

Seven Letters To My RSS Friend: Letter #6

My Dear Judge Sahab,

The founding fathers of the constitution of free India were inspired by the idea that every citizen of a sovereign state stood equal in regard to basic rights, responsibilities and opportunities, irrespective of religion, caste, region or gender. This approach implied that the state, as such, was not a patron of any one religious creed, and that the Indian republic had no official religion. It will be agreed that this idea was not only laudable but also courageous under the then divisive Hindu-Muslim passions that had been aroused by the politics of partition and the emergence of Pakistan as a Muslim homeland and Islamic state. I submit, no honest and impartial observer or analyst can over-praise the founding fathers for their wisdom and foresight in framing the constitution.

Some Hindu quarters have raised voices (perhaps, in all sincerity and good conscience) that the term 'secularism' is an unnecessary borrowing or imitation of Western ideas, under the influence of Nehru, and the secular ideal should be displaced by the ancient Hindu ideal of equal respect for all religions (sarvadharmā sadbhāva). These quarters argue that the idea of secularism was an understandable response of Western humanitarian reformers to the never ending religious intolerance and conflicts between different religions or sectarian groups in Christian society. Since Hinduism is, intrinsically, free from the virus of intolerance and is committed to the doctrine of free choice of deity (ishta devatā) free India, having an overwhelmingly Hindu population, should substitute the borrowed Western secular idiom with the ancient traditional idiom of 'sarvadharmā sadbhāva'. These quarters confidently claim that a true Hindu state would guarantee and fully protect all fundamental human rights as the secular dispensation does today. According to these quarters, the stress on secularism not only dilutes national pride, but it also dilutes the distinctive spiritual basis of the Indian value system that has been her glory from time immemorial. Perhaps, these quarters have in mind the example of several Muslim countries, recently liberated from colonial rule, that are Islamic states and yet enjoy the benefits of the modern age and command influence and power in the comity of nations without imitating Western secularism. I submit, this reasoning is sophistry and illusion.

Secularism, in modern parlance, is a clear-cut concept of social and political thought. The definition of Hinduism, or any other religion, for that matter, is, at bottom, a matter of choice and opinion. The basic question, 'what is Hinduism/Islam?' or 'who is a good Hindu/Muslim?' elicits plural answers. Both Gandhiji and Dr. Hedgewar were good Hindus but their idea of Hinduism differed. Gandhiji remarked that if un-touchability were an integral part of Hinduism he was not prepared to call himself a Hindu. He, obviously, believed that un-touchability was not integral to Hinduism. However, I personally know some Hindus who honestly hold that a good Hindu ought to follow Manu's text to the letter. I may add that I honestly respect these Hindu friends for their sincerity and integrity, though I freely express my disagreement with them. The same remarks apply to some Muslim relatives or friends whom I admire for their truthfulness and integrity, without agreeing with their conception or definition of Islam.

Despite the fact that India is a secular state the country has to face serious problems in controlling communal passions and maintaining inter-group harmony. At bottom, these problems arise due to political or economic factors, but interested parties give a religious or communal color to them as a matter of strategy. A secular state, therefore, would always be better placed than a Hindu state to provide an even ground to different players belonging to diverse religions, castes and regions. The same remarks apply to Islamic states having mixed populations.

Secularism, as a political concept, flows from a liberal humanist philosophy. This means giving primacy to man's sense of wonder and mystery when he confronts the universe. Every religion attempts to unravel the mystery of birth and death, good and evil, joy and sorrow, final release from pain and suffering. Answers to such questions can never be proved and different people at different times are bound to give different answers to such existential questions. Such matters should, therefore, not be dealt with by the state and should be left as matters of individual preference or conscience. Secularism holds that the state should not advocate or oppose any attempt at resolving the existential mystery of the universe. The state should concern itself only with matters of law and order, security, political, economic, educational and administrative arrangements, framing and administering of civil and criminal laws and so on. When secularism is combined with liberal Humanism this adds up to democracy. This implies that the state should perform all the above functions with the consent of all its citizens according to previously agreed procedures so that law becomes the ruler, rather than any person or persons. It is, however, inevitable that law will be interpreted and enforced by the persons concerned.

A serious complication, however, arises in the above definition of secularism if and when any organized religion claims that it is more than an existential perspective on the inscrutable mystery of the universe, and that it is a complete 'blue print of the good life as a whole', and further that it is the religious duty of the believer to live strictly in accordance with the prescribed code as such. Some believers might be convinced that it is also part of their religious duty to convince all others to do the same. Now if the state has a mixed population this approach creates tension and conflict. Even if the citizens belong to one religion only they may well be members of different sects or have diverse views on creedal or social matters. This was the actual situation in medieval Christianity and Islam, and the idea prevailed that the church and state ought to be one.

As we all know, after centuries of doctrinal and also armed conflict the Christians in Western Europe outgrew doctrines that directly or indirectly produce conflict between the church and the state. The Treaty of Westphalia in Germany, signed in 1648, was, in essence, the recognition of the principles that (a) the church and the state, each have their respective proper jurisdiction and neither should encroach upon the other, (b) the state should be neutral and impartial to all its citizens irrespective of the church to which they belong. The Treaty of Westphalia, thus initiated the era in which the English philosopher, John Locke, wrote his famous letters on tolerance and the Glorious Revolution took place in Britain in 1688. This was the beginning of the story of religious tolerance in Western Europe, but the story took two centuries to reach a happy ending when Disraeli, Jewish by blood, became Prime Minister of Great Britain.

There are several notable examples of enlightened good Muslims who have authentically accepted the principle of the separation of church and state. However, the great Muslim community the

world over has yet to accept this, not merely as a policy for Muslims living in mixed societies, but as an authentic understanding or reinterpretation of Islam in the modern scientific and global age. The Muslim community, as a whole, accepts the idea of the unity of the church and state, and of the shariah as a complete guide to the whole of life. They are not prepared to give up this ideal, but they just cannot resist the pulls and pressures of the modern age. Such Muslims reluctantly, acquiesce to adjustments essential to keep life going. However, there are others who just cannot bring themselves to water down what they term 'true Islam' for the sake of convenience or worldly gains. This approach or position is termed 'Islamic fundamentalism' in modern parlance. I submit the great Muslim community must engage itself in an honest dialogue to resolve this issue and other connected matters. Other great world religions such as Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism have already accepted the principle of the separation of church and state.

'Islamic fundamentalism', it should be noted, does not entail the use of terrorist methods against others. Terrorism is a different phenomenon. It is born out of a sense of helpless rage against perceived oppression by super powers who practice double standards and impose their arbitrary decisions on small and weak groups or nations. Suicide missions appear as the only means of expressing their existential anger and frustration against an incurably callous tyranny of the strong over the weak. The perceived oppressors, however, cannot but hit back and contain the attacks on, obviously, innocent people. This is the tragic logic of history. The vicious circle will have to be broken. The United Nations Organization is a great step in this noble direction. But super-powers are ever tempted to turn it into a tool for promoting their own interests. This, again, is quite natural and understandable. It is, therefore, imperative not to lose faith but to persist in doing what is right and avoid what is wrong. And terrorist attacks, suicidal or strategic, against the innocent are definitely wrong. Islam itself strongly prohibits this method of rectifying injustice.

With best wishes,
Yours sincerely,
Jamal Khwaja