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Making Sense of the Secular

Critical Perspectives from Europe to Asia

Edited by
Ranjan Ghosh



Making Sense of the Secular

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Introduction

Making Sense of the Secular

Ranjan Ghosh

Only worship can prevent secularization from becoming inhuman, and only secularization can save worship from being meaningless.¹

The most important thing . . . that we can know about a man is what he takes for granted, and the most elemental and important facts about society are those that are seldom debated and generally regarded as settled.²

Making sense of the secular is about freeing secularism as much from taxonomic rigidity as from conceptual enslavement. If secularism is about courting certain definitive ways, exemplars and codes, then what happens to people who refuse to make those principles a guiding force of their lives? Do they stand to be coerced into submission, persuaded and then prodded to assent to the ethos of secularism? What happens to a person who believes in nonsecularism? Does secularism freeze the extension and reinvestment of the notion of the 'other' and, in its abstemious and temperate means of understanding, choose to configure the other as reductionism? Is secularism then with its own habitus and premeditated principles of pragmatic philosophy disabled to conduct profound investigations into the complexities besetting the socio-cultural existence of man? If everything becomes inclusionist and constitutionally expostulatory and exhortative, what happens to the reflexive ethos of difference and diversity? Does secularism, in its fixed ways of principled manifestation, show a contradictory status where, in trying to be inclusionist, it, in effect, becomes fiercely exclusionist and thoroughly prejudiced to people who believe *otherwise*? Does it not make secularism a kind of violent mechanism to ensure that people who do not belong to the secular community are the ones who should be targeted as perilous, pernicious and, hence, eliminable?

I

The advocacy by American liberal philosophers such as John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin and Robert Audi about removing religion from public

affairs as the most effective means to preserve values of freedom and toleration, might prove incongruous when such a proposition crosses borders to get tested in other cultural and national territories. Such strident walls of separation, such Lockean fear that religion practised in public and performed privately can threaten political stability, do not always determine the secular in liberal democracies. In societies with pluralist solidarity, the dynamics of societal arrangements are more complicated than what such dichotomies would have us believe. Thomas Hansen rightly observes that ‘in most debates on secularism and its problems in various parts of the world there is an unfortunate tendency to understand the secular state in rather undifferentiated terms: modern, homogenizing and driven by objectifying scientific modes of governance. But this view tends to ignore how the history and practices of the state, as well as the connotations of secularism, differ substantially from, say, Algeria to India.’²³ How often is it feasible to maintain with unchanging regularity the liberal-democratic principles of being neutral to religion, equalitarian towards all persuasions and developments and uniform about socio-cultural treatment when democracy cannot always be about a symmetrical, ordinal and programmed growth? There are inevitable disharmonies in democracy, and, hence, equanimous treatment on issues networking around religion, caste, class, social discriminations and gender is not always perfectly possible. These are risks, transcendences and enchantments of democracy. Being secular accompanies a preparation to cotton on to such disequilibriums and dissonances which, most often, stem from a collusion of religion and politics. The public reason in democracies owes much to the contestatory spaces generated by the secular. Public morality, in certain cases, argues for the secular that is not a candid antipode to religion whose worldliness is seen as severance from individual spirituality. Secular reason has a spirituality whose foundations are deeper than what statist and constitutional consensuality make it out to be; it is an opposition whose discursive formations lie outside secular fundamentalism. It is also about being moral without religion, not about countervailing religion but finding the dynamics of living with it and opening it up to greater choices, freedom, toleration and reason in a vibrant democracy. So public education in our making sense of the secular cannot always be the Kantian rational state or Rousseau’s civil religion with ‘positive dogmas.’²⁴ It is essential to connect our understanding of religion with the politics of neutrality and dedivinisation.

T.N. Madan convincingly argues that the paradigms of modernisation from the West are believed to have ‘universal applicability, the elements, which converged historically—that is in unique manner—to constitute modern life in Europe in the sixteenth and the following three centuries have come to be presented as the requirements of modernization elsewhere, and this must be questioned.’ ‘Paradoxically,’ notes Madan, ‘the uniqueness of the history of modern Europe lies, we are asked to believe, in its generalizability.’ So we cannot position ourselves argumentatively to accept models

of modernisation that ‘prescribe the transfer of secularism to non-Western societies without regard to the character of their religious traditions or for the gifts that these might have to offer.’⁵ Ashis Nandy observes that when the modern Indians ‘project the ideology of secularism into the past and assert that Ashoka was “secular”, they ignore that Ashoka was not exactly a secular ruler; he was a practising Buddhist even in his public life. He based his tolerance on Buddhism, not on secularism. Likewise, the other symbol of inter-religious amity in modern India, Akbar, derived his tolerance not from secularism but from Islam; he believed that tolerance was the message of Islam. And in this century Gandhi derived his religious tolerance from Hinduism, not from secular politics.’⁶ Disavowing the legitimacy of importing secular principles from the West, R. S. Mishra sees the merit of Christianity as having the organising power in well-established churches which could withstand the hostile onslaught of nonreligious and antireligious modern ideologies and movements. Hinduism was never blessed with such formidable organisational power, and yet it did not fall apart in the teeth of *Varnasrama* dharma and the invasive waves of Muslim domination, which, thus, speaks of its essential adhesiveness despite religio-cultural diversity. Mishra sees the danger of dharma—the essential component of Hinduism—being put under fire. He writes:

Dharma can in no case be conceived as a private matter or as an affair of the individual, as the secularist would have us believe. It is vitally concerned with community and its peace and prosperity. It is the non-religious secular ideology that treats Dharma as a private matter of individual. . . . To leave Dharma or Religion at the mercy of the individuals will only mean an end of it. . . . People have to see that their rulers are governed in their conduct and behaviour by the higher moral and spiritual principles of Dharma so that they may not start behaving in a demonic way.⁷

So for Mishra, secularism in India deserves to proceed from the premises that uphold the radically different nature of Hinduism—unity in diversity and not the principle of uniformity: ‘it constitutes its weakness as well as its strength.’ Dharma has not been accorded its due place by the Indian polity, which has also overlooked the ethical and the spiritual in its constitution. The indifference to dharma and what it can mean to the public at large have resulted in a serious crisis of values for the nation. The contradiction between *dharma-nirpekshata* (neutrality to religion) and *sarvadharmasamabhava* (harmony of religions) is evident, for they cannot be conceived as equivalents. Mishra emphatically notes that it is *sarvadharmasamabhava* which has constituted an essential feature of Hinduism and of Indian culture as a whole and not *dharma-nirpekshata*, which is utterly foreign to it. It does not turn the nation to a theocratic state, for universal dharma is radically different from the religion of the law: the ‘latter is imposed from

without, whereas the former constitutes the meaning and truth of human life, individually as well as collectively.’ Mishra would, thus, infer that the sovereign state of India can no more afford to maintain a policy of neutrality or an attitude of indifference towards dharma, which has moulded and shaped, in a considerable measure, the culture of humanity.⁸ So, more than secularism in its undifferentiated incarnation, it is the making ‘sense of the secular,’ both heterotopically and heteronomically, which calls for our investigation.

By claiming the secular as sacred, I am not looking into an enclosed space with some inflexible characteristics. Secular is not an amorphous zone either. I am actually arguing against the stringent dialectic between religion and the secular (different from what we commonly understand as secularism). In fact, the religious is housed in the secular; the material dwells in the secular; dissent lies in-built in the secular. For me it is a complex term whose sacredness in varied exfoliations and incarnations refuse to delimit itself within the even-tempered church-state dichotomy. Howsoever differently secularism has come to be interpreted in different societies, cultures and in different periods, making sense of the secular is certainly about opening possibilities in our understanding of life and living within communities and among communities. These possibilities are about encouraging *desire* in our lives: a desire that challenges the sovereignty in our understanding of systems and constructions of self and statal governance. The secular becomes sacred in allowing itself to be invaded upon by dissenting forces, unhegemonic discourses and certain nonsovereign modes of value formation. Religion that preaches closures on conversation and pontificates about building enclosures of communal values cannot be sacred; the secular in rewriting and revising our continual advancement and adjustment in life becomes the procreative sacred. The faith in this proactive sacred can often mean interrogating one’s hitherto understood values and moralities of religion. This faith can also mean re-premising our encounters with religion. Religion that has the secular inscribed in it is our newfound faith awaiting collective acquirement—also a ‘cosmotheandric’ experience where religion will have a future in not merely striving for transcendence or immanent spirituality but in ‘changing forever the unilateral sense of the concept of religion. Religion will still “religare” certainly, but not exclusively the human person with God but also with the whole universe, and thus discovering it in its cohesion and meaning.’ Without being domineering, religion, as Panikkar presciently observes, functions ‘to secure linkage (religio) and the cohesion (dharma) between every sphere of reality.’⁹

Giorgio Agamben in *Profanations* points out that the sacred or religious ‘are those things that belonged in one fashion or another to the gods’ and, hence, ‘they were removed from the free usage and commerce of mankind, and could not be sold, given as deposits, or ceded in usufruct.’¹⁰ Religion has been encouraged to build on this lack of free usage, a kind of consecration that renders it as a sacred exception, an exemplary. This limited

commerce with mankind, largely protected by rituals, taboos, beliefs and injunctions, has made religion look into its other (secularism) as clearly a force that cannot work outside its compelling loop. This force is secularism, which, more than becoming a force that can answer its own dynamics and operations, looks into preserving the sacerdotal and the sanctimonious. So making sense of the secular is allowing a *profanisation* of the religion as sacred, which is returning things into the realm of public usage and evaluation. The secular is meant to be a critique of this profanisation mostly as a liberation from conventional strictures of living and as a preparation to deliberate on the nuances of a functional and associative democracy.¹¹ If religion is our right, then being secular is our right, too; but the secular I am trying to interpret is not about establishing a right but exploring where a right can be established. It is not about owning a province of thought and ideals to work with but disowning some already-held views and ideologies made sacrosanct by a select few. How can the Hindu, in this process of profanising the sacred, of delivering religion back into the common use through transreligionisation, make free usage of Islam? How can a Muslim transport religious sentiments, unfortunately set apart by the provincial denomination of a festering minority, into the domain of common usage? Secular provokes both secularism and religion to set their potential beyond the categoric and constitutional ritualism that we usually associate them with. The secular is the eros of trying to break free from certain concepts generated through the religion-secularism nexus into the percept and affect of a living, vivacious democracy.

II

A brief exposé on the issue of Ayodhya can be an interesting point of discussion. Ayodhya, considered by the Hindus as the birth place of Lord Rama, was sacralised through history and collective memory;¹² it was never allowed to nonsovereignise its sacredness, and whatever values of secularism it projected in its historic-social ramifications clearly did not question its constitutional sacredness, as it were. The secular was never achieved. So if Ayodhya is sacred, how does it evoke violence? How does the act of violence against the phobic other preserve the sacredness of the site, the solemnness of the space and the place? Temples demolished during the Muslim reign in India and the potential subjugation of the Hindus in countries such as Bangladesh and Pakistan have become stimulations to mimetic violence. In a Rene Girardian way, the Hindu fundamentalists have betrayed the desire to spread their web of communal domination. This imitation of desire, powered and inflected by a particular reading of history and made aware by a much-vaunted tradition, has come to threaten community life. Mimetic conflicts have infused instability to the ways by which we understand the sacred. This sacred is not harmony; it sweeps people up into greater

paroxysms of violence. Understanding of communal tensions through the filter of mimesis has produced the excommunication of the phobic other as a reality, which, more than being a means to security, is a violent way to buy endogamous harmony. Death of the other repeated endlessly is believed to diffuse tension and expurgation, leading to a diaphanous peace. If in Afghanistan the Christian white is the surrogate, in communal riots across the Indian subcontinent, either the Hindu or the Muslim falls prey to surrogate victim mechanism. This is slightly different from Girard's argumentative premise when the victim becomes a sacred figure, a harbinger of peace. I would reinterpret this to see the victim becoming sacral through death, which ensures that the community sacrificing him is left in peace and redemption, something that terrorist organisations have been teaching successfully. Vengeance is justified through 'good violence,' 'holy violence,' and this ensures that blasphemy is redeemed and sacrilege is prevented. Terror politics across the world is, in a way, ritualistic, where sacrifice of the perpetrator—say, the suicide bomber—obliterates the heinous fact of the killing of many within the logic that the gory violence was conducted to restore sacredness. And, hence, the violence is not vicious; it is argued to be sacred and good. I take the Girardian thesis a little further to argue that suicide bombers are, in a way, scapegoats who get sacrificed with the benign notion of emancipation in mind, a freedom from the rule of others, a freedom from people who think and act differently from the community choosing to scapegoat the person. The community, more than achieving stability out of this, considers this as a testament of progress. The crisis continues, and, hence, sacred violence has a seemingly endless tenure. In defining communal violence, the scapegoating is effectively worked out where, for instance, Lord Rama is the sacred and the protection of Lord Rama can be ensured only through violence and 'purification.'¹³ The sacred individually available to communities clashes among each other, while the centres of power have made secularism grow as a point of deterrent and solution to crises of democracy. Secularism, both principally and juridically, exists because communal violence has necessitated its emergence. Ironically, holding on to secularism requires violence: the violence of comeuppance for not believing adequately in secularism, violence of muffling resentment which might be sectarian in nature. The Ayodhya controversy sparked off violence and secularism needed to produce violence to counter it, burying, in its wake, a host of questions that would have lent deeper sense to our understanding of the secular. Secularist principles about maintaining symmetry succeed both through the violence that some people have endured and through people who allow them to be scapegoated. Violence and non-violence are both mimetic. But achieving nonviolence is about enduring violence in the name of holding on to an assemblage of sacreds—syncretism, communitarianness and secularism.

How, then, do we configure the secular here? Ayodhya becomes secular when its sacredness, as seen through myth and history, does not become the

end of devotion but the beginning, not a closure on rehearsed belief but an opening, into the call of times, of changing communal perspectives caught under continually refreshed ideas of the mythic other. The argument is not about securing a social existence at the foot of a transcendent but about realising ways of transcending values and beliefs towards a more perceptive understanding of otherness, communality and borders. Making sense of the secular is clearly affiliated to such accommodativeness, a capaciousness that brings difference to our percept and concept of life. So this secular is not about being repetitive, propositional and prosaically every day, where certain rules of comportment and conceivment are brought to bear on our existential ways in inflexibly rigorous and scarcely vigorous terms. Secular in its complexities appreciates the surprise, the non-normativeness and anxiety that enliven our existence by assuming that moments of challenge and crisis are not meant to be subsumed under certain laws and protocols of social living but encouraged as part of our passage through history. Becoming secular is not to throw oneself uncritically to an authoritarian and idolatrous past—the veneratively frigid and institutionalised—whose impingement on the present is only to constrict our understanding of events and action but making room for the past to critique its sacredness through a futural opening appropriate to the altering demands of life and times. This helps us to understand differently what Gilles Kepel has described as the ‘revenge of God.’¹⁴ The secular cannot merely be a coherent, well-legislated bulwark against the dread and unease that democracy often generates, not the nomothetic ‘ultimate’ in which all crises find a solution; rather, an intelligibility, an alert and informed consciousness, a preparedness to pass judgements on certain confused trains of thought. So religion has to move forward *without* religion.

The secular as sacred is both charismatic and numinous in that its ethics of execution does not always have to centre on the ‘ought.’ The oughtness inscribed in the conglomerate of secularism and religion forecloses the variations, exceptions and discrepancies that the secular can deliver as a concept and practice, avoiding the entrapment of a kind of universalism that neuters the nonconforming experiences that difference generates. It becomes a legitimisation of power and domination and, for me, antihumanistic, once we choose to promote neutrality as means of progress. Ironically, our constructions of cultural and political frameworks have never been free of inequality, domination, stratification and lack. And to consider secular as an unmoving sacred in the sense of a law undoes the values which the sense of discrimination and difference continually brings into our everyday ethics of life. The immanence of life is built on difference and the diversity of the other, and so being secular cannot merely be a mechanism to police the emergence of violence, keeping the centre of our society in place. The secular cannot just be an unbending calculus, a mundanised entanglement, a routine; it is more of a negotiation and articulation, a positive categorical imperative, a reinvention of the everyday. The secular can be prevented from being desacralised

by being made to work within boundaries which are essentially permeable. It is a process in time, passing through moments in history, a living entity continually faced with circumambient changes unlike what secularism as a constitutional principle is made out to be—fixed at a moment of history, impervious and insensitive to the emotions that democracy throws up in the trials of its journey.

So my idea of the secular comes close to what Walter Benjamin would qualify as a ‘purified festival,’¹⁵ a ceremony that does not operate only on ritualistic festivity but is a practice which understands religion and secularism in their singularities. It is a happiness which is not strictly understood as the antonym of unhappiness. It is not based on a transcendent, whether that is sacred or constitutional or theological or governmental; it is a question whose consequent fate lies not always in foregone and conclusive answers. Secularism is operated upon an assumption that religious sentiments cannot be hurt, and, hence, certain issues cannot be brought into the domain of rational investigation and palaver. Agreeing with Agamben, I see secularism here as an extension of the religious contrary to what it is principally believed to be and made to pragmatically function as. In countries such as India, where the secular power is under the sign of theological power (not in the sense of a theocratic state, though), where decisions based on secularism are somewhat contaminated by ‘hurting the religious sentiments’ syndrome, secularism can hardly do away with the sacred. It becomes imposingly difficult to neutralise this relationship, and, thus, the profanisation of the secular does not happen.¹⁶ The crisis develops when certain socio-political developments rub into the preserve of religious sentiments, calling on talk as a mode of decision making in the public sphere. The sacred order with determinate rules and grounded legislation forbids action and intervention; a zone of exclusion is created not by what is considered as forbidding but also in the banishment, the abandonment, that people feel about a certain segment of their lives. Religious grounds and secularist foundations ignore the dissent that might be inscribed in the system and ideology that they promote and establish. Such assumptions and presumptiveness are exclusionary. So secularism, as Agamben claims, is limiting to its potential to function and liberate, because the forces and compulsions it is expected to sever from remain with it; it chooses merely to change places by remaining on the other side of the fence that separates it from religion. Agamben is very critical when he points out that this change of place is about a displacement from the ‘celestial monarchy into a terrestrial one.’¹⁷ Can the secular, then, unground the transcendent and the nomothetic? The secular, as argued through these pages, has the power to exist with the sacred (religious) and yet stay distinguished by being peculiarly profane. The secular investigates within pluralist principles of political and religious ethics—both contractualism and constructivism—the fundamentalism of secularism, its philosophical and symbolic *Letztbegründung* (ultimate foundation). It has a power, a potential, a kind of profane game that looks into the inoperativity existing between

religion and secularism by infusing more usage in its circulation and manifestation in public life and morality. The secular investigates the impotentiality of secularism and religion, returning with more uses and usages where the profane vocation becomes the real political task for a well-meaning democracy.

III

Secularisation, in its handcuffing of religion, brings a certain cluster of changes:

Secularization relates to the diminution in the social significance of religion. Its application covers such things as, the sequestration by political powers of the property and facilities of religious agencies; the shift from religious to secular control of various erstwhile activities and functions of religion; the decline in the proportion of time, energy, and resources which men devote to super-empirical concerns; the decay of religious institutions; the supplanting, in matters of behaviour, of religious precepts by demands that accord with strictly technical criteria; and the gradual replacement of a specifically religious consciousness (which might range from dependence on charms, rites, spells, or prayers, to a broadly spiritually-inspired ethical concern) by an empirical, rational, instrumental orientation; the abandonment of mythical, poetic, and artistic interpretations of nature and society in favour of matter-of-fact description and, with it, the rigorous separation of evaluative and emotive dispositions from cognitive and positivistic orientations.¹⁸

But commitment to the super-empirical concerns and the smug instrumentalist encroachments on the territories of the supernatural in the modern world have not stopped religious symbols from flourishing, generating newer engagements with the sacred. These are not representations, as Émile Durkheim argues, of blind faiths and irrationalities but manifestations of entropic forces in ever-expanding socio-cultural structures, leading to further intricate revelation of the sacred; the sacred draws upon Richard Niebuhr's 'radical monotheism,'¹⁹ which discounts exclusive religious differentiation and commits to a participation in the diverse and the plural, working on behalf of the good, where sacrality is not the possession and sovereignty of the particular. The secular, significantly, shows the sharedness of the sacred. Religion becomes interesting when we initiate a thoughtful and delicate sense of the secular; rather, the secular as sacred influences our understanding of religion received supra-empirically as holy. Profanity, as the import of the secular, is not about degrading religion; profanity succeeds in instilling an unease within religion and the normative secularist principles of living. Panikkar points out that 'what is emerging in our days, and what may be a "hapax phenomenon," a unique occurrence in the history of mankind,

is—paradoxically—not secularism, but the sacred quality of secularism. In other words, what seems to be unique in the human constellation of the present kairosis the disruption of the equation sacred = nontemporal with the positive value so far attached to it. The temporal is seen today as positive and, in a way, sacred.²⁰ The secular, interrogating the sacred potential of the temporal, the religious, that dogmatic disciplinary religion cannot evoke, makes us realise the value of our inheritance which is often the un-historicised; but this value is not to celebrate a legacy without contemporanising it; the respect for the inheritance, a certain set of traditional ideals should combine blindness (the loyalty which, at times, calls for a suspension of reason) and insight (the stir, the risk to innovate and experiment for a wider range of emotions and experiences). The secular, in being steeped in difference, invokes the remainders that religion can provide. Religion is not merely about upholding rituals and withholding inviolable privacy of one's exclusive legacy and symbolic polarisation; rather, as John Caputo points out, it is 'like art, an elemental human experience.' In the bind that religion creates with the secular, the question 'who are we?' seeks an answer—answers which, perhaps, will continue to keep the originary question alive:

We are the ones who do not know who we are. So we have this Augustinian motif of *quaestio mihi factus sum*, I have become a question unto myself. I think that is a very beautiful and powerful characterization of exactly who we are—the ones who do not know who we are, who are a question for themselves. Consequently, there is a mystery surrounding us and an unknowing that are not simply a matter of an ignorance that we have to dispel. In fact this unknowing constitutes in a positive way the structure of our life, because it requires some movement of faith, some decision or orientation in our life not founded on rational argumentation. I am not saying we should not use rational arguments or that we should not try to know as much as we can know and demonstrate as much as we can demonstrate. But I think that there is a kind of structural darkness, a structural unknowing in our life, in the midst of which we need to take a stand, without having any sense of foundation; we cannot get foundations in a thing like this. It is beyond us, but it is an elementary mystery in our lives that everybody has to deal with. Some people deal with it by walking away from it, some people deal with it religiously, some people deal with it cynically or skeptically. But we are all faced with a deep unknowing, and that to me is the most interesting philosophical question of all. What is this thing that we do not know? I do not know—that is what it is; it is what I do not know that constitutes me. But how do I relate myself to that?²¹

The task lies in avoiding being always optimally nominal and normative, which can surely smother the mystery that a certain loss of foundation can bring. The secular in its bipolar acknowledgment of the mystery and the

obvious, the structural marrow and the unknowing, makes religion articulate its remainders, its impotentiality, the in-betweenness that man so fixatedly has oversighted through ritualisation and disciplinisation of religious understanding and thought. Ananda Abeysekhera, drawing upon some of Talal Asad's arguments, sees an incapacity, a productive aporia, in religion getting discursively always in disciplinary practices and theorisation. There is an impossibility to such thinking that continually strives to theorise and interpret, the 'impossibility of the separation and translation of religious disciplinary practice from what constitutes it, that is, life/living/existence itself.'²² The 'force of decision' responsible in theorising and qualifying religion into a practice and life into a symbol or metaphor renders life itself as something that can be *historicised*. In the context of Thomas Tweed's *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*, Abeysekhera argues that

the sovereign call to define religion is based on a presumption that such definition has to be *repeated* until (complete?) clarity of the term can be gained, something that is never certain and thus may remain an infinite task, since unclarity is the (tautological) condition of the term that *repetitively* calls for clarity, in and all by itself. What Tweed seeks to produce is ultimately a politics of clarity about religion pretended as an "obligation." To do so, he must water down religion and make it *available* for explanation in more self-evident and less complicated metaphorical terms. This is why he says, astoundingly, that "religions function as clock and compass."²³

The secular breaks open the common sense of religion and calls into question what passes off as inevitable, clocked, undifferentiated and compassed. The more perceptive and nuanced our understanding of the secular becomes, the deeper religion as a philosophy and practice is enabled to suggest possibilities, a quality of going beyond its formal and decorous institutionalised existence. This means that blasphemy cannot easily be qualified as a sin; rather, it becomes a question that needs rational investigation supervening on a choice and decision. The public space and discourse stand to greater enrichment from such agonistic journeys.

Within constitutional secular rites, intercourse among religious communities can offend, affront, violate and shock; a community of believers feel certain intrusions on their sacrosanct status of religious being as insult and calumny, a traducement. So the secular intervenes to mark out the walls that might make one religion feel secure and unviolated in the proximity of the other. But does our experience ever wake up to such feelings as sadness, brooding, disappointment, anxiety and curiosity? Making sense of the secular is, then, making more meaning out of religion and disallowing the secular from becoming the handmaiden of fundamentalism. Rather, being secular is about questioning the fundamentals of one's religion, demonstrating how fundamentalism defeats the purpose for which religion is

meant to survive and serve; it nourishes a promotion of both cooperation and competition, suggesting that the divine is the 'emergent creativity that figures, disfigures, and refigures the infinite fabric of life,' and secularity is 'the fulfillment rather than the simple negation of religion.'²⁴ Selfhood need not strictly become the possession of the religious community; it must form itself to enjoy the liberation and release that religion provides. Today secularism is caught between questioning the already thought and its fitness to its constitutional validity. Even though secularism questions certain issues, its range of critique and interrogation cannot work outside its constitutional legitimacy and functions. Secularism works under certain sets of expectations and injunctions without being seen as the revelatory power to newer forms of knowledge and understanding. Both religion and secularism have come to be reduced to mere ideologies and principles of consensus and rites of observance. Unfortunately, the creative in both is made to languish in fear of inserting an unease in liberal democratic configurations. Both are constituted as judgemental and seldom made a point of leverage and mobility. Deeply critical of the discourses of ethicists, religionists and formal secular humanists, making sense of the secular instead is thinking life in and out of religion, within cultures, with a potential, possibility and imagination. The possible is not lost out to the given; the ordinal is not allowed to sedate and overpower the surprise and mystery of our existence. The rigidity with which secular principles are referred to judge all contexts and situations speaks of an implausibility of a supposed rationality. The sovereignty of the secular—within a kind of mimetic atrophy where the constitutional is deemed obligatorily veridic across the board—has written its own obituary. Thus, making sense of it reflushes our existence with a new life of thinking and possibility, where contradiction is not always irrational and counterdiscourse is not courting violence. But the secular is no provocation to relativism; rather, it admits the importance of certain precepts of political acts and precedents in community comportments. It can question its own revelatory possibilities, its power to deliver certain things, which makes democracy vibrant and citizenry ingenious. Collective self-preserving entitlements to the constitutional make secularism forbid any infusion of creativity and spark in life and thoughts, sponsoring instead a seamless democracy inoculated against any kind of communal commotion and political peskiness. What secular does is that it makes possible a space where both the mundane and invention of the everyday can inhabit, where conflict is not always venal and ominous, where inquiry is not always the means to destabilise the government in power, where harmony and solidarity can be built on contradictions and dissensus, where knowing oneself is about knowing others.

Religion enshrines in the formation of the nation-state; it stays diffused in the smaller communities, ethnic holes and linguistic confederacies; it forms its own people and events and times and places; its values and manifestations are, at times, unpredictable and fleeting.

This makes the secular understanding of religion intricate and compelling. The secular is left to form its interpretation working within the interstices of private, public, domestic, official, political, institutional, the unorganised and the communal. So Joan Scott's observations in the context of the head scarf controversy and French republican secularism is pertinent:

Instead of positing religion as the antithesis of secularism (particularly its democratic forms), it's useful to see that they also sometimes operate as parallel systems of interpretation. This can certainly be said of some Protestant denominations as well as of Judaism and Islam, where there is neither institutional centralization nor a singular head of the church. Both democratic states and these religions refer to founding texts (constitutions, divine revelation, bodies of law), both delegate to experts (lawyers, judges, theologians) authority to reconcile text and interpretation, but both also open to more general, lay discussion the meanings of the laws which set rules for behavior and the expression of belief. I don't want to push the analogy too far, just far enough to offer an alternative to the characterization of religion as an obstacle both to democracy and change. I don't deny that in secular states the relationship between the political and the religious is asymmetrical, that democratic states have coercive power that exceeds any influence religion may have, but the importance of interpretation is still worth noting.²⁵

This is aspiring to a new universalism where negotiations among communities and centres of belief would rest on difference and not erasure and assimilation, thus preventing the arrival of an 'absolutist, intransigent secularism.'²⁶ The logic of the secular, caught between the interstices of religion and secularism, can be likened to a Deleuzian apathy for ordinal thinking and interpretation.²⁷ Everything cannot be explained and looped into an inflexible system. The sacred of the secular survives on this logic. There is something to the secular that keeps it mobile and political and, hence, in a state of becoming. It aggregates ideas, aggravates on situations that are difficult to harness and assembles around certain adjustments and adjudication which sets precedents without being stultifyingly regulatory and dispassionately timeless. Democracy, too often, works on a generality—the common minimum programme—without being mindful to what Deleuze would call the 'universal.' The secular can respond to the universal and also the singularity to bring a certain reformed *distribution* in notions and practices that have encrusted a time-honoured sanctity on them. There arise situations where secularism fails to provide the prudentiality required to engage with certain cases involving the intricate matrices of human rights, religious affiliations and community good, thus, making a decision or passing a judgement utterly controversial and exacting. Secularism, on some issues, is left to negotiate its own principles of neutrality and impassibility. Indexed on multiple registers, secularism needs an understanding of the new

logic of singularities to smother and smoothen striations in negotiations with issues and events; singularities in democracy are hard to explain and realise unless they emerge anomalously from our prevailing understanding of set discourses, because democracy goes by a logic that often turns on itself for serious deficit in self-criticality. Singularities show the inadequacy of the secular in modern democracies; as resistances, they can bring us to face the breakdown of understanding and leave governments struggling to pass a judgement. Such crises show that secularism cannot be always normed and precedented. Thinking about the essences of the secular is thinking productively and proactively, where the logic is less about working on rules set in stone but on arguments amenable to the variety of the situations that democracy jettisons in its survival. The secular is as much a mechanism to prevent religious wars as it is to make warring communities see the logic of their strife and sense the viability of seeing religion, spirituality and ideology in an argumentative and nonimpositional bind. As the singularities of Hinduism can effectuate reconfiguration through the potential acknowledgment of the other, the singularity of a Muslim can help reunderstand certain things about Islam through the heterologies of the Hindu or the Christian other. This is an invitation to a new 'secular city.'²⁸ The secular can question the singularities of a particular religion and theological philosophy to provide differentialities to our understanding of communal existence and 'thicken the meaning of our democratic lives.

IV

To fraternise the inexpungeable singularities of certain sects and creeds into a functional mechanism of state power and community obligations—at best an *e pluribus unum*—requires the complex duality of communication and mediation. The roots of religion in a democracy are deep and wide: liberal democracies would spend considerable time to figure out the unease and brush between religion as practised in private and religion as made available in the public sphere. The rub lies in trying to see a good democrat not as a good believer. Rather, a good democrat would have the discerning intelligence and discriminative reason to cultivate scepticism about an unfolding democracy. This is a high ask which looks into finding a general welfare in civil milieus interlarded with a faith in the exercise of beliefs, in negotiation on important and contradictory religious issues, in the potential of the present crisis, the projected promise and premise of the future and respect for contested positions. Sultan Tepe notes,

Recognizing that modernity can be conceived of as plural invites us to resist conventional wisdom and normalized assumptions. This pluralistic incision directs our attention to the need to loosen the tight grip of deductive and deterministic accounts on our efforts to understand

how the contribution of religious movements and parties can unfold in different directions—including toward democracy. Such adjustment requires a deep shift in our thinking to allow us to acknowledge that the ideas of modernity (e.g., autonomy of individual, free will, an understanding of history as an open-ended project) can take root in unexpected places, practices, and traditions. Although deductive approaches suggest otherwise, the possibility that religious doctrines are capable of accommodating autonomy, and that a strong religious community can coexist with independent agents, needs to be part of our inquiries. After all, at its core modernity entails the breakdown of all traditional legitimizations of the political order. However, it does not and cannot preclude multiple ways of constructing a new order. Therefore, tradition does not necessarily disappear in modernity. Instead, it is reinterpreted in critical ways.²⁹

Under the overlapping consensus and reinterpretation of tradition and promise of a new order, the ethics of dissensus demand what Charles Taylor has seen as negotiated compromise. He argues, 'Not all of us will be able to enshrine just the catalogue of rights that we can justify out of our background philosophy. Of course, most of us cannot even today. But we take this as an invitation to go on arguing with our compatriots out of our supposedly shared premises.' Taylor recognises the significance of debate in 'healthy society under diversity': 'the kind of pale ecumenicism' where 'each feels constrained from speaking about the other's views is actually a way of preserving, under the mothballs of respectful silence, all the odd misconceptions and contempt. But nevertheless in the political arena, we have to operate on the assumption that disagreement will continue, that there will be no agreement on the authoritative canon for adjudication.'³⁰ Vinay Lal rightly points out that 'our very dissent is incomplete if it does not allow others to partake in the dissent, and if it does not create the conditions for further dissent. There is an egalitarianism in dissent, too.'³¹ This dissent also springs from the struggle that legal uniformity would have with legal pluralism. The concern is about the contest that personal laws protecting minority rights can grow with the uniformity of the civil code. 'Hopefully,' the Rudolphs rightly observe, 'it will be the story of an unstable but viable equilibrium that combines the legal equality of human rights with a post-civilizational multi-culturalism.'³² Democracy, thus, in its claims on the secular, wrestles with the equilibrium and the disequilibrium which disturbs but does not destroy, is productive but not luridly unbounding and attentive without being cynical. Welcoming of multiculturalism, it succeeds in inscribing a viable note of difference into its tryst with the secular. Joan Scott writes,

Differences are often irreducible and must be accepted as such.

Differences are relational and involve hierarchy and differentials of power that will be constantly contested.