

A Comparative Study on Western and Eastern Secularism

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ABSTRACT

Diversity is one of the features that are common to most states throughout the evolution of history. Diversity could be of language, culture, history, and religion. Religion has been a crucial factor among the diverse elements of the revolutionary and evolutionary histories of modern states. To get rid of this most of the democratic states in the world have adopted a secular principle that separates the state from religion. This article is to elucidate how secularism is practiced in Western and Eastern states. The history of Western and Eastern secularism has been explained in terms of European theories and other historical events in the west and from the East philosophy of Indian secularism and the role of the kings has been taken. To explain the practice of secularism in the modern period comparison of its practice in the USA from the west and India from the East has been studied. The secular approach of France also has been referred to in this article because of its uniqueness among the world states. Holistically this article aims to show how secularism is being practiced differently in Western and Eastern states.

KEYWORDS: Eastern Secularism, Western Secularism, India, United States of America, Spirituality, Religion

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I. INTRODUCTION

Secularism in a most general way can be defined as the separation of state affairs from religious institutions. But in a broader sense, it is not an easy task to define secularism because there is a need for a clear understanding of the state institution and religious institutions. One of the most controversial and complex terms in social and political theory is secularism. The word secularism is derived from the Latin word “**seculum**”. The word secular refers to things that are not religious and spiritual. A state which is established by human association for the purpose of lawmaking, law adjudication, and law execution is a pragmatic institution and not a spiritual institution. Laws of the modern state will be mostly practical and needed which is not based on any spiritual beliefs. Thus, a state which is created for a human being is always expected to be separated from spirituality to ensure its logical existence. Religion, on the other hand, was an institution that believes in spiritual laws and was guided on those lines. Religion as an institution of faith was created by the state as an instrument of statecraft. Religion and spiritual laws were used by the head of the state in the ancient period to receive acquiescence from the people. Religion was ensured by many ancient political philosophers to be part of the state so that fear of godly punishment brings social order.

Secularism in the modern period is most widely practiced in democratic setups. Though the general meaning of secularism is more or less the same in all states, the application of the principle of secularism varies from region to region. This article aims to compare the practice of secularism in the Western region and the Eastern region. The USA is taken as an example from the West which is a place known for liberal ideas. The Eastern region is flooded with theocratic states (middle east) and non-secular states, India stands out as an exception from the eastern region where secularism is safeguarded by the constitution. **A man without a history is like a tree without roots** (Malcolm X). A birth to a culture or principle cannot happen in a day. It has its roots and reasons to be practiced in a particular way in a particular geographical region. The indigenous roots of secularism in the Western region and Eastern region are needed to elucidate the differences and similarities between the practice of the same in the modern era.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF WESTERN SECULARISM

[1]. Ancient Greece and Greek thinkers laid the foundation for the practice of secularism in their theories of politics and state. The concept of secularism is considered to be emerged in medieval Europe, especially as an outcome of the protestant reformation and the Enlightenment. The idea of secularism was known to the rest of the world through education and practiced by modern states like the United States and Turkey. To know the evolution of secularism in Western states we have to understand the seeds sowed by ancient Greek thinkers regarding the relationship between state and church.

St. Augustine (354 – 430) a Christian philosopher in his theory of church and the state believed that the state and society were the same which is the creation of God as a reformative institution. Initially, in the state of nature, people were innocent and pure-hearted but in the course of time, they started to deviate from godly principles and became sinful people. So as a reformative purpose, god created an institution that is the state which Augustine refers to as the city of earth. In the city of earth, the church is believed to be the representative of the god through which God delivers his orders and the king was the person sent by God to punish the sinners. Thus, Augustine's state or city of the earth was a reformative institution which is religious and in which the king had no authority to deny the orders and advice provided by the church. This view of Augustine implies that the state cannot be separated from the influence of religion.

St. Thomas Aquinas (1227 – 1274) was a medieval thinker who gave a controversial theory on the relationship between state and church. He was an orthodox Christian so he was expected to give the same supreme authority to the church and sub-ordinate position of the state, but he wanted to maintain the autonomy of the state and the church. He took a moderate approach toward the relationship between the state and the church. He believed that a king is someone who has to get the support and consent of the people and on the other hand, he has to recognize the leadership of the church. He laid the foundation for the autonomy of secular authority and softened the relationship between the state and the church. In the course of the 12th and 13th centuries, the supremacy of the church started to decline where the monarch started to attract the support of the people, and the church adopted the new phenomenon.

The thirty years war which is blood flooded war of religious violence took place within the roman empire from 1618 to 1648 and the mid-17th concepts of enlightenment in the west impacted the need for secular authority in the Western states. Accordingly, the Declaration of French Independence and the Declaration of American Independence sowed seeds for the separation of state from the influence of religion in the West.

III. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF EASTERN SECULARISM:

[2]. In the eastern region, India and spirituality go hand in hand since it is the place of birth for several religions like Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, and Sikhism. The secular ideas of Buddhism and Jainism were later on spread to the eastern side of India like the modern period in China, Sri Lanka, Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asian states. Thus, the history of Indian secularism is the foundation of Eastern secularism. Indian secularism is criticized as a Western import concept but secular tradition cannot be separated from the history of India. The state and the rulers in the ancient period maintained a tolerant policy towards all faiths and respected all faiths. The philosophy of **Sanatan dharma** in Hinduism developed an interconnected concept inviting different faiths and trying to integrate them to move towards a common way. This philosophy in ancient India stressed the importance of knowing the traditions of various religions and their spiritual beliefs because only when people of different faiths get to know about other faith, they'll develop a sense of harmony among faiths. Ashoka ancient Mauryan king who followed Buddhism after the Kalinga war maintained a tolerant religious policy. In his 12th rock edict, he not only advised to maintain tolerance towards different faiths but also to develop respect towards them. In ancient India, people had the freedom of religion they were given citizenship by the state irrespective of the religion they followed.

The secular approach towards various religions in the ancient period shifted after the arrival of Islam and with the formation of the Delhi sultanate in the medieval period. The rulers of the Delhi sultanate maintained a rigorous religious policy towards other religions by imposing taxation policies like the jizya tax – a tax imposed on non-Muslims. Qualification to take over the throne was on the lines of Islamic laws, Razia Bibi daughter of Iltutmish the first Indian woman ruler was killed by people since women were prohibited from taking over the throne in Islam, this shows how religion cannot be separated from the state in Islamic rule. With the arrival of the Mughal sharia law was imposed but most of the Mughal rulers maintained a tolerant policy except for the Aurangzeb. Akbar is called great because of his pro-secular approach toward other religions. He abolished jizya taxes imposed on non-Muslims, promotes inter-religious marriages, professed equality between Islam and other religions, was against forced conversion of other religious people to Islam, and promoted the construction of Hindu temples. Aurangzeb a descendant of Akbar maintained a contrasting policy. He wanted to establish a theocratic state of Islam and imposed religion-based taxes. The end of Aurangzeb marked the dominance of colonial powers in India.

The British colonial powers did not aim to separate religion from the state but they wanted to maintain equality among the different religions. They brought in common laws and common taxation policies for all religions. But the British also promoted the idea of a divide-and-rule policy which created a division among the communities. The Morley Minto reforms gave a separate electorate to Muslims. Many leaders who took part in the freedom movement wanted to maintain the secular approach of the state towards all religions. Jawahar Lal Nehru the first prime minister of India desperately wanted to have a secular state since it was an approach toward modernity and progressiveness. Thus, Indian secularism is not completely a Western import but a tradition that

was practiced in all phases of Indian history, and most importantly secular approach flooded most of the minds of Indian freedom leaders.

IV. THE WESTERN MODEL OF SECULARISM:

[3]. In most Western states, secularism is understood by the concept of separation of state and church which implies a state is negative in the case of existing religious affairs and establishing a religion. Here church refers not only to Christianity but includes the distance of the state from all other religions. **The American model of secularism** is taken as an example from the west

USA: There is a clear-cut separation between the state and religion in the USA. The state will not intervene in religious affairs and religion will not influence the laws passed by the state. The state will not aid or support any religion financially. But the state provides the freedom of their citizen to follow a particular faith and not follow the particular faith and also not to follow faith. If a religion is not accepting a citizen to be part of their faith, the state cannot act on it, the state cannot intervene and give the citizen his right to follow the religion. The state can only be a spectator in the affairs of religion. The freedom of religion in Western conception only means the right of the individuals but not the right of the communities. There will be liberty for a citizen to choose their faith and follow the same, there will be equal treatment among the individuals irrespective of the faith they follow. There is no scope for communal-based liberties there won't be any codified laws for the communities and minorities. The policies and laws which are passed and implemented by the state will have no special provision for minorities. This neglect of rights to minorities in Western states is because of their history in which except for the Jews all other religions had homogeneity in the state. There were conflicts between two religions or two sects within religion but there were no hierarchies among the religions and sects. This model of secularism where there is a mutual exclusion of state and religion can be seen in most of the western states. Religion is completely a private affair in the state. Neither public policy nor religious laws can intervene with each other.

France: Among all the secular states in the west French model of secularism is one of the unique models of secularism not only among them but also among all other secular states in the world. It has attracted the attention of global states of its unique approach to secularism. In the Western region, France is a pretty diverse place when it comes to religion. Half of its population is identified to be Christian it also has a large population of Muslim and Jewish communities in Europe. There is also a good number of people who don't provide allegiance to any faith at all. All these communities have managed to compact with each other peacefully in France because of the principle called *laïcité* which means secularism. This principle was adopted in 1905 to separate the state from the influence of the catholic church. The state, the government, and the civil servants remain neutral but people are not expected to be neutral which is to provide them the freedom to believe and not to believe in faith. But it is not the same secularism that is followed in the United States as explained above. In France, the state is not associated with any religion, it is neutral but not negative, it is positive. The state has an action on religious affairs and intervenes in the religious freedom of people. When we say freedom of religion in France it only means freedom of conscience which is to believe and follow any faith by heart and mind. Freedom of practicing religion is confined to one's private space and places of worship. Freedom to profess, propagate and practice religion in public institutions is prohibited in France which implies the state is regulating religion and intervening in religious affairs. In 2004 the **French law on secularity and conspicuous religious symbols in schools** banned religious symbols and identification (large crosses, headscarf, turban, skull caps) in educational institutions. Laïcité as a legal principle of protecting religious freedom shifted its approach towards establishing the state of invisible religion or state of uniformity. This is how secularism in France is different from other Western states where it has an action on religious affairs. It is still a debate whether France is an example of a truly secular state or an extremist state in the name of secularism.

V. EASTERN MODEL OF SECULARISM

[4]. Secularism in the eastern region is the most confined principle that can be restricted to only a few states because most of the eastern states are theocratic states like Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Iran. There are few non-theocratic states in the eastern region but not all non-theocratic states are secular states. Many non-theocratic states provide their close allegiance to a particular religion like Sri Lanka and China which wants to maintain the principle of uniformity. India which relies on the principle of unity in diversity follows the positive approach of secularism in the East. Thus, India is taken as an example from the east

India: India is a constitutionally secular state in which articles 25-28 deal with the freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, freedom to profess, practice, and propagate religion, freedom to maintain religious institutions, exemption from taxes, and freedom from religious instruction from educational institutions. These articles enumerated in the constitution laid the foundation for a secular India even though the word secular had been added to the preamble by the 42nd amendment act in 1976. One of the criticisms against Indian secularism is that it is a Western import. It is indeed because the Western education and ideas of the West promote inter-community

equality to eliminate the hierarchy. The arrival of colonial powers and Western education provided to native Indians reformed many religious practices which were prevalent in India. Though Western modernity provided a lot to Indian secularism it cannot be called completely a Western import. Indian constitution has adopted the concept of secularism and modified it according to Indian society. Indian secularism is distinctive in the way that it not only promotes the separation of religion from the state but respects and accepts every religion. India is not associated with any one religion but associated with diverse religions and treats them equally. More than the separation of religion Indian secularism stresses more equality among and within religions. Within religion, it opposed the oppression faced by Dalits in Hinduism, suppressed position of women in Islam, and extremist thoughts in all the religions. The state plays a positive character in matters of religion where it regulates religious laws, establishes religious institution, provide financial assistance for religious promotion, etc. Indian secularism not only promotes the liberty of an individual in matters of religion but also protects the liberty of minority communities in matters of religious and educational institutions. Despite being a most diverse state India is proving to be a stable secular state which has avoided a civil war for 75 years which should be credited to India's positive secularism.

VI. CONCLUSION

Most different system design is the method used to compare the practice of secularism in western and eastern regions. India is taken as an example from the Eastern region and the American model of secularism from the Western region. Though the principle of secularism in a narrow way means to be a separation of state and religion, the practice of secularism in both states is like two different sides of the same coin. The Negative and Positive approach to secularism is the major difference that can be attributed to USA and India respectively. In the USA the state has no action on religious affairs but it provides liberty to the individuals in the matters of religion i.e., freedom to follow or not to follow a particular belief. In India state has a positive action where it not only provides liberty to the individuals but also all the communities in matters of religion and also protects their religious rights through the court of law. Though Indian secularism doesn't coincide with the abstract idea of secularism which is the separation of state from religion, Indian secularism can be credited for its positive practice which respects all faiths and protects the rights and culture of the same. The USA on the other hand has been a truly secular state which doesn't intervene in any religious affairs but fails to protect the freedom of oneself.

Secularism in France has been explained to show how a positive approach can be a violator of freedoms. The recent laws in India which are related to religious affairs show that there is a gradual decline in the secular approach towards religious personal laws in India. For example, The recent hijab issue and the verdict of the Karnataka high court show the changing trends in Indian secularism which resembles the French law on secularity and conspicuous religious symbols in schools. To conclude Secularism in any state doesn't mean anti-religion but it is anti-hatred toward religion. When we speak about the freedom of religion it is not the religion that matters here it is about the freedom of the citizen.

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