

Secularism, Secularisation and Secular Age- Responses from Indian Ecumenical Theology¹

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Summary:

This article investigates the concept of secularism in contemporary, European and Indian ecumenical thinking, highlighting the different reception and development of the elements of the secular debate - the concept of secularism (ideology), secularization (social process) and secular age (historical time period) - in Europe and in India, in the thinking of some iconic Indian thinkers. The different social framework and the different religious and political premises in India in comparison to Europe (where the term secular was initially invented) are highlighted, and, also, the model of social coexistence of the different religions that the Indian state tends to cultivate in the debate on the idea of secularism.

Keywords:

Indian Ecumenical theology, Secular Humanism, Closed Secularism, Multiple Secularism, Indian Public Debate, Nehruvian State Policy, Gandhian Harmony of Communities, Hindu Nationalism, Positivism, Transcendental dimension of life.

Introduction

Secularism as a process, time span, and an ideology is related to the ecumenism as it holds to heal and harmonise the social. Ecumenical theology addresses the ways of the social, political and the religious are contested and this in turn is the debate of the secular also addressing to. The key question of the paper is to study what are the ways in which the debate of the secular - concepts of secularism (ideology),

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secularisation (social process) and secular age (historical time period) has been received and responded in Indian Ecumenical theology? This question will be dealt with three parts. First part commences with brief note on the epistemological history. The second part of the paper will be summarising the debate by the different groups of scholars in Indian civil society. The third and the main section will ponder over the responses to secularism of Indian Ecumenical theology in the contributions of Paulose Mar Gregorios, MM Thomas, and Russel Chandran.

1. Epistemological Context

In the debate of the secular, the usages of secularism, secularisation and secular age are all used interchangeably, yet some common epistemic references are evident. In the words of Arnold E Leon defining “*secularism as the historical process by which the world de-divinized, or rather human consciousness is de—divinized.*”³ One may observe that this model proposed by Leon is a central European version of the secular. Hence contemporary scholars like Jose Casanova argues that “The secularisation of Europe is particular, unique and ‘exceptional’ historical process, not a universal teleological model of development which shows the future to the rest of the world.”⁴ This is to say that secular-secularism, secular age and secularising- works in various ways in various continents and contexts. But the European debate could be studied as the first epistemological launching of the concept of the secular in the history of the humanity.

In the European context, the period of secularization is usually said to have begun with the treaty of Westphalia in 1648, which ended the thirty Years of War between Catholics and Protestants.⁵ This agreement is the genealogical root of the secularization, in which it was attempted to resolve particular religious problems by adopting a general political principle at a time when the core of religion was coming to be seen as an internal matter.⁶

One may say that from this debate advanced two paths of the epistemological trajectory in the debate of the secular: the path of the positivist science and the path of the modern social theory.⁷ The positivist science has three vivifications:

³ Arnold Leon, *Secularization Science without God* (London: SCM,1967),7.

⁴ Jose Casanova, “Beyond European and American Exceptionalism: towards a Global Perspective.”, in *Predicting Religion: Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures*, ed. Grace Davie,et.al.(Aldershot \Burlington:Ashgate,2003),22.

⁵ Steven Fuller, *The New Sociological Imagination* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006), 148.

⁶ *Ibid*, 264.

⁷ Social theory - we use combine to refer to sociology , anthropology and philosophy

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1. Cosmology-The cosmology of the traditional world view was challenged by Copernicus, Bruno, Kepler, Galileo and Newton paving to see the cosmos as having some explanation within and meaning within it, devoid of external meaning.

2. Zoology- the Study by Darwin in the doctrine of selection absorbed the mystery of life and its character of wholeness was thus a wholesale secularization of the creation.⁸

3. Philosophy-The positivism and existentialism and its versions of philosophy developed hermeneutics without reference to the mythical and metaphysical rather to the scientific and rational and humanistic phase.⁹

This positivist sciences' contribution to the epistemology of the secular had a counterpart from the modern social theory also. In his *The Positive Philosophy*, French positivist Auguste Comte (1852) proclaimed that sociology would replace religion as the basis for morality. England's Herbert Spencer (1874) argued the same. The Marx and Engels envisioned a denarcotized future once the masses learned the real secret of their misery (political economy), substitute class consciousness for false consciousness, and exchanged this worldly action for other worldly hopes.¹⁰ For Weber (1904), secularization was an implication of the rationalization of the society. In the neo-positivist line Durkheim (1961) envisioned religious beliefs being displaced by science, has reasoned that a sense of society as a sacred collectively would remain.¹¹ These epistemological and historical heritages play a decisive role in civil debate of the secular.

2. The Context of debate of the Secular in Indian Civil Society

Secularism as an ideology, secularisation as a social process, secular age as a time span has seldom been distinctively addressed by the Indian civil debate on the secular. In the Gandhian phase of the freedom struggle the term *secular* was portrayed to harmonise or respectfully distance the then communally aligned forces, in a different conception to the European cultural context. This is the time in which the *sarva darma sama bhavana* (Gandhian vocabulary for the secular) has taken as an iconic word for India, meaning equal respect to all religions. Hence it may be noted that one of the ecumenical theologian Konrad Raiser observes that the Indian experiment of secularism function as “secular state that offers equal respect to all

⁸ Arnold E Leon, *Secularisation Science without God*, op.cit, 24.

⁹ Ibid, 117.

¹⁰ N J Demerath, “Secularisation Deconstructed and Reconstructed”, *The Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, edited by James A Backford and N J Demerath III (New Delhi: Sage, 2007),58.

¹¹ ibid

religions and ensures protection of minorities, going back to the political and religious convictions of Mahatma Gandhi.”¹²

In the 1950's, Nehru read the *secular* as state's equal distance from all religions and even those who does not have a religion(*dharmanirapekhsa*).The Nehruvian debate on the secular can be termed as statist's turn .By the 1990's, the Indian context witnessed religious revivals in its life affirmative forms and life threatening forms. The resurgence of the Dalits, tribal and women and the theological and social scientific reflections by them challenged the emancipatory capacity of the secular rationality being deafened to the subtle dimensions of the social and cultural formations. But the demolition of the Babri Masjid, Killing of Graham Steins and the like turned the whole of history of the secular debate into a new phase.

In this context contemporary scholars consider secularism in India, distinctly different from the secularism now flourishing in the west, denotes not the absence, or banishment, of the religion in the public life but acceptance, equivalence, support and tolerance of different religions as crucial for survival of any large political system.¹³ But this view is somewhat complemented and corrected by Rina Verma Williams as she consider partition of India and Pakistan is so decisive to understand the debate on the secular in India, she argues “partition impacted discussions of secularism in India in two important ways. It created worries about separatism and further divisions of India if the proper relationship between religion and politics was not achieved, and it created a new, neighbouring state that was both a benchmark and a counterpoint in discussions of Indian Secularism.”¹⁴ But the scholars with Indian Islamic background criticises that Indian Secularism as a high caste deployment.¹⁵ But in contrast to this, Right wing group contest that the secularism concept gives privileges to minorities and undermine Hindus. Hence one could observe that these trajectories of debate on the secular makes the Indian ecumenical theology as demanding and decisive.

3. The Debate on the Secular in Indian Ecumenical Theology

One may note that there are few phases in the theological debates in Indian Christian theology. There are mainly four waves in the debate. The *first wave* (*the*

¹² Konard Raiser, *Religion, Power, Politics*. (Geneva, Switzerland: WCC Publications, 2013),55.

¹³ Cf. Nandini Chatterjee *The making of Indian Secularism. Empire, Law and Christianity, 1830 – 1960*.New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2011.

¹⁴ Rina Verma Williams and Laura Dudley Jenkins ‘Secular Anxieties and Transnational Engagements in India’, in *Multiple Secularities Beyond the West : Religion and Modernity in Global Age* by Marian Burchardt, Matthias Middell, and Monika Wohlrab-Sahr, eds. (Munchen, Germany: De Gruyter,2015),25.

¹⁵ Cf. Shabnum Tejani, *Indian Secularism: A Social and Intellectual History.1890- 1950*. (Bloomington : Indiana, University Press, 2008)

missionary era) of the Indian theologian's debate of secularism is a covert and complex with the take of the missionaries –some of them engaged with the local traditions positively and faith, while some others like William Carey was very critical to the local faith. The *second wave (the convert's era)* of Indian theologians would go with the attempt majorly to articulate Christian faith as in line with the *Advaitic* tradition of Hinduism (often equated as the Indian) and also with the ashram movement. The *third wave (the nationalist's era)* of Indian theologians attempted to locate the Christian faith in the process of nation building and the social change happening thereby. This third wave attempted to articulate of faith in relation to the process of nation building. The *fourth wave* deals with the context of communalism, an age of identity assertions, resurgence of the social relevance of the religions and rampant global migration. The fourth wave also demands a reading and rereading of the debate of the secular by ecumenical theologians. Interestingly, the fourth wave is the time of ecumenical movement in India. Among the Indian ecumenical theologians belong P D Devanandan, MM Thomas and Paulos Mar Gregorios, KT Paul, S K George, E V Mathew, Russel Chandran and the like .Our study is limited to the contributions of P D Devanandan, MM Thomas and Paulos Mar Gregorios.

3.a. P D Devanandan

The earliest debate of secularism in the Indian ecumenical theological engagement has been availed through the books titled as the *Cultural foundation of the Indian Democracy*¹⁶ and *India's Quest For Democracy*.¹⁷ These were jointly edited by P.D. Devanandan¹⁸ and M.M Thomas¹⁹ .In 1957 a companion volume to this was edited by PDD and MMT under the title 'Human Person, Society and State'.²⁰ PDD called 'secularistic humanism' as a gospel of hope with three doctrines:(1) the ultimate destiny of human life must be found in the nature of man (2) it can be reached by means which are possible to men, if they will only properly utilize their own native capacities and environment for the common good (3) natural and social sciences give us all the guidance and direction we need to realize our destiny.²¹ PDD adds three supplementary faiths for these doctrines: Democracy, Socialism and Nationalism.²²

¹⁶ PD Devanandan and M.M.Thomas, *Cultural foundation of the Indian Democracy* (Bangalore: The Committee for Literature on Social Change,1955).

¹⁷ PD Devanandan and M.M.Thomas, *India's Quest for Democracy* (Bangalore: The Committee for Literature on Social Change,1955).

¹⁸ Hereafter PDD will denote PD Devanandan.

¹⁹ Hereafter M.M.T will denote M.M. Thomas

²⁰ PD Devanandan and M.M. Thomas, *Human Person, Society and State*'(Bangalore: The Committee for Literature on Social Change,1957).

²¹ PD Devandan.et.al, *Presenting Christ to India Today* (Madras: CLS,1956),4.

²² *Ibid*,6.

PDD raised the question “Have Christians In India in this generation, this “secular”²³ task of helping, evolve a common Indian way of life, which is not to be confused with adherence to common religious beliefs and practices?”²⁴ This search redefines the secularism of the state, founded upon the conception that whatever one may or may not believe about otherworldly values, the state is profoundly interested in the realisation of this-worldly values. A Secular state can never be anti-religious.²⁵ The context of this debate of the secular was the tensed cultural field of India polarized between Nehruvian and Neo-Hindu definitions of the secular. Among Indian ecumenical theologians, PDD was the most articulate for a secular humanism which is positivist in its content and critical in its reflection.

3.b. M M Thomas

It can be studied that the writings of *early* MM Thomas²⁶ (1950-1980) were concerned with social democracy as spiritual witness.²⁷ In *Christian Participation in Nation Building* (1960), M M Thomas, recommends *secularism* as a broad movement comprising many streams. In one part it is a revolt against the control of the traditional religion over the social and the political life, a revolt in the name of the autonomy of the secular areas of life; in the other, it is an affirmation of the self-sufficiency of science and human history to save (hu) mankind and is in opposition to all religions.²⁸ Secularism also, challenges traditional religious beliefs as responsible for the prevalence of a fatalistic attitude which encourages apathy to social evils and hesitation to take social responsibilities in difficult situations.²⁹

In *Acknowledged Christ of Indian Renaissance* MMT explores *secular* as a social process- secularization of culture, which dissociates cultural institutions from all religions to further modernization of life, and breaks up all religious cultures to

²³ Here PDD refers to the term as unity based on Common nationality not based on Common faith.

²⁴ PD Devanandan, *Our Task Today, Prevailing View On Evangelism* (Bangalore: CISRS, 1959), 23

²⁵ P D Devanandan, *Preparation for Dialogue* (Bangalore: CISRS, 1964), 127. The same argument can also be seen in his book *Christian Issues in South Asia* (New York: Fortress Press, 1963), 85.

²⁶ Early M.M. Thomas denote –M.M. in the years –(1950-1980)

²⁷ M.M.Thomas and JD McCaughey, *the Christian in the World Struggle* (Geneva, WSCF, 1950), 78.

²⁸ M.M.Thomas, *Christian Participation in the Nation Building* (Bangalore: CISRS/NCCI, 1960), 247.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 249.

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reintegrate them on a new basis.³⁰ In the epilogue of *The Secular Ideologies of India and the Secular Meaning Of Christ*, he attempts to develop ‘theological Insights for a secular Anthropology’.³¹ In this section MMT had, for the first time, a double take on the debate of secularism. On the one hand he criticizes any version of secularism which consider it as ‘closed in itself’³² and which devoid of a comprehensive understanding of the reality of (hu)man and therefore liable to become dehumanizing in the long run. On the other hand, he endorse a secular humanism, which affirms creativity of man in the purposive history, liberation from social bondage, and realisation of love in human relations as the promise and potentiality of humankind in every historical situation and which struggles to realize them within the limits and possibilities of the situation integral to the faith and hope of Christian Gospel.³³ We can conclude that this is an early MM phenomenon. In the writings of MMT in this period, we can note, the *secular* as the theological rhetoric for the public and prophetic dimension of spirituality.

In the post 80’s, *later* MMT (1980-1996) starts to problematise, the use of the theological rhetoric of secular. He notes on the positive side, anyone who seeks to destroy secularism in India in the name of religion is not a friend but a foe of responsible personal and social existence. On the negative side, secularism is the deification of history emptying of orientation and making life burdensome, of relativism giving way to scepticism and apathy, of emancipated individual lonely and homeless expressing him in an irresponsible freedom, religious neutrality working itself out as an oppressive atheism.³⁴

MMT criticizes naïve/neutral perception on the secular on three lines of *historical –epistemic* lines:

1. Hitlerism and Stalinism have proved beyond doubt that even secularism can be authoritarian, even totalitarian which leaves no room for thought and life.³⁵

³⁰ M.M. Thomas, *the Acknowledged Christ of Indian Renaissance* (Madras, C.L.S, 1970), 236.

³¹ M.M. Thomas, *The Secular Ideologies of Indian and the Secular Meaning of Christ* (Bangalore/Madras: CISRS&CLS,1976), 193-203.

³² *Ibid*, 194.

³³ *Ibid*, 195. Hopeful in the secular as he was tremendously influenced by the Gandhian, Nehruvian and Ram Manohar Lohia’s concepts of the secular and also with the heavy influence of Bonhofferian and Neibhurian ethics .These five traditions marked the intellectual geography of M.M.T, while he engaged with the concept of the secular in his writings.

³⁴ M.M. Thomas, *Ideological Quest within the Christian Commitment, 1939-1954*(Bangalore/Madras, CSRS&CLS, 1983), 256.

³⁵ M.M. Thomas, *The Church’s Mission and Postmodern Humanism, Collection of Essays & Talks 1992-1996*, (Thiruvalla: CSS&ISPCK, 1996), 24.

2. Secular ideologies have created a spiritual vacuum in the life of the secularized people, leading many to return to religious fundamentalism and communalism.³⁶

3. The secularism is not accommodative of the public response of the religion namely the prophetic function of spirituality.³⁷ One can make a note that Indian ecumenical theologian with interreligious concern S.J Samartha, agrees with the double take of MMT, hopes that “secular political framework can provide neutral space for people of different religious persuasions and ideological convictions to make their contribution to the value basis of the nation.”³⁸ Samartha criticises the Secular state and secular ideology, In India, has generated “equal indifference” to all religions which in turn is also the aftermath of the abandoning of teaching of any religions in the public schools in India.³⁹ He has also, almost, forecasted the danger of the probability of the end of secular credo in India by the communal forces. The theological double take of MMT is further condensed in *the Nagas towards 2000 A.D.*, that Indian Secularism needs the support of Renascent religions, if it is not to be overthrown by the forces of fundamentalist and Communal Religion.⁴⁰

3.c. Paulos Mar Gregorios

As an Indian ecumenical theologian Paulos Mar Gregorios⁴¹ debated on secularism on the historical – philosophical route. PMG’s was convinced that the worldwide process of secularization can be understood only in the context of European Enlightenment.⁴² The secular has been elucidated as “that ideology which believes that the world open to our senses and our instruments is the world that exists, and that meaning has to be found in that universe without reference to anything outside of or transcending our field of sense perception and our rational mind. It is that ideology which makes religion a matter of personal choice and thus a compartment of life to be banished from public life and pushed into the margin.”⁴³ PMG observed that the enlightenment did not destroy religion, but simply marginalized and privatized it.⁴⁴

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ M.M. Thomas, *A Diaconal Approach to Indian Ecclesiology* (CSS, Thiruvalla, 1996), 14.

³⁸ SJ Samartha, *One Christ, Many Religions. Towards Revised Christology. 3rd Edn.* (Bangalore, India: SATHRI, 2000), 54.

³⁹ Cf. SJ Samartha. *One Christ, Many Religions. Towards a Revised Christology*. op.cit, 55

⁴⁰ M.M. Thomas, *The Nagas Towards A.D. 2000* (Madras: Centre for Research on New International Economic Order, 1992), 216.

⁴¹ Hereafter referred as PMG

⁴² Paulos Mar Gregorios, *A Light Too Bright the Enlightenment Today* (New York: State University Press, 1992), 27.

⁴³ Paulos Mar Gregorios, *Religion and Dialogue* (Kottayam: MGF/ISPCK, 2000), 106.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 214.

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In a paper prepared for WCC Uppsala Assembly Section V, in 1965 PMG pointed to the double side of the process of secularization to two aspects- the liberation of human thought from religious presuppositions, and the liberation of human institutions from ecclesiastical control.⁴⁵ The cultural caravan of the secularization is comprised of the three sections of the people: (1) those who substitute for the norm of revelation to some form of natural law-philosophers of secularization(2) those who commit themselves, without an acknowledged transcendent authority, to the ideal of using our best human efforts to achieve maximum of social justice and human welfare in this world – prophets of secularization (3) those who seek to be as open as possible in their understanding of this world and in choosing the immediate goals to be achieved in this world by man and society – pragmatists of secularization.⁴⁶ By the joined effort of all the three, the secular has turned as our civilization plot, we create and inhabit. There are two dangers for this process: 1) religion today in politics has become largely negative and destructive and 2) inward turn of religion becomes narrow minded and fanatical. In such a situation, PMG poses three key challenges to the concept of the secular: Can human beings be better educated and lead their lives more ethically without rather than any reference to the Transcendent? Can the liberal secular humanist framework unite people from various traditions of life orientations? Can secularism, being a personal practice of religion, confront the communal forces?

PMG observes that the secular ideology cannot do away with the communalism, if it does away with religion. The secular ideology cannot also resolve communalizing of the religion.⁴⁷ He argued that the Nehruvian reading got wider currency in India, still prevailing, has to be challenged. The uncritical plea for scientific humanism and the demand for a break with the past are the pillars of Nehruvian secularism, but they are the failed logic of enlightenment.⁴⁸ That the values of scientific humanism and secular identity are historically dated and geographically conditioned.⁴⁹ Hence it will be too shallow to generalize these theories in our time. Both, the Marxist and the Hindu Virat Sabah's readings of the secular are not the remedies, as they do not envisage a plural and democratic community.

PMG beckons that it is high time to reconsider the concept of the secular state and find a concept true to Indian history, culture and present situation.⁵⁰ PMG confirms that Secularism has no basis for the unity of Secular Democratic India. That

⁴⁵Paulos, Mar Gregorios, *Worship in A Secular Age* (Thiruvalla /Kottayam: CSS/MGF, 2003), 131.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 132.

⁴⁷Paulos Mar Gregorios, *The Secular Ideology An Impotent Remedy for India's Communal Problem* (New Delhi/Kottayam: ISPCK/MGF, 1998),5.

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Ibid, 17

⁵⁰ Ibid, 56.

basis can come only from the pluralistic, mutually respectful, and democratic co-operation of many traditions.⁵¹ One may critically note that PMG has not developed further and this may be a pointer for future studies.

Conclusion

The debate of the secular – process, ideology, or as a time period – has the epistemic commencement in the context of religious war 1610 – 1640 and the resultant Westphalian treaty in 1648. Though this has been influential globally, different continents responded to this in various ways. In Indian context the process, the ideology and the era of the secular was received and reflected in many shades and positions in the last 90 years of the formation of the nation. Among the Indian ecumenical theologians' decisive contributions have come from PD Devanandan, Paulos Mar Gregorios and MM Thomas. PMG has responded to the debate of the secular from the epistemological –theological critical vantage point, while MM Thomas and PD Devanandan has gone in line of a historical –ethical critique. These three ecumenical theologians show us the need to theologically engage with the debate of the secular. PMG and MMT were critical to the hegemonic trend of secularism. They were advocating theological critic to the hegemonic version of secularism in India. Hence it could be said that Indian ecumenical theology would fundamentally challenge the preoccupation of the secularism, with unity and effacing of the religious differences. As the reflexive school of secularism is opened in India by the contributions of MM Thomas and Paulos Mar Gregorios envisaged rereading of the secular or traverse beyond the secular in order to facilitate multi-religious, multi-lingual and multi-cultural social matrix of India. Sunny George commends that conceptualizing secularism as an ideology (as done by PMG, MMT and PDD), would not resolve the riddle, rather we need to develop the distinctions between secularism as ideology and secularism as a social space.⁵² Hence an Indian ecumenical theology would not subscribe secularism as an ideology, but would engage with secularism as a social space facilitating dialogical, mutually respectful, mutually corrective and reconciled living produced thereby. The absolute humanism of the secular assumption will have to be corrected in the hermeneutic context of the finitude of humanity. This would need a new language which would bridge the hiatus between 'the historical and mystical', 'factual and metaphysical' foundations of the society in a new reflexivity of ecumenical theology in the debate of the secular. Paulos Mar Gregorios and MM Thomas pondered over the renewed presence of the religion in the public realm, contrary to the positivist secular expectation. Such an effort to reflexively look into the nature of the state in Indian Christian Theology has been done by ECC, Bangalore in

⁵¹ Ibid, 43.

⁵² Rev.Sunny George, *Life As Sacramental Celebration In Community*, Unpublished.

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the year 1983 in a consultation, by publishing an edited volume under the title '*Nationalism in Crisis*.'⁵³

But Indian ecumenical theology so far does not address the social formation of human beings through religious patterns and practices. Or otherwise they are silent on the subjectivity formation by religion. This is very important in the life affirmative or life negating forms of religion in Indian situation. Such a debate of subjectivity formation through religious practices and discourses would be central to the Indian ecumenical theology in the coming days.

⁵³ M N V Nair edited, *Nationalism in Crisis* (Bangalore: ECC, 1985).