamentalism. In a multi-religious country like India, a secular government that does not make sides in religious matters, though it respects all religions, a flourishing religious life, not merely individually but also in groups and a public space where all religions and other ideologies can actively share and discuss their perspectives on socio-economic and political issues.

#### **3.1. Cosmic Religion**

The cosmos includes the world of the ancestors and Spirits. Nature itself is animated and human and social life relates to the cycle of the seasons. Religious rituals contribute to and regulate cosmic processes too, besides human, historical ones. The Gods too are localized and relate to the people and their social and geographical space. When people fight with each other, their God too fight with them. Their victory or defeat is as much their as that of their Gods. People may change their loyalty to a more powerful God. Such religion is rooted in culture. It provides meaning and justifies socio-cultural structures like slavery, caste system, oppression of women etc. It may condemn transgressions and demand reparation. But the religio-cultural structure and frame work are not touched. They are taken for granted. These can be called Cosmic Religion<sup>8</sup>.

#### **3.2. A positive View of Other Religions**

A cosmic religion is closely related and also limited to a particular human group. The people belonging to different religious groups, encounter with other religions. If they look at other religions as merely different and opposed to their own religion as false to true, then they cannot remain unconcerned. Either they have to convert them or defend and protect themselves from them, even fighting them if necessary. But what if they find that the other religions are not only different but are also true and valid in their own way? Only then can one speak of an awareness of Religious Pluralism. Each religion makes space for others within its own view of the world. This seems true of the major world religions, even though they may understand this phenomenon within their own theological and spiritual framework. For them, God is present and active in other believers in and through their religions. It is important to realize is that God is open and inclusive in a way that transcends our own search for identity and difference.

### **4. Religious Pluralism and Personal Relationship :**

All the religions speak of a God who relates to all believers, because there is only one God. But the religions attribute this inclusivism of God to themselves. Each religion offers a way to its followers to which they are committed. God alone is inclusive. That is God's mystery and will. It is often a vocation, a call and a response which express the freedom of God and the freedom of the individual involved. But though there may be many ways to experience God, God is one. It is the same God that all people experience, each one in his/her own way. That is why God is inclusive. This is the image of God that one sees to get from the various religions. Every religion thinks that it is the best and the easiest way to God. Precisely because one has experienced God in his/her religion. He/she is attached to it. A religion is a divine human relationship. While one considers his/her own religion to the best, he/her can accept that the other religions also facilitate divine-human encounter to their own followers. Ultimately what matters is the generosity of God's gift and the generosity of the human response. These cannot be compared. Much less can one compare religions as systems of doctrine. This is a necessary minimum to acknowledge the fact of religious pluralism as legitimate.

India is a country with different religions. As different divine-human relationships are not same. But one may find similarities. If the religions are different and represent different relationships and to different views of God or

<sup>7</sup>Micheal Amaladoss S.J, *Making Harmony Living in Pluralist World*, 89-90.

<sup>8</sup>Micheal Amaladoss S.J, *Making Harmony Living in Pluralist World*, 118-119.

Salvation, then one can learn from other religions. If God has spoken to them in their Scripture, even though those words are addressed to them, they may not be totally irrelevant to others<sup>9</sup>.

By analyzing all these, one does not say that all religions are same. What here proposing is that each religion, while believing its specificity and uniqueness, can be accepted the legitimacy of other religions as facilitating divine-human encounter. Each religion will explain this an accordance with its own faith-vision. The classical Hinduism and Buddhism accept the legitimacy of people following their own religions in the context of their doctrine of rebirth. Everyone is following a particular religion in this life corresponding to the state of his/her spiritual development. The believer has the right and the duty to do so and one has to respect that right. Islamic tradition accepts that God has spoken to other people and that they can follow God in their own way. Christianity teaches that Christ and the Spirit are active everywhere.

But this happened in and through the religions that the people practice. Therefore, whatever may be one's own transcendental explanation of what is happening even unknown to the other believers, the others have the right to the path that they feel at the moment called to follow. Religious pluralism is a fact of history. One seeks to proclaim and propagate his/her own faith-vision. But one accepts that those who do not feel called to follow the religious path of their choice, according to their conscience. One could go one more step and say that one think that it is God's will for him/her, since God has placed them in such a historical context<sup>10</sup>. Religious belongingness, therefore should not be an obstacle for living together at the political, social and cultural levels. Even at the religious level there can be mutual respect and collaboration in the context of the one God or ultimate to whom every one relates.

## **5. Living Together :**

India is a nation marked by political, cultural, ideological and religious pluralism. It is no longer possible to think of a group of people anywhere who will be politically, culturally, ideologically and religiously homogenous, except for some hitherto unexplored tribal groups deep in a forest or high on some mountain, if there are any. In such a situation various ways of living together is possible. One way is that a majority group of people dominate and shape a society of their choice. Ethnic or linguistic or religious minority group may be militarily and politically dominant. The others are tolerated as real or political minorities in so far as they can adjust to this dominant order- supposing that the majority does not engage in 'cleansing' operations in the name of ethnicity or religion. Political domination, supported by the military power, is at the service of economic and social domination. This is what is actually happening in the many parts of India. But minorities and subaltern groups are agitating for recognition and equality everywhere like Tamils in Sri Lanka and Dalits in India<sup>11</sup>.

### **5.1 A Vision of Community**

Human beings are living together with others. Some people may be individualists, thinking only about themselves, looking at everyone else as means to help them achieve their own goals. But some people may feel that they share common interests with others. Sharing interests may lead to shared responsibility to achieve them. Shared interests and responsibilities lead to an experience of community. Such community can be experienced at various levels. The primary level is that of the family. And the wider level, it may be an interest-group bought together by the same kind of interests, work or goals. A group may be determined by the place in which it lives, like the village. Some groups may be shaped at wider levels by other factors like language, caste, ethnicity, or religion. The contemporary Nation-State is one such community. The unifying factor can be a common language, supposed common ethnicity, culture, religion or geographical territory. Normally people tend to identify themselves narrowly with either caste or ethnic group or religion. Such identities need not be denied. But people must go beyond this and discover larger communities at national, regional and global levels. To feel a sense of community is to experience a sense of belongingness and a sense of mutual responsibility. At the moment such a global experience seems to happen only on occasions of great tragedy, helped by the media<sup>12</sup>. Such experience will seek expression in some appropriate structures.

## **6. Respecting Differences**

In the context of pluralism and differences, one need to develop a policy of recognition, respect, and acceptance of differences. Recognition supposes that the different identity of the other is precede as different. There is no attempt to subsume and dominate it in an inclusivist and totalizing perspective of to integrate it in a hierarchical system.

<sup>9</sup>Micheal Amaladoss S.J, *Making Harmony Living in Pluralist World*, 118.

<sup>10</sup>Micheal Amaladoss S.J, *Making Harmony Living in Pluralist World*, 138-139.

<sup>11</sup>Micheal Amaladoss S.J, *Making Harmony Living in Pluralist World*, 145

<sup>12</sup>Micheal Amaladoss S.J, *Making Harmony Living in Pluralist World*, 149-150.

Religions and cultures tend to become inclusive integrating various cosmic religions. Hinduism is a good example. Hierarchical integration takes a social form. This happens in the Indian caste system. It is organized around the system of graded religious purity and pollution into five broad groups; the priests, closes to the divinity, the warriors and Kings, the traders and the peasants and servants. A fifth group of people are considered untouchable, totally outside the pale of the system and totally and permanently impure. Each group can have many subgroups. One can count more than four thousand such sub groups in India. Each sub group is endogamous. The social order of unity is maintained so long as each group plays its assigned role in society. New groups like Muslims and Christians can easily fit into the system, especially at the lower level of being out castes. Muslims and Christians have also integrated the caste hierarchy into their own social organization. In this system the hierarchical unity is assured, but there is no equality and only limited freedom<sup>13</sup>.

## **7. Conclusion :**

India has a population over 1.2 billion people. This vast population is characterized by great diversity and immense complexity, to say the least. It is seen that Indians managed to live together with various religions and cultures through ages, there have been significant conflicts between communities because of this plural complexity. India is a nation of different religious communities includes Hindus (79.8 percent), Muslims (14.23 percent) and Christians (2.3 percent), as well as Sikhs (1.72 percent), Buddhists (0.7 percent) Jains (0.37 percent) and other religious or non-religious groups (0.9 percent)<sup>14</sup>.

One of the main reasons why difference becomes a problem is that it is experienced as a cause for discrimination and inequality. At the level of religion, the other may be seen as inferior or demonized. At the level of society, the other is ostracized and considered inferior in status. At the level of politics, the other is subjugated. At the level of economic, the other is exploited. Respect for and acceptance of difference would mean a certain amount of equality. In a modern liberal society, everyone is supposed to be formally equal. All enjoy freedom and the basic human rights. The equality of opportunity is also often affirmed. But the formal frame work of political equality leaves untouched economic and social inequalities. A democratic frame work in politics may overlook a lot of social and economic inequality. This is the experience of poor countries like India, which have succeeded in remaining democratic despite all orders. Authentic democracy cannot go with wide spread injustice. That is why, in India, people speak about economic and social rights besides human rights.

---

<sup>13</sup>Micheal Amaladoss S.J, *Making Harmony Living in Pluralist World*, 151-152.

<sup>14</sup>Census Info India 2011, op.cit. See "*Census Info India 2011, Our Census, Our future*", accessed October 2, 2019, <http://www.dataforall.org/dashboard/cencusinfoindia-pca/>