

# **Secularism, Religion and Spirituality**

**by Kittu Reddy**

**Direct Disciple of  
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A new word has recently been cast into the shifty language of politics, — a language of self-illusion and deliberate delusion of others, which almost immediately turns all true and vivid phrases into a jargon, so that men may fight in a cloud of words without any clear sense of the thing they are battling for, — it is the word “secularism”.

The Late Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, introduced this word into the Indian Constitution in the mid-seventies, during the Emergency. Since then, the word secularism has become the battle cry of political parties, intellectuals and opinion makers in India; it has been used as a tool and a stick to decry anyone with a different viewpoint and has created more confusion than understanding and harmony. So the terms now being bandied about by the media are “secularists”, “pseudo-secularists”, and “non-secularists”. As a consequence, there is a great confusion in the minds of the average Indian as to what secularism really means.

It will therefore be both useful and interesting to try to trace the origin, history, and meaning of the word secularism. This

exercise might help in clearing the misunderstandings and pave the way for a more harmonious polity. The word “secularism” is not essentially of Indian origin; rather it is a product of modern Western history and civilization and has now become a part of the vocabulary of all governments in the world.

## **The Western Mind**

Let us therefore take a look at modern Western history and the mindset of its people in order to understand its psychological roots. The first point to note is that it was during the reign of Constantine in 324 AD that Christianity became the State religion of the Roman Empire. Before that there was no State religion anywhere in the world. Another point to note is that the first religious wars in history were fought between the Christians and the Muslims - during the Crusades in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

Let us analyze the characteristic trends of the Western mind. There are two things especially that distinguish the normal European mind.

First, the cult of the inquiring, defining, effective, practical reason and second, the cult of life.

All the great developments and the high tides of European civilization, Greek culture, the Roman empire before Constantine, the Renaissance, and the modern age with its two

colossal idols, Industrialism and physical Science, have come to the West on the strong ascending urge of this double force. Whenever the tide of these powers has ebbed, the European mind has entered into much confusion, darkness and weakness. Such was the period of the Middle Ages; it began from the time of Constantine when Christianity was made the State religion and continued right up to the period of the Renaissance and the Reformation in the 15th century.

During that period the Church was the dominant power in Europe. The Roman Empire was in a state of decay, disorder, and lawlessness and it was the Christian religion that brought light in that period of darkness. Appealing to the poor, the oppressed and the ignorant, it captured the soul and the ethical being, but cared little or not at all for the thinking mind; it was content with the mind remaining in darkness if the heart could be brought to feel religious truth.

Later, in the fifth century, when the barbarians captured the Western world, it was in the same way content to Christianize them, but made it no part of its function to intellectualize them. Distrustful even of the free play of intelligence, Christian ecclesiasticism and monasticism became anti-intellectual; it was only when the Arabs came in contact with Europe that the beginnings of scientific and philosophical knowledge were reintroduced into a semi-barbarous Christendom; and it

needed the spirit of the Renaissance and a long struggle between religion and science to complete the return of a free intellectual culture in the re-emerging mind of Europe.

Thus, although the Christian religion humanized Europe in certain ethical directions, it failed to spiritualize Europe; and this happened because it ran counter to the two master instincts of the European mind – the cult of reason and the cult of life. The Christian religion denied the supremacy of the reason and suppressed the urge for a satisfied fullness of life. The natural consequence of this denial was a revolt which began by questioning the external and conventional forms that religion imposed; it then went to challenge the authority of the Pope and the priesthood as the sole mediators between the human soul and God and the scriptures; and finally it turned into a battle against all supernaturalism and religious beliefs. One may thus say that in the West, atheism and secularism were the inevitable end of this revolt and the movements of the Renaissance and Reformation overthrew Christianity.

Since then religion was put aside in a corner of the soul and was forbidden to interfere in the activities of the human being and this was done on the ground that the **interference of religion in science, thought, politics, society, life in general had been and must be a force for retardation, superstition, oppressive ignorance.**

That was the beginning of the modern age of Europe; and undoubtedly it was an age of great progress in all the fields of human activity. It was a time of great activity, of high aspiration, of deep sowing, of rich fruit-bearing; it was also a time when humanity got rid of much that was cruel, evil, ignorant, dark, odious, not by the power of religion, but by the power of the awakened intelligence and of human idealism and sympathy. It was from this time onward that the predominance of religion has been violently attacked and rejected by that portion of humanity which was then the standard-bearer of thought and progress, Europe after the Renaissance, modern Europe.

The tendency to secularism is a necessary and inevitable consequence of the cult of life and reason when it is divorced from their inmost inlook. The early Christian religion in its origin and essence, like all oriental religious thought claimed to make religion commensurate with life; it aimed at spiritualizing the whole being and its action. But the later version of Christianity as it was practiced was a secular institution which did not look beyond a certain supra-physical sanction and convenient aid to the government of this life. And even then the tendency was to philosophize and reason away the relics of the original religious spirit in order to get into what they called, the clear sunlight of the logical and practical reason.

But modern Europe after the Renaissance and the Reformation went farther and to the very logical end of this path. In order to shake off the obsession with the Christian idea, modern Europe separated religion from life, from philosophy, from art and science, from politics, from the greater part of social action and social existence. **And it secularized and rationalized all human activity so that it might stand in itself on its own basis; it had no need of any aid from religious sanction or mystic insistence.**

**In this evolution religion was left aside, an impoverished system of belief and ceremony to which one might or might not subscribe with very little difference to the march of the human mind and life.** Its penetrating and coloring power had been reduced to a faint minimum; a superficial pigmentation of dogma, sentiment and emotion was all that survived this drastic process.

## **The Indian Mind**

But in India there has been neither this predominance of reason and the life-cult nor any incompatibility of these two powers with the religious spirit. Reason and life were not opposed to religion and spirituality.

In the words of Sri Aurobindo: *“In Indian civilisation philosophy and religion, philosophy made dynamic by religion, religion*

*enlightened by philosophy have led, the rest follow as best they can. This is indeed its first distinctive character, which it shares with the more developed Asiatic peoples, but has carried to an extraordinary degree of thoroughgoing pervasiveness”.*

Similarly, the life force has not been suppressed by religion in India; it rather encouraged it and gave it full play and raised it to greater heights not by suppression but by elevation. In a reference to Indian religion, Sri Aurobindo says: *“Certain religious disciplines have understood this truth, have taken up these relations boldly and applied them to our soul's communion with God; and by a converse process they can, lifted out of their present social and physical formulas, become for us, not the poor earthly things they are now, but deep and beautiful and wonderful movements of God in man fulfilling himself in life”.*

A beautiful illustration of this can be found in the relationship of the devotee with Lord Krishna. To some like the Gopis, he is the eternal lover; to others like Arjuna, he is the friend, companion and guide; to still others like the mothers in India, he is the naughty child and so on. All these relationships were powerful means of spiritualizing the individual through human relationships. Religion thus became a powerful motivating factor in Indian life and has been the springboard of all the great movements and eras of Indian culture.



The great ages of India, the strong culminations of her civilization and culture, —in India the high Vedic beginning, the grand spiritual stir of the Upanishads, the wide flood of Buddhism, Vedanta, Sankhya, the Puranic and Tantric religions, the flowering of Vaishnavism and Shaivism in the southern kingdoms—have come in on a surge of spiritual light and a massive or intense climbing of the religious or the religio-philosophic mind to its own heights, its noblest realities, its largest riches of vision and experience.

The ebbing of spirituality brought in always, on the contrary, the weakness of these other powers, periods of fossilization or at least depression of the power of life, tracts of decline, even beginnings of decay. Even in its period of decline, the religious spirit saved it. And this was proved vividly in the 14th century and later in the 19th century when it seemed that Indian civilization was going down under the onslaught of the Muslim and British rule respectively. We can therefore say that all great awakenings in India, all her periods of mightiest and most varied vigour, have drawn their vitality from the fountainheads of some deep religious awakening. Wherever the religious awakening has been complete and grand, the national energy it has created has been gigantic and puissant.

This is a clue to which we have to hold if we would understand the great lines of divergence between the East and the West.

We thus see that the Indian temperament is radically different from the Western temperament. What is good for the West is not necessarily good for India. Neither is there any question of superiority or inferiority. They are only two orbs of the same world culture.

The question now arises as to what is the place of secularism in India. **If by secularism is meant the separation of religion from life and all its activities, then it goes contrary to the natural Indian temperament. Such secularism cannot have any place in India; for the religious power and instinct is too strong and powerful here; more as already seen, it has been the central motive force behind all Indian development.** It will be therefore impossible to separate religion from life and all its activities.

**If on the other hand secularism means that all religions have an equal place, that is nothing new; it did not need the political class or the intelligentsia to reveal this truth. For this concept has been the very essence of all Indian religious thought right from the Vedic times till today.** Indian religion has always given equal importance and place to every approach to God and that is the reason why all the religions in the world find place in India. No other country in the world has all the religions being practiced with as much vigour and freedom as in India. **A very important point to note in the political history of**

**India is that despite the very strong religious and spiritual tendency, a theocracy was never was created here.**

We may conclude therefore that the word secularism is quite irrelevant and out of place in the Indian context.

## **Religion and Spirituality**

Religion, then has been one of the dominant motivating forces of Indian culture. But the governing force of Indian culture was not religion but spirituality. A spiritual aspiration was the governing force of Indian culture, its core of thought, its ruling passion. It not only made spirituality the highest aim of life, but it also tried, as far as that could be done in the past conditions of the human race, to turn the whole of life towards spirituality. But since religion is in the human mind the first native, if imperfect form of the spiritual impulse, this predominance of the spiritual idea necessitated a casting of thought and action into the religious mould and a persistent filling of every circumstance of life with the religious sense; it demanded and created an all-pervading religio-philosophic culture.

It is true that the highest spirituality moves in a free and wide air far above that lower stage of seeking which is governed by religious form and dogma. But man does not arrive immediately at that highest inner elevation and, if it were demanded from him at once, he would never arrive there.

**Therefore Indian culture created a strong religious base with the intention of leading man gradually from religion to spirituality.**

But at the same time it was aware of the serious limitations in the practice of religion. Let us then see the limitations of religion and what we have to guard against.

### **Limitations of Religion**

The first and most serious limitation of religion is when it becomes creedal and **insists on the existence of one God only, one sacred book, and one approach.** This leads to narrowness and to fanaticism.

Another serious defect is that religion often lays exclusive stress on intellectual dogmas, forms, and ceremonies, on some fixed and rigid moral code, on some religio-political or religio-social system. Not that these things are altogether negligible or that they must be unworthy or unnecessary or that a spiritual religion need disdain the aid of forms, ceremonies, creeds or systems.

On the contrary, man needs them because the lower members have to be exalted and raised before they can be fully spiritualised, before they can directly feel the spirit and obey its law. An intellectual formula is often needed by the thinking and reasoning mind, a form or ceremony by the aesthetic

temperament or other parts of the infra-rational being, a set moral code by man's vital nature in their turn towards the inner life. But these things are aids and supports, not the essence; precisely because they belong to the rational and infra-rational parts, they can be nothing more and, if too blindly insisted on, may even hamper the supra-rational light. Such as they are they have to be offered to man and used by him, but not to be imposed on him as his sole law by a forced and inflexible domination. In the use of them toleration and free permission of variation is the first rule which should be observed.

The spiritual essence of religion is alone the one thing supremely needful, the thing to which we have always to hold and subordinate to it every other element or motive.

**We also see that religion has often stood violently in the way of philosophy and science, burned a Giordano Bruno, imprisoned a Galileo, and so generally acted in this matter that philosophy and science had in self-defence to turn upon Religion and rend her to pieces in order to get a free field for their legitimate development; and this because men in the passion and darkness of their vital nature had chosen to think that religion was bound up with certain fixed intellectual conceptions about God and the world which could not stand scrutiny, and therefore scrutiny had to be put down by fire and**

sword; **scientific and philosophical truth had to be denied in order that religious error might survive.**

Another shortcoming of religion is that a narrow religious spirit often oppresses and impoverishes the joy and beauty of life, either from an intolerant asceticism or, as the Puritans attempted it, because they could not see that religious austerity is not the whole of religion, though it may be an important side of it, is not the sole ethico-religious approach to God, since love, charity, gentleness, tolerance, kindness are also and even more divine, and they forgot or never knew that God is love and beauty as well as purity.

In the field of politics too religion has often thrown itself on the side of power and resisted the coming of larger political ideals, because it was itself, in the form of a Church, supported by power and because it confused religion with the Church, or because it stood for a false theocracy, **forgetting that true theocracy is the kingdom of God in man and not the kingdom of a Pope, a priesthood or a sacerdotal class.**

Similarly religion has often supported a rigid and outworn social system, because it thought its own life bound up with social forms with which it happened to have been associated during a long portion of its own history and **erroneously concluded that even a necessary change there would be a violation of religion and a danger to its existence.**

As if so mighty and inward a power as the religious spirit in man could be destroyed by anything so small as the change of a social form or so outward as a social readjustment! This error in its many shapes has been the great weakness of religion as practiced in the past and the opportunity and justification for the revolt of the intelligence, the aesthetic sense, the social and political idealism, even the ethical spirit of the human being against what should have been its own highest tendency and law.

These are the limitations of religion and we must become aware of it.

## **The Solution**

Where then is the solution? The solution lies in not in getting rid of religion but in the words of Dr. Abdul Kalam in graduating from religion to spirituality. This is beautifully illustrated in the following passage from Sri Aurobindo: *“India can best develop herself and serve humanity by being herself and following the law of her own nature.*

*This does not mean, as some narrowly and blindly suppose, the rejection of everything new that comes to us in the stream of Time or happens to have been first developed or powerfully expressed by the West. Such an attitude would be intellectually absurd, physically impossible, and above all unspiritual; true*

*spirituality rejects no new light, no added means, or materials of our human self-development.*

*It means simply to keep our centre, our essential way of being, our inborn nature and assimilate to it all we receive, and evolve out of it all we do and create. Religion has been a central preoccupation of the Indian mind; some have told us that too much religion ruined India, precisely because we made the whole of life religion or religion the whole of life, we have failed in life and gone under. I will not answer, adopting the language used by the poet in a slightly different connection, that our fall does not matter and that the dust in which India lies is sacred.*

*The fall, the failure does matter, and to lie in the dust is no sound position for man or nation. But the reason assigned is not the true one. If the majority of Indians had indeed made the whole of their lives religion in the true sense of the word, we should not be where we are now; **it was because their public life became most irreligious, egoistic, self-seeking, materialistic that they fell.***

*It is possible, that on one side we deviated too much into an excessive religiosity, that is to say, an excessive externalism of ceremony, rule, routine, mechanical worship, on the other into a too world-shunning asceticism which drew away the best minds who were thus lost to society instead of standing like the ancient Rishis as its spiritual support and its illuminating life-*



*givers. But the root of the matter was the dwindling of the spiritual impulse in its generality and broadness, the decline of intellectual activity and freedom, the waning of great ideals, the loss of the gust of life.*

*Perhaps there was too much religion in one sense; the word is English, smacks too much of things external such as creeds, rites, an external piety; there is no one Indian equivalent. But if we give rather to religion the sense of the following of the spiritual impulse in its fullness and define spirituality as the attempt to know and live in the highest self, the divine, the all-embracing unity and to raise life in all its parts to the divinest possible values, then it is evident that there was not too much of religion, but rather too little of it—and in what there was, a too one-sided and therefore an insufficiently ample tendency.*

*The right remedy is, not to belittle still farther the age long ideal of India, but to return to its old amplitude and give it a still wider scope, to make in very truth all the life of the nation a religion in this high spiritual sense. This is the direction in which the philosophy, poetry, art of the West is, still more or less obscurely, but with an increasing light, beginning to turn, and even some faint glints of the truth are beginning now to fall across political and sociological ideals.*

*India has the key to the knowledge and conscious application of the ideal; what was dark to her before in its application, she can*

*now, with a new light, illumine; what was wrong and wry in her old methods she can now rectify; the fences which she created to protect the outer growth of the spiritual ideal and which afterwards became barriers to its expansion and farther application, she can now break down and give her spirit a freer field and an ampler flight: she can, if she will, give a new and decisive turn to the problems over which all mankind is labouring and stumbling, for the clue to their solutions is there in her ancient knowledge. Whether she will rise or not to the height of her opportunity in the renaissance, which is coming upon her, is the question of her destiny”.*