

INTRODUCTION

Scientific modernity is said to lead to a decrease in religious belief and practice. It is called secularization. But this does not seem to be a problem in Asia, though non-religious secularism is promoted as an ideology in some countries. On the other hand we may need to encourage secularism as a strict separation between the state and the religions and an acceptance of religious pluralism in social life. Secularism then means the acceptance of religious pluralism. In some Asian countries, though religious pluralism is accepted in principle, the religion of the majority is allowed to dominate social and political life. Even in a democratic set up a majority in any field can easily impose itself democratically. In such a situation, it is not enough to affirm individual dignity, rights and freedom. We have to promote group rights and equality between individuals and groups. The Indian Constitution, for instance, recognizes and protects the equality and rights of minority religious and cultural groups.

In this context, the Institute of Dialogue with Cultures and Religions, Chennai wanted to look into the impact of secularization on religions in Asia and the relationship of religions among themselves and with society and the state. So we invited scholars from six Asian countries: China, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and India. The situations in these countries are certainly different. As a contrast, we wanted to look at the situation in France and in the United States of America. France is secular, almost in the sense of being anti-religious, while the United States of America is secular in the sense of a strict separation between the religions and the state. Each of the eight papers was responded to. To these papers have been added my own key-note address and the presidential address of Dr. Lazar, the Secretary of Loyola College, Chennai, India.

Benoit Vermander's exploration focuses on praxis rather than ideology. In China religious institutions and structures were under attack during the cultural revolution. The communist regime seeks total social control. But it has not been able to extinguish the need of people for religious belief and practice. A quest for the sacred is very much present. Religious memory and tradition remain strong. Now various religious groups are permitted to function provided they focus on personal needs and do not seek any strong social or political expression. Under these conditions there seems to be a lot of religious, even ritual activity. On the one hand people go back to their traditions, Confucian, Buddhist and Christian and their rootedness in the sacredness of the land and its history. On the other hand a certain impact of modernity which seeks personal and emotional satisfaction is not absent. Religious activity also seems to provide the context for creative artistic and cultural activity.

Dr. Murali suggests that the various religious manifestations are very much under state control. The state has forbidden some emotionally effervescent sects. Islam does not seem to enjoy the same freedom as the other religions like Buddhism. Certain secular celebrations of religion are encouraged. In general religious praxis is tolerated, even encouraged,

provided it remains private and the state is not challenged. Malaysia is ethnically and religiously pluralistic. Though Islam is the official religion of the State, the other religions have freedom to function. All the religions have been impacted by modernity. This has led to phenomena like secularization, ethical relativism, individualism, decontextualization in the sense that one is no longer bound by tradition, commodification in which everything, including religion, becomes something to be used for one's own benefit without being attached to it and a social media that promotes communication without commitment. Modernity also affects the religions in various ways, promoting a dichotomy between faith and life, loosening the hold of religion on people and encouraging a personal spirituality free of religious faith and ritual and encouraging egocentrism.

The school system promotes contacts between different religious groups. There are also efforts to promote community building and a collective search to resolve conflicts.

Buddhism in Sri Lanka was under attack by the colonial powers, Portuguese, Dutch and British. It is Henry Steel Olcott who comes to their defence. He starts Christian-type schools for the Buddhists which modernizes the Buddhist community and encourages and prepares the people to defend Buddhism. His onetime disciple Anagarica Dharmapala also plays an important role in this revival. Now Buddhist leaders are using the press and other modern media to promote and defend Buddhism.

However the tendency of a "Protestant Buddhism" to downplay the role of the monks has been successfully resisted. This resurgence of Buddhism has made the Buddhists defend religious freedom on the one hand and resist conversion by force or enticement on the other. Tilakaratne sees no problem in the state supporting and promoting the majority religion of Buddhism (70%) while allowing freedom to the other minority religions. Sri Lanka is a Buddhist country. The factors of modernity like secularization do not seem to affect the Buddhists in Sri Lanka.

Abdussalam Puthige, commenting on the paper of Tilakaratne suggests that the record of Sri Lanka in the defence of the rights of the minorities has not been great. He hopes that the new government under the leadership of Mr. Maitripala Sirisena will promote and defend the right of all the citizens, withstanding pressure from the more radical elements in the Buddhist community. All religions, including Buddhism, seek to promote the great universal values such as love, trust, compassion, tolerance, peace, justice and equality in society. We can expect Buddhism, in collaboration with the other religions in Sri Lanka, to do the same. Heru Prakosa from Indonesia suggests that globalization has led to relativization which recognizes one's own limitations leading to a feeling of insecurity which seems to lead to a fundamentalist self-assertion. In Indonesia fundamentalist groups are found both among Christians and Muslims. Though Indonesia is an inter-religious country, it is also the largest Muslim nation in the world. Java had been Hinduized before it encountered Islam. Islam, interacting with local cultures and religions, has acquired various shades in Indonesia.

Fundamentalism is not a purely religious phenomenon. It is linked to the economic and political situation too. The Second Vatican Council has certainly inspired and encouraged the Catholics towards interreligious dialogue. But this needs to be prepared by contextual theological reflection, an experiential approach to other religions in the context of the one God of all and collaboration in working for the people, seeking to resolve conflicts and building up community.

Responding to Heru Prakosa, Faizur Rahman suggests that the resurgence of Islam in the 20th century is more political than religious. Real democracy can be promoted only through inter-people dialogue, going beyond inter-faith dialogue. The focus of such dialogue is not merely mutual understanding but a quest for truth – truth about God. Islam of course will find it difficult to accept the divinity of Christ claimed by the Christians, who are not likely to abandon it. In Indonesia, the Muslims too seems to identify ‘religious values’ with ‘Islamic values’. Eventually interfaith dialogue should seek to promote, not a uniformity of views, but a uniformity of values to promote which all can work together.

Rudi Heredia offers an exhaustive analysis of the paradox of secularism in India. India is multi-religious and multi-cultural country. After the trauma of the partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan, the leaders of India shaped it into a secular democratic republic. All the citizens were promised freedom, justice, equality and fraternity. In relation to religions there were two orientations identified with Nehru and Gandhi. Both affirmed secularism. But for Nehru it was non-religious, while for Gandhi it was equal treatment of all religions. Religious and other minorities were specially protected. There was no affirmative action, except for the Scheduled castes and tribes, but freedom to develop in their own way. It was expected that the different religious groups would protect the basic constitutional freedoms and rights of individuals. Unfortunately each cultural (caste) and religious group has been defending and promoting itself. The majority (Hindu) group is also playing its majority card to dominate the others. The need then is to protect the basic democratic freedoms. In this context, secularism as equal openness to all religions seems to be ideal.

In responding to Rudi Heredia, Prof. Chandrasekhar shows his broad agreement with Prof. Heredia, supports the Gandhian ideal of treating all religions equally, suggests that Swami Vivekananda had a similar approach to religious pluralism even earlier and affirms that in our relation to other religions we should promote ‘acceptance’ in place of ‘tolerance’.

Albert Alejo looks at the impact of modernity and secularization from two different points of view. If we look at popular religious practice we have to say that religion is very much active among the people, especially those who are poor and in need of help and healing. On the other hand the impact of secularization can be seen in the phenomenon of corruption, not only in public life, but even among the priests.

In a short but crisp paper François Euvé describes the impact of secularization. Distinguishing between secularization which is a sociocultural phenomenon and secularism which is rather a political arrangement he shows how both have evolved in France. Scientific and philosophical development lead to secularization. The tension between religion and politics leads to secularism. One distinguishes between the legal and the moral dimensions of actions. The separation between the Church and the state is not absolute especially at the symbolic level. The decrease in religious practice, the increasing autonomy of moral conscience and the emergence of feminism have to increasing secularization. The phenomenon of globalization leads to a search for identity that may bring up religious symbols. The ecological movement also seems to lead to new relationship to nature. With the increasing migration of Muslims religion seems to be becoming a source of personal identity. While the forces of secularization still seem to be working a quest for community may be bringing in a religious sense.

Responding to Euvé, Priyanca Mathur Velath shows that secularism supposes that all the citizens are seen and treated as equal irrespective of their religious or ethnic identity. But such an integration has not been possible with the post-war Muslim migrants. A subtle difference between the Christian roots of France and the Islamic roots of the migrants is present. The Muslims then want to affirm their identity. Making matters worse, Laïcité or secularism seems to have become an aggressive religion of the state imposed on non-conforming Christians and Muslims alike.

Reaction to such an imposition is inevitable. Leo Lefebure summarises the story of religion(s) in the USA as four great awakenings. The first in the 18th century was animated by Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield and fostered a sense of equality and led the American revolution. The second in the 19th century was focused on social reform and the abolition of slavery and resulted in the civil war. The third in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries channeled the energies towards the labour movement and the liberation of women who got their voting rights. The fourth in 1950s and 60s gave rise to the movement for civil rights under the leadership of people like Martin Luther King. The current president of the USA has been whipping up anti-Muslim sentiment. Racism seems to be more of a problem than religious diversity.

Responding to Leo Lefebure, Catherine Punsalan underlines two points. The four awakenings that Leo speaks of concern mostly the white Americans. The WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) group may have integrated also the white Catholics. But the Afro-Americans, the Hindu and Buddhist Asian Americans, the Muslims and Sikhs, the Indigenous people and the poorer Hispanics are still on the margins as the anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric of Donald Trump elected president shows. Secondly the emergence of the 'Nones' shows that the phenomenon secularization is slowly catching on also in the USA.

Lively discussions followed the presentations of the papers and the responses to them. All over the world countries, thanks to the phenomenon of migration, economic or political, are becoming multi-cultural and multi-religious. The challenge is to avoid any sort of discrimination and conflict and to respect and protect the dignity, rights and equality of all humans. Each religion, avoiding fundamentalism and communalism, has to make space for the other religious believers within the sphere of religion itself in the context of the pluralism of religions and the need for national and world community. The believers in different religions also need to dialogue with each other to help remove ignorance and prejudices and to promote acceptance of the religious others. Our experience at the Institute of Dialogue with Cultures and Religions would even suggest that we must celebrate difference. Such an openness to each other could lead to collaboration in building up human community based on common human, ethical and social values, even if the religious convictions on which they are based may be different. The experience in many of the Asian countries shows that this is possible, though the concrete form of collaboration may vary from country to country.

It is our conviction that collaboration and celebration in the context of religious (and cultural) pluralism is the only way to peace and harmony in Asia and in the world. May such peace and harmony become increasingly real in the world!

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