

Understanding Secularism and Secularisation: A Case Study of India

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Abstract. This paper focuses on the separation of secularisation and secularism from a conceptual lense embedded in the theoretical frameworks presented by contemporary literature. It provides a timely contribution into the understanding contemporary manifestations of religiosity better, in a more holistic manner. The first section of the paper broadly defines the terms secularism, secularisation, manifestation and religiosity. Separation of these two terms, secularism and secularisation, are extremely important as they are often used interchangeably in academic and non-academic literature alike. However, it is not only important to conceptually separate them but also understand the historical processes behind them. Building on these definitions, the paper then offers an analysis of secularism as a concept and its importance in furthering the understanding of religiosity. Furthermore, the paper approaches secularisation in a way to distinguish it as a separate conceptual construction from secularism. Finally, it introduces the case study of contemporary India to further the thesis presented and concludes by summarizing the overall arguments. This paper provides a unique approach to understanding religion in the contemporary world and furthering the debate on religiosity in modern life across both the global south and north.

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Secularisation as a “historical process” underwent a unique form of “ideological inversion” (Asad 2003, p.192). “The secular” was once part of a “theological discourse” and stemmed from religion itself rather than politics and science (ibid.). In contemporary times – with the inversion of the relationship – the secular discourses constitute “the religious’ and religion emerges as a ‘construction of the Western secular modernity” (Casanova 2008, p.111). Secularism and secularisation are surprisingly complex and intertwined but are critical to the understanding of manifestations of religiosity. This essay unpacks and analyses their construction as separate concepts using a contemporary case study to support the argument.

The first section of the essay will broadly define the terms secularism, secularisation and manifestation of religiosity. Building on the definitions, the second section will analyse secularism as a concept and its importance in furthering the understanding of religiosity. In the third section, the essay will approach secularisation in a way to distinguish it as a separate conceptual construct from secularism. The fourth section will introduce a case study of contemporary India to further the argument presented. Lastly, the essay will conclude summarizing the arguments presented.

Secularism – in broad and over-simplified terms – is a political project, doctrine and ideology that manifests separation between religion and other aspects

of the society. Asad (2003) has argued that it is much more than that as it “presupposes new concepts” and “new imperatives” in context of religion, politics and ethics (p.2). Philpott (2009) argues secularism is an ideology that marginalises religion from other spheres of society (p.185). Others such as Hallward (2008) maintain that it describes a ‘quasi-religious ideology’ that contends with religion (pp.2-3). Secularisation – the process and social construct – focuses on the decline of religion in the contemporary world.

The shift of religion and its practice from the public to the private sphere is critical to the understanding of secularisation (Fox 2013, p.22). Asad (2003) describes secularisation as a “process” rather than an ideology. It manifests the privatisation of religion and the increase or decrease in religiosity in the public sphere (Iqtidar 2012, p.54). Secularism and secularisation are complex concepts with multiple and varied meanings. Within this complexity, as Asad (2003) has argued, we must anchor in and relate to religion to understand both these concepts. It is useful to consider manifestations of religiosity as a term rather than two separate concepts. There is no consensus on a specific meaning for the term as there is no single definition of religion that is applicable universally (ibid., p.29). It reflects distinct yet overlapping experiences, belief systems and values associated with spirituality, transcendence and the divine (Berdyayev 1939, Elkins et al. 1988, Mattis 2000; 2002, Potts 1991). Broadly, it reflects the manifestation of religious practices in both public and private sphere and their impact on socio-political structures.

Understanding secularism, the political project and ideology, as a distinct concept from secularisation is critical in unpacking the practice of religion around the world. Manifestations of secularism, on the other hand, are often seen as an alternative to religion and in direct competition with it (Philpott 2009, pp.185-186). Thinking of secularism as an opposing force to religion or something that replaces religion is a popular strand of thought (Juergensmeyer 1993; 2008, Philpott 2009, Stark 1999, Taylor 2007). Secularism as a political doctrine that allows public discourse in a manner that is neutral and non-religious emerged out of religious conflicts by providing some form of lowest common denominator to the overarching socio-political system (Taylor 1998, pp.2-3). This position is somewhat paradoxical, as Asad (1993, 2003) argues, since we cannot think about what secular constitutes without referring to religion. The tendency to regard religion as alien to secular ideals and practices is self-contradictory (Asad 2003, p.193). Over centuries, secular beliefs paved the way for the rise of mysticism and “oppressive religion”, while in more contemporary times it is secularism that helps more moderate manifestations of religiosity to take shape (ibid., p.193). The process works like a feedback mechanism, where the definitions of secular, secularism and secularisation depend on how we define religion and vice versa.

Secularism is not merely the separation of the religion from the state; rather it is the ‘continuous management’ of religion by the state (Iqtidar 2012, p.54; Asad 2003, pp.190-191). Contemporary manifestations of religiosity including practice and beliefs are increasingly under state management. A Eurocentric illustration is the gradual erosion of the power of the Catholic Church and its eventual

displacement as the centre of power in Europe. The Reformation and the dissolution of Western Christendom reduced the role of papacy as the leader of a global Christian monarchy embodied in the Holy Roman Empire (Casanova 2008, p.107). Before Reformation, the Catholic Church exercised control of national churches, owned vast amounts of land, provided social services, education and health facilities to people through the Treaty of Westphalia 1648. The treaty excluded papacy from European and national affairs of the states (ibid., p.107). Nation states replaced the historic functions that the Church had monopolised for centuries signifying a separation of religion from the state. In modern Europe, Catholic groups such as Opus Dei – a personal prelature of the Pope – still represent and model the historic nature of the work of the Vatican by running schools, universities, social security schemes, and homes for old and orphans (Tourneau 1987, pp.9-23). The difference is that today organisations like Opus Dei function within state laws and constitutions and not under Vatican laws. Through the example of Opus Dei it can be argued that secularism is identifiable as a concept distinct from secularisation and it is useful to think of it as the management of religiosity.

The dual use and interchange of secularisation and secularism is very common but a conspicuous misconception. Charles Taylor (2007) contends that secularism is an ideology that constitutes secularisation. Secularisation is the “move from a society where a belief in God is unchallenged . . . to one in which it is understood to be one option among others” (Taylor 2007, p.3). This is a ‘profoundly wrong’ position because secularism, the project, does not simply constitute secularisation (Fox 2013, p.30). Secularisation is the quantitative increase or decrease in manifestations of religiosity in the modern era. People who have less belief in religion or are not religious at all have always been present in society. The fact that these groups can now identify with an ideology – secularism – does not mean that there is an empirical decline (Stark 1999, pp.249-273). A large body of work in secularisation theory (Dobbelaere 1999, Haden 1987, Philpott 2009 and Stark, 1999) concentrates on the empirical decline in religion focusing on quantity. The emphasis on qualitative aspects in decline or rise in religiosity is under-appreciated (Iqtidar 2012, p.54). In the conceptual unpacking of secularism, emphasis on both quantitative and qualitative aspects of secularisation is important as the latter can help explain empirical trends witnessed in various religions.

An understanding of the distinction between the public and the private is critical to building an understanding of what constitutes secular. Secularisation theorists such as Chaves 1994, Dobbelaere 1999, Philpott 2009 and Wilson 1982 among many others predict declining religious influence in the public sphere. Religion and its practice are gradually moving from the public sphere into the private (Fox 2013, p.22). Although on the decline, religion may remain an integral part of people’s private life and individual beliefs. Secularisation process involves an increase in the autonomy of secular institutions and an increase in the conformity of religious ones to the broader secular world (Wilson 1982, p.149). This privatisation of religion forms a core part of the secularisation theory that furthers understanding of religiosity. The three basic processes in classical secularisation

theory are (1) differentiation of religion from the secular sphere, (2) decline and (3) privatisation of religion (Casanova 1986, pp.1-7). Casanova (1986) using empirical evidence and case studies argues that religions went 'public and deprivatised' through resurgence and that privatisation is not a rule among secularisation thesis (p.3). Differentiation of religion from state, market forces and political power structures forms the "defensible core" of the secularisation theory (ibid., p.7). Asad's (2003) contention that deprivatisation unravels this defensible core of differentiation is very convincing, since both the conceptions are intrinsically connected and not mutually exclusive from each other. Through the ideas discussed above, we can conceptualise secularisation separately from secularism.

The case study of India illustrates secularism and secularisation a separate concept that help understand not just religiosity but also the socio-political environment. India is historically not a single nation but rather a collection of communities practicing their own faiths, traditions and customs. Nehru envisaged the newly independent India as a secular state with a vision of taking the country towards modernity (Khilnani 2006, pp.100-103). Under the Congress Party, India worked its way towards achieving modernity through secularism. India's political leadership believed that to modernize, the country would have to move away from traditional religious practices and superstitious beliefs. Nehru's ideas about secularism shaped the approach that the Indian National Congress - and especially, Indira Gandhi - used in the 1960s and 1970s. The Indian Constitution is secular in its outlook and provisions in Articles 13 to 17, 19, 23 and 25 to 30 lay down the fundamental rights explicitly allowing for freedoms for all religions in an equal manner (Madan 2010, pp.249-248). Article 44 that forms part of the Directive Principles declares that "the State shall endeavour to secure for the citizens a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India" (ibid., p.249). In 1976, the 42nd amendment introduced the word 'secular' in the Indian constitution's preamble for the first time and this represented the point when India adopted secularism as a state project (Sen 2006, p.371).

Secularism in India is distinct from secularisation and this separation helps us understand manifestations of religiosity in the country's diverse Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Jain and other groups in much better light. It is not only distinct but also very unique from the classical Western conception of secularism both in its nature and implementation. Amartya Sen (2005) explains that there are two forms of secularism, one where there is complete separation of state and religion and the other where the state maintains all religions at an equal standing (Sen 2005, pp.16-33). India, as Sen argues, has a form of secularism that treats all religions in an equal and fair manner, or at least, that is the state policy. Given Indian subcontinent's diverse cultural history and plethora of religious practices, the policy is both pragmatic and problematic. This closely relates to Asad's (2003) view on secularism as the state management of religiosity among its populations. The Indian state manages its diverse religious groups both politically and socially especially through funding and provision of places for worship. When the state project of management comes in direct conflict with certain manifestations of religiosity – e.g., Sikhism in 1980s – the state forces the religion to comply (Madan 2010, pp.101-105).

Indian society, or one should say societies, never managed to adopt secularisation. Religiosity increased in India in the years after the independence especially in the political sense. Communal riots between the Hindu majority and the other minorities occur regularly despite the fact the constitution is secular and India is a great triumph of Western liberal democratic models (Asad 2003, p.8). The rise of Hindu nationalist parties in the 1960s and 1970s with movements such as the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* signified an increase in the manifestation of religiosity among the Hindus (Noorani 2000). Conflicts with other religious minorities, such as the anti-Sikh riots (1984), Babri Masjid demolition (1992) and Gujrat violence (2002) illustrate the rising religious tensions within India (Rajagopal 2006, pp.209-212). This reflects that religiosity is on the rise in a secular India, not just on part of Hindus, but also among other religious communities. Indian Muslims, following their own laws, are at odds with the majority Hindu population which often reflects in the voting patterns at the time of the general elections. The recent projection of the Hindu nationalist *Bhartiya Janta Party* to the central government in the 2014 election laid many of the religious cleavages bare when Hindu nationalist groups started asserting their influence.

The underlying cause of these tensions and religious conflict is the failure of the Indian society to embrace secularisation despite the presence of state secularism. Conceptual separation of secularism and secularisation helps to clarify the case of India. Religions are part of India's culture and social life since ancient times and deeply rooted within socio-political structures. A Hindu majority in a nation with many other religious minorities further undermines secularisation processes in the country (Thapar 2006, p.193). Jawarhal Nehru explained the dilemma of Indian secularisation aptly; the "Constitution lays down that we are a secular state, but it must be admitted that this is not wholly reflected in our mass living and thinking" (Gopal 1980, pp.330-1). Secularism exists in India as a state project and political ideology, but secularisation never took hold in the society. Casanova (1986) did not focus on India in his seminal work on public religions, though contemporary India shows the rise of religiosity and de-privatisation of religion.

Investigation into the causes of the secularisation failure in the Indian case leads us back to Taylor's (1998) arguments. Secularism stemmed from the problems in Western society managed by the Church and is applicable to all non-Western societies (Taylor 1998). Classical secularism as we know it is a Eurocentric construct. Scholars like Asad (2003) rightly point out that secularisation preceded secularism in Europe and not the other way around. In non-Western societies like India, states want to usher in a process of secularisation through secularism. The Indian case does prove to some extent that this is not always a success. Structured and well-informed scholarship into the conceptual separation of the two concepts can help us understand the manifestations of religiosity around the world in much more depth and detail.

We can further the understanding of religiosity by drawing the distinction between secularism and secularisation in many other nations as well. The Iranian

Revolution (1979) marked the drift of a secular state under the Shah towards a religious theocracy under the Ayatollahs. The secularism adopted by Reza Shah in 1924 not only separated religion from the state but also subdued and repressed all forms of religious expression particularly Shiite Islam (Ashtiani 1994, pp.66-70). It was this repression of dissent and suppression of religiosity that paved the way for the Revolution in 1979, which Foucault described as the “first post-modern revolution of our time” (ibid., p.51). Modern France with its state led secularism bans the burqa and other manifestations of religiosity. The French society, in particular its Muslim and Jewish communities, failed to secularise despite the state being secular. Recent attacks such as the one on *Charlie Hebdo* represent the differences between secularism and secularisation in France.

This essay unpacked both secularism and secularisation as separate concepts using insights and arguments from a range of theorists working in the field. Often these two concepts are inter-changed and used synonymously. Seminal work in secularisation theory such as that of Taylor (1998, 2007) revolves around secularism and secularisation being mutually inclusive to some extent. Arguments from the likes of Asad (2003) refute this position by providing insights into secularism as a political project and secularisation as a process in the social structures. The case study example of India sheds light on the usefulness of separating these concepts to understand religiosity around the world. It also illustrates that the Indian secularism model is distinct from our classical Eurocentric construction of secularism. In conclusion, this conceptualisation is not only useful but also crucial in analysing and furthering the understanding of religiosity.

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