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The Idea of the Secular State

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The concept of the Secular State is the fruit of liberal thought. The concept had a profound influence on the evolution of political thought in the West during the last four centuries. In one sense the history of modern times is the history of the gradual secularization of political institutions.

The Secular Concept

Secular is not a satisfactory term ; its use is more convenient than correct. The word was originally used in the sense of belonging to the world of time as opposed to spiritual realities which are timeless. (It may be noted that in this sense the expression 'Secular State' is a tautology, because by definition the State is secular, and secular is that which has to do with the State.) But there is a more circumscribed meaning of the word which is more relevant for us, according to which *secular* is that which is not bound by monastic rules. It is in its relation to religion that we must find its real meaning. *The secular is not opposed to monastic regulations, nor is it influenced by them ; it is just not bound by them.* Monastic regulations may be taken to mean organized religious rules, and it follows that the Secular State seeks to be neutral in religious matters. The idea of the Secular State expresses neither an irreligious nor an anti-religious attitude. The Secular State recognizes the reality of religion, and it appreciates religious differences. But such appreciation is purely intellectual, and, therefore, impersonal. There is no participation, no taking sides. Thus a State that is secular should view religious forces and movements from the vantage ground of neutrality and objectivity, of detachment and impartiality.

Today, however, the term must command a wider connotation. In olden days narrow religious views sometimes rendered ineffective even ideals of natural justice. Race and language, to take only two examples, did not present many disturbing problems. But today such forces as race and language are equally strong. Religion has even been identified with race, and racial discrimination and religious intolerance often go together. And consequently social relations, both on the national and international levels, have entered a new dimension of complexity in our day. Hence the concept of secularism in politics to be of any lasting value in the context of modern life should comprehend all such forces.

The State

The concept of the State involves three factors: a definite geographical territory, a people inhabiting it, and a government function-

ing among them, making laws, enforcing laws, and executing justice. The government is thus the means by which the State discharges its two-fold obligation, first as a guardian of the people, and secondly as a trustee of the territory. From this may be derived Prof. Laski's definition of the State as a society which is integrated by possessing a coercive authority legally supreme over the authority of any individual or group which is part of it. This supremacy of its authority is a fundamental concept. The State is sovereign. Such sovereignty today is identified with democratic sovereignty, and its effectiveness in internal and inter-State relations is assessed by the measure of its democracy.

The basis of the State is the consciousness of its citizens being a nation. It is this consciousness which makes for solidarity, and it is this that is at the root of the sovereignty of the State. And the usual ingredients of such nation-sense are religion, race and language, and the traditions born out of them.

Let us look at it another way. The State is there to guarantee and to protect the freedom of the individuals that comprise it. Its aims are liberty and protection, freedom and order, which, as is apparent, are conflicting aims. Hence the inescapable antagonism between the individual and the State. The success of the State depends upon a healthy reconciliation of its paradoxical functions, achieved through an intelligent ordering of governmental policies. To adopt Nietzsche's famous distinction, the State must guarantee both freedom from and freedom to, without producing any sense of strain in social life. It is only in the context of this inherent tension that we can rightly appreciate the relevance of the secular idea as applied to the State.

The Theocratic State

In the ancient world all life was lived in the shadow of fatalistic notions. Religion, not consciously formulated as in modern times, but inevitably taken for granted, permeated all thought and life. The propitiation of the gods was an integral part of all social activity, and all governments were theocratic. There certainly were degrees of theocracy, but there was no government which was not, in some way or other, religious.

There was self-conscious theocracy, as in the Jewish State of the Old Testament times, where the religious character of the State was constitutionally accepted and proudly upheld. In China and Japan the emperors were also the high-priests of the national religions. In Persia and Egypt, in all seats of ancient civilizations including India, the general nature of the government was theocratic. The differences were only in details; the fundamental emphasis was more or less the same. Asoka was a tolerant king; but such tolerance in the ancient world was never based on any realization of secular ideals. Very often it was only a different theocratic emphasis.

It is often contended that Greek political culture was secular in character. This is only relatively true. The Hellenic outlook no doubt was rational and liberal-minded, but such 'modernism' of the city-states consisted in their comparative indifference to religious matters, not in any conscious secularistic outlook in politics. The worship of the Olympians, if not enforced as a duty, was recognized, in however vague

a manner, as an obligation, and they had the gods always up their sleeves to be produced on necessary occasions. They did it in the most dramatic manner when Socrates was being tried. One of the charges against him was this, that 'he was an evil-doer who corrupted the youth, and who did not believe in the gods the city believed in, but in other new divinities'. This certainly was not secularism. Nor was the slave system, which was accepted universally by the Greeks. One must, however, hasten to admit that when everything is said the Hellenic liberal conceptions in the ancient world came nearest to modern secular ideals in politics.

This was to some extent true with the Roman tradition too. In the Roman Empire there was a greater emphasis on the practical and institutional side of life. The poetry of Rome, as Shelley remarked, lived in its institutions. But the general tendency was towards an ill-defined theocracy, and an evil man like Caligula could appear in public with a golden beard and call himself Jupiter and get away with it.

A safe conclusion to be drawn from a study of these ancient States would be this: the greater the organized and centralized efficiency of the religion, the more rigid was the character of the theocracy. Because religion in Greece and Rome was largely a formality, and at its best a cultural inspiration, the less pronounced and the more liberal were their theocracies.

This is clearly illustrated in the theocracy of the Catholic world, i.e. Europe from the fifth to the fifteenth centuries A.D. The Catholic Church was the only organized power with any consciousness of historic relevance, and it found itself occupying the vacuum created by the fall of Imperial Rome. It accepted its new rôle with unquestioning confidence, and so commenced the theocratic imperialism of the Dark and the Middle Ages. Peacock's cynical assessment of the influence of Christianity, that darkness thickened with the progress of light, is to a large extent justified.

It was during this period that Augustine of Hippo laid it down that the State was only a part of the City of God, and that civil rulers must submit themselves to the judgment of the Church. Thomas Aquinas was even more emphatic. The goal of human activity was bliss eternal, and only the Church could lead man to it. Hence the Church was supreme. The Pope had been given all temporal and spiritual powers, and the king was only his delegate.

Prof. Rashdall quotes a medieval writer who claims that the Imperial State, the Catholic Church and the Scholastic Universities are the three 'mysterious powers or "virtues" by whose harmonious co-operation the life and health of Christendom are sustained'. That was after these forces attained a definite and tangible place in the scheme of life and in the structure of society. *What is important for us to note is that the structure of society was theocentric, that the State and the university had no independent existence.* But such a system could not continue. The intolerance of such a rigorous religious set-up, its inequality and its corruption, were fated inevitably to destroy the system. The fall of Catholic theocracy was a historic necessity. The great Italian poet Dante had voiced his protest as early as the thirteenth century A.D. There was John Wycliffe in England, and later came Martin Luther.

Subsequent history is to a great extent the history of the slow separation of the functions of the religious and the secular organizations. Our own day has witnessed the denouement of this particular historic plot, and Arnold Toynbee has christened (strange word to use!) our times as the Post-Christian Era!

It is useful to pause for a moment and realize that the religious State was not an unmitigated evil. Its primary object was not the preservation of vested interests through the exploitation of religious sympathies. It was the easiest and most natural way of achieving the necessary unity of outlook and national solidarity. Thus theocracy fulfilled a historic function. It enabled men, at least on one plane, to transcend the historic limitations of class and rank which obtained in particular periods. It formed strong cultural traditions, and, in general, enriched the pattern of history. If to introduce it today is an anachronism, that is because of the complex nature of the composition of modern society.

The Growth of the Ideal of the Secular State

This may be briefly sketched. Broadly speaking, the secular tradition in politics has its origin in two main sources. On the level of concrete example, there has been the contribution of enlightened rulers and liberal-minded societies throughout the ages. The secular tradition of the Greek city-states is the most significant of such contributions to the common fund of history. Then on the level of the evolution of historic thought there was the influence of Christian ethics. Christian thought freed from an exclusively other-worldly outlook, and embracing as it did the totality of human life, made a very definite contribution to the secular concept. Even before human life achieved a new significance through the Incarnate Word, the Prophets of the Old Testament had begun to question the narrow theocentric nationalism of the Chosen People. Thus Amos had the boldness to declare 'Are ye not as the children of the Ethiopians unto me, saith the Lord'. The Incarnation was the greatest affirmation of the significance of material values and social realities. (In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither bond nor free.) It gave man a new insight into the nature of God, by shedding new light on his own situation.

But it was in the fifteenth century A.D. that the ideal of the Secular State emerged as a self-conscious tendency. We may trace its origins in the disruption of the Catholic theocracy of the Middle Ages. The Reformation emancipated the individual spiritually, and the Renaissance freed him intellectually. (Such generalizations are always misleading. It is one of the anomalies of human life that emancipation on one level invariably means enslavement on another. The disruption of Catholic theocracy also meant the destruction of the unity of Christendom. The only point we would make here is this: that in the emergence of the individual from the system in which he had been lost for centuries, we have the beginning of free thinking and of the ideal of the Secular State.) Human thinking was certainly revolutionized in these momentous centuries. Scholarship in the Middle Ages was often confined to trans-mundane speculation, and the theories of State expounded by scholars like Thomas Aquinas were substantially influenced by pre-suppositions which were unmistakably biassed. But now that man was

found to be significant in his own strength, we find a bolder approach to the whole science of State-life. Machiavelli is perhaps too extreme to be taken as a representative, but there is no doubt that the new approach was secular.

The Bloodless Revolution of England which destroyed monarchical absolutism, the American War of Independence which demolished the myth of imperialism and recognized the right of national freedom, and the French Revolution which marked the collapse of feudalism, a system into which theocracy had made deep inroads, are the more prominent milestones in the development of the secular concept in politics. It was only towards the closing years of the last century, however, that the concept of the Secular State emerged as a triumphant ideal, accepted in the Western world as the only possible approach to political life.

We have now briefly traced the history of the growth of the secular concept in politics. It was born when the tyranny of ill-understood religion was recognized as the biggest stumbling-block in the path of a groping humanity. The evil deeds of corrupt leaders of religion, inevitable results of organizational over-emphasis, manifested themselves in a blatant manner, and the whole religious set-up began to be questioned. Corruptions and compromises bred scepticism, and scepticism, in its turn, gave rise to the secular ideal. Such secular ideal was dangerously bordering on materialism; and it was redeemed by the very religion to which, on another plane, it represented a reaction. The spirit of healthy criticism inside religion, and a constant re-examination of the religious presuppositions by honest men who did not relinquish their religious convictions, saved this secular ideal from materialism.

A General Critique of the Secular Concept

The dangers of the secular ideal are mostly self-evident. There are positive and negative dangers, dangers arising from reading too much and reading too little into it. It may be better to start with the negative dangers.

(1) The most obvious danger is that the concept may be inadequately defined, and therefore only partially practised. As it is a necessarily ill-defined idea there is always the possibility that its limits may be conveniently fixed by interested parties. Governments, in order to serve selfish ends, may exclude factors like race and language from its pale. Thus only the conscious adoption of a more comprehensive definition of the idea may correct the racial prejudices in South Africa, or even in America, and perhaps save India from a linguistic dictatorship. On a wider level the same applies to the world situation today. Only an enlightened appreciation of the meaning of the Secular State, defined comprehensively, can save ideologies and peoples from a suicidal narrowness of outlook.

(2) Then there is the peril of the concept lending itself to materialist and rationalist interpretations. In a secularist set-up, the whole question of morality may be seriously challenged. Morality in the secular climate cannot claim any objective validity, and thus loses its compelling relevance in the context of life. Listen to what Niebuhr says in his *Interpretation of Christian Ethics*: 'The distinctive contribution of religion to morality lies in its comprehension of the dimension of depth

in life. A secular moral act resolves the conflicts of interests and passion, revealed in any immediate situation, by whatever counsels a decent prudence may suggest, the most usual counsel being that of moderation "in nothing too much". A religious morality is constrained by its sense of a dimension of depth to trace every force with which it deals to some ultimate origin and to relate every purpose to some ultimate end. It is concerned not only with immediate values and disvalues, but with the problem of good and evil, not only with immediate objectives but with ultimate hopes. It is troubled by the question of the primal "whence" and the final "wherefore".

At this point it may not be out of place to underline, in however cursory a manner, the curious confusion in most systems of scepticism we have in the modern world. The cultured rationalist of our day is often curiously dogmatic, may even be said to be strangely religious, because the dogmatic truths he postulates in a state of blissful ignorance are fundamentally religious truths. When J. B. S. Haldane declared, 'It is no joke at all to be an atheist, because it means that you feel yourself responsible for the future of the world', he could have meant only a moral responsibility, for which there is no warrant in his own philosophy of scepticism. Such stealthy didacticism is characteristic of modern scepticism, and is much less scientific than acknowledged religious dogmatism which has at least the merit of being final and ultimate. One cannot believe in reason without assuming the objective validity and the lasting reasonableness of reason, and one cannot believe in man without assuming the belief-justifying nature of the human personality. The fact is that thorough-going scepticism, like thorough-going puritanism, is a negation of life, and life cannot afford to tolerate negations of itself. Neither suspension of belief nor suspension of disbelief can be sustained indefinitely and independently. At one point or another our mortal uncertainties will have of necessity to be explained and solved by relating them to religious certainties, and our mortal certainties clarified and re-emphasized by exposing them to the full light of religious certainties.

Thus the practice of a thorough-going secularism, entirely divorced from convictions which are not warranted by a secular reading of life and history, will have serious consequences. This, of course, begs the question; one only means the modern approximations which pretend to be that. It involves the whole question of ends and means with a devastating finality of choice. And the Secular State will be caught between the Scylla and Charybdis of totalitarianism and anarchy.

(3) Again, such all-out secularism will mean a glibly optimistic reading of human destiny. It takes on too much significance for itself, and makes the blasphemous claim that it is competent to redeem humanity on its own strength. The curious and unrealistic optimism, as well as the inherent challenge to ultimate moral principles, has origin in an unfortunate but natural enough confusion between secularism and materialism. They are entirely different view-points, and an emphasis on this difference should be considered fundamental. Materialism is a whole philosophy actively opposed to religion, and in whatever garb it is clothed, the denial of the objective affirmations of religion is its source and its most prominent characteristic. Secularism

in politics, on the other hand, is only a concept, which is not only not opposed to religion, but is the supreme affirmation of its own universality. *The secular concept which is non-religious in its working, is and must be deeply religious in its inspiration. And this paradoxical relationship between the secular idea and religion should be more consciously recognized if the Secular State and secular institutions in general are to be really and lastingly effective.*

(4) There is the danger here in India that the secular concept may be identified with the Indian tradition of tolerance. This is a far more subtle peril than any we have discussed so far. The Hindu tradition, it is constantly dinned into us, is a tradition of religious tolerance. There is no fanaticism in the Hindu attitude. All religions are good: they are different manifestations of the same universal reality, radii of the same circle, streams making their way to the same sea. Is it not most natural, most inevitable, to conclude that in India we have the right soil for the growth of the secular concept? Is not the secular idea essentially the same as the Hindu idea? *Is there any difference between a Hindu State and a Secular State?*

If this kind of argument does not betray simple confusion of thought, it betrays subtle intolerance of the most calculated variety. Tolerance of this kind can indeed be more tyrannous than intolerance. A system or an idea cannot afford to be tolerant for the simple reason that its uniqueness is the principle of its existence. One may be liberal in one's thinking, but one cannot be liberal with one's convictions because truth is more important than tolerance or liberalism. Tolerance on the humanist level makes for liberalism and secularism. On the level of Hindu religious thought it is merely a dogmatic tenet, and to claim any superiority for it, is sheer religious fanaticism. And in so far as it denies the uniqueness of other religious systems it is aggressively fanatic. There is a marked tendency in India today to equate such Hindu tolerance with the secular concept in politics, and it is one of the most serious problems that the Indian Secular State will have to face.

The Indian Secular State—No Supporting Culture

We must recognize the fact that the Secular State has no supporting culture in India. It has been imported from the West, and to assert that 'Indian culture, civilization, life, thought and outlook in their essentials are quite favourable to the establishment of a tolerant secular democratic State'¹ is merely to indulge in the doubtful luxury of wishful thinking. The secular concept in politics certainly is not Hindu Revivalism.

Democratic emphasis in general may be said to have its roots in a consciousness of the independent significance of the individual. This consciousness in its turn is based on a philosophy of life which sees more in the individual person than is apparent to a superficial study. And where do we have such a consciousness? Not in a religion where the individual soul is destined to merge into a larger consciousness, losing its own independent existence. Nor, surely, in a view of life which considers man as a sparrow flying through the banqueting hall of a king, flying in from utter darkness, flying out again into utter darkness, from

¹ A Treatise on Secular State: J. S. Venkatraman.

oblivion to oblivion. The first represents Hindu thought on the religious level, the second Hindu thought on the popular level. For the Hindu, individuality is a burden to be borne, or an evil to be dissipated. How can a positive secular democratic emphasis receive any sympathy from such an outlook ?

Again, democracy presupposes belief in the equality of man. How far is the principle accepted in Hindu thought or practised in Hindu life ? We have only to think of the caste system and of the Hindu attitude to women to realize the undemocratic nature of the Hindu way of life. Caste, it may be noted, is no simple evil which may be rectified through a few simple modern prescriptions. It has its roots in the theory of *Karma*, which, in its turn, defines the individual's relation to reality. How can a Hindu abolish caste without giving up his traditional faith ? In other words, how can a Hindu adapt himself to the demands of a Secular State without ceasing to be a Hindu ?

The Christian Roots and the Christian Reinforcement of Secularism

There is a great deal of truth in the belief that the emphasis of the Indian people has been other-worldly. They have tended to be world-renouncing rather than world-accepting. To state this as a fact, however, is not to praise it as a virtue. The denial of the world when one is in the world, the denial of life when one has to live it, savours of irresponsibility. The way of self-fulfilment is certainly the way of self-surrender, but self-surrender does not signify the obliteration of self ; it is rather its sublimation. An other-worldly emphasis, in so far as it tends to deny the relevance of life, involves a denial of itself.

There are always two ways before us : the way of affirmation and the way of denial. The way of denial has been popularly recognized as the difficult way, involving suffering and self-sacrifice. A profoundly false valuation has christened it as the way of the cross. Affirmation, let us hasten to assert, can be more difficult than denial. Let us ask ourselves what it means to affirm the independent significance of our neighbour. Would we not reject his relevance, leave him behind or use him as ' it ' rather than accept him as ' thou ' ?

It is in the Semitic religions that we first meet the affirmation of the individual's unique importance. In the Jewish concept, however, the individual has only a circumscribed importance ; he was created in the image of God, but he has travelled far inland from the shores of glory, and there is only a distant hope of the pristine relationship. The Islamic notions of the individual's significance, as far as I can make out, remain on a fragmentary and undeveloped level. I say *fragmentary* because of the emphasis on the difference between the sexes, and I say *undeveloped* because the religious notions of the Muslim lead to a fanatic confusion of values where the affirmation and the denial get sadly mixed together.

It is in Christianity that we have the highest and the most comprehensive affirmation of the value of the individual person.

In Christianity, let us repeat ; not in the Western way. The Western way, alas, is not the way of affirmation of life and the world ; it is the way of their deification. It is the materialist way, and is not the world white with the bones of its victims ? The betrayal of Christ by

so-called Christian civilization is the most tragic theme of modern history. Science, history, humanism—these are thy gods, O Israel! Religion is dismissed as the Utopia of the dreamer or the opium of the people. Life's end has become the pursuit of immediate pleasure or of a historical heaven. The attitude involves an even more fundamental denial than the way of the world-renouncing mystic; it accepts the primeval chaos and rejects the spirit of God that brooded over it. If the other-worldly denial of matter produced in the long run a lethargic indifference, the this-worldly deification of it has resulted in an aggressive attachment which defeats its own purpose. Consider for a moment the notorious crises of our day; crisis in the family, crisis in national and international relations, crisis in culture, crisis in every sphere of human life and activity!

Between the attachment to things and to persons which in effect becomes the apotheosis of things and persons, and the detachment from things and from persons which encourages irresponsible inaction, there is the Christian way of the critical acceptance of things and persons. Between the blind deification of matter and the almost nihilistic denial of its relevance, there is the way of its affirmation. And the Christian should appreciate the secular concept as the interpretation in one sphere of the Christian principle of affirmation.

Perhaps it is important at this stage to remind ourselves as Christians of the nature of our whole concern in the political sphere. For us the Secular State, or any earthly State, is not the first and the final concern. Our experience as 'sojourners', citizens of this world, should never be unrelated to our expectancy as Christians. The cities of this world are for us only a preparation and a foretaste of the City of God. 'A complete assimilation of politics to morality may never be possible for us, but again and again we shall be able to act so that some new form of organization may be the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual unity among men, some reconstitution of the cities of this world may be a sacramental means to a fuller entry into the City of God. We live today between the temporal constraints and the eternal truths, turning now to these and now to those. But there is a point at which the two meet and become one; it is the dwelling-place of God and, while it is always far beyond us, a step nearer to it is always within our power. The faith that life is one in God in spite of its divisions in us should at last enable us to overcome those divisions, and so to create at least the beginnings of a society in which the inner will be as the outer and the outer as the inner, in which all right human activity, by the very fact that it is obeying its own truest laws, will do the will of God.'¹

It is in this spirit that the Indian Christian should enter into the social and political life of his country. He finds himself today in a position of peculiar opportunity; he has been freed from the traditional lethargy of the East, and he has not yet been completely corrupted by the materialism of the West. The Christian community can thus in a very real sense become the conscience of the nation. They truly constitute the 'creative minority'. What use will they make of this strategic position?

¹ The Structure of Life: E. L. Allen.