CHAPTER VI.

THE ROLE OF RELIGIONS IN SECULAR INDIA

To the anthropologist, religion is a phase of human culture, obedient to the same laws which govern human progress in society. He sees a movement from law and crude primitivism to higher and more refined. We may review each of the great religions as historical movement and discuss what evidence each may offer. The more highly developed religion should not forget some strong feature of the primitive faiths. The higher religions, while they cannot approve the crude primitivism should not fail to appreciate them. It is not enough to see the primitive faiths in their simplicity. We should also regard them with sympathy.¹

Some of the differences are so wide that they will persist for long time to come. The simplicity of Muslim theology will hardly blend with the subtleties of Hindu thought. Its comparatively rigid attitude will not be harmonised with Buddhist calm. Christian dogmatism will doubtless continue to confront dogmatisms elsewhere.

¹ George Perrigo Conger: Towards the unification of the faiths Calcutta, 1967, p. 117.
Racial connections—whatever one means by race—will continue to encourage isolation, sectarianism and it will continue to regard brethren as strangers. We must draw our only consolation from the fact that integration always involves some differentiation. In the new integration each religion may retain some of the features precious to its adherents. The thought of some new synthetic religion which will ultimately replace all the traditional faiths is equally, if not more, fantastic. Comparative religion postulates that all our faiths have some values. There are changes in religious forms, but religion itself is found to be a universal phenomenon. It is native to the human mind. Everything may dissolve but belief in God remains in all of the faiths of the world. It may take many forms and it will continue as long as man remains what he is, a blend of power and weakness. The universal longing of human souls which has been used as a proof of the existence of God, receives impressive ratification by the results of comparative religion.

2. Ibid., p. 119.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 18.
Religions have had a history and none is final or perfect. It is a movement, a growth. Every religion has in it survivals from the old. There is no expression of religion which is absolute and exhaustive. If one treats religious forms as final then he has to accept slavery, subservience of women to men, and many more evil things. The character of gods has not been by any means ideal. We cannot shut our eyes to the vitality of the contrasted cultures and religions. Professor J. B. Pratt, the pioneer of these studies used to say that it is the function of each of the great religions to bring out the best that there is in others.

The most irreligious conduct of religion is intolerance and some are more guilty than others. India, with a variety of religions has a better record. Their tolerance is associated with the fine insight that a man's religious belief is a function of his mental and spiritual development. The spirit of toleration began early in India and was never extinguished.

Ahimsa, or harmlessness towards all creature is the fundamental law in Jainism, Buddhism and certain sects of Hinduism. These Eastern faiths have expanded the area of moral

6. Towards the unification of the Faiths, p. 121.
One of the peculiar characteristics of Oriental civilisation is that abrupt changes have been rarely welcomed. Particularly, in India, the assimilation of new forces has always taken place without any violent break with the past.

The history of Indian Thought seems to be a series of stupendous intellectual adjustments. "It is indeed difficult to say," writes Humayun Kabir in his 'Indian Heritage', how much of the present world outlook of the Hindu is derived from the Vedas and Upanisads and how much from the teachings of Islam. 7

It was this composite culture, the theistic-humanistic religious outlook that evolved through the fusion of Hinduism and Islam and modern Indian thought developed on the basis of this heritage. In social thought Islam was able to offer India a tradition of equality, in religion, freedom from priest craft in philosophy, a reverence for the concrete and the particular. 8

The outcome was a wonderful synthesis of culture and thought — a synthesis which is unparalleled for its richness and appeal. In custom and ritual language and idioms and even

in popular religion, the fusion was already well advanced. The Western thought was at that time more dynamic and had more to offer than traditional Indian thought. Indian thought came under the spell of Christianity because it discovered the teachings of Jesus were in harmony with the important aspects of the oriental tradition. With the notable exception of Gandhiji all the leading thinkers of modern India have shown great fascination for science on its theoretical as well as technical side. The Indian thinkers of the 19th century were prepared to embrace many new values but their world outlook was still determined by religion. 9

India has set before herself the ideal of a democratic republic and has been endeavouring to move towards this goal. Indians, who contributed much in making modern India and developed secularism in this country are mainly Mahatma Gandhi, Radhakrishnan and Jawaharlal Nehru. The ethical ideals of these thinkers will give us the cream of contemporary Indian philosophy. 10 Gandhi has been the greatest religious personality in the social context in modern India. His crusade against untouchability his calling the outcastes Harijan, his discouraging conversion, his prayer Iwar Allah Terraham

9. In some of his recent address Radhakrishnan has emphasised this point from many different angles.
all go to show the great secular humanistic and yet deeply religious attitude towards life of society.

Mahatma Gandhi was the first Indian after Asoka the great to apply non-violence to politics. He spiritualized India's struggle for independence. Truth and non-violence form the crux of his philosophy. Gandhi's philosophy may be called pragmatic spiritualism because his philosophy was not a mere intellectual pursuit or an abstract theory but an applied idea which inspired millions of Indians.11

As a specialist in Ahimsa and Truth, Gandhi has made the world his debtor by his actual demonstration of the moral equivalent of war. Specifically, so far as India was concerned, he made a fear-ridden people fearless. The prison houses and the gallows which used to awe any people were transformed into holy shrines. He endowed non-violence with power. He taught the virtue of self-discipline and self-purification to the individual and disciplined organized action to the masses for overcoming social, economic and political ills.12 Mahatma Gandhi was a unique example for the world to learn the lesson of love, and brotherhood, Albert Einstein, the well known scientist philosopher called Mahatma Gandhi, 'a leader of his

11. Ibid., p. 322.
people, unsupported by outward authority ....... a victorian fighter who has always scorned the use of force, a man of wisdom and humility armed with resolve and inflexible constancy who has devoted all his strength to the uplifting of his people and the betterment of their lot; a man who has confronted the brutality of Europe with the dignity of the simple human beings and thus at all times risen superior ......... Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth! He has firm faith in the power of love. His conviction was that even the meanest of the human species is capable of cultivating virtues because man is essentially spiritual and divine. He was sure that love alone could be victorious over hatred.......

'... mankind has got to get out of violence only through non-violence. Hatred can be overcome only by love'. The path of non-violence advocated by Gandhi rises above all barriers of caste, creed, religion and nationality and yet raises the dignity of man in all spheres of life.

Nehru is the successor of Mahatma Gandhi. Nehru's passion for truth and non-violence and his unique manner of tackling international problems by offering solutions with

---

reference to his ideology of Pancasila are indicative towards a spiritual philosophy based on love and non-violence. This practical pragmatic philosophy is necessarily indifferent towards eschatological or other worldly conceptions. Nehru remarked 'essentially we are integrated in this world, in this life, not in some other world or a future life'.

The humanistic philosophy which predominates in the thought of Nehru prompts him to declare that 'God we may deny, but what hope is there for us if we deny man and thus, reduce everything to futility'. Along with a deep discontent with standard forms of religion, there is a growing seriousness about it. The forms are dissolving but the needs persist. The millions who neither dare to have a religion nor do without one are rushing hither and thither seeking for direction. Radhakrishnan felt that majority of people today feel the absence of any purpose in life. They seek an aim or an ideal. Naturalism denies the existence of God, rejects the offering of prayers, disbelieves in soul, reduces man to a thinking machine and asserts that consciousness is just an accidental and temporary phase of nature. He has remarked 'The world is passing through a period of uncertainly,

of world less longing. It wants to get out of its present mood of spiritual chaos, moral aimlessness and intellectual vagrancy. 18

To quote Radhakrishnan again 'In spite of all appearance to the contrary, we discern in the present unrest the gradual dawning of a great light, a converging life endeavour, a growing realisation that there is a secret spirit in which we are all one, and of which humanity is the highest vehicle on earth, and an increasing desire to live out this knowledge and establish a kingdom of spirit on earth'. 19 The antagonism between religion and material progress and between spiritualism and secular well being disappear the moment it is realised that 'The liberated soul is not indifferent to the welfare of the world. It is related of Buddha that when he was on the threshold of Nirvana he turned away and took the vow never to cross it so long as a single being remained subject to sorrow and suffering'. 20 Indian mind finds it easier to understand even politics through the medium of religion. 21

18. S. Radhakrishnan: Contemporary Indian Philosophy, p. 36.
The preamble to the constitution of India identifies the Indian state as a democratic, socialist and secular republic. Secularism is a movement and essence of this movement is that the relationship of the citizens to the state — the citizens' rights and obligations vis-a-vis the state — shall not be allowed to be affected in any substantial manner by the religious faith of any individual or community. Secularism in India does not stand for the abolition of religion but only for the separation of state and religion. It is important to point out that similar separation of politics and religion is not envisaged as the people are free to form political parties.22

The constitution of India reflects the efforts of the Indian National Congress during the national movement to carry on the struggle against colonialism and religious differences. The partition of India was a repudiation of this principle and leaders of the Congress including Jawaharlal Nehru — were a party to this decision. They accepted partition as an inevitable event but reaffirmed their faith in secularism by proclaiming India as a secular state.23 Pakistan was avowedly a religion based state. Adoption of secularism by our constitution makers soon after the triumph of Jinnah's two nation theory shows that for India there is no other alternative to secularism.

22. T. N. Madan : The essay 'The historical significance of Secularism In India'. The book Secularisation in Multi-religious societies edited by C. Dube, T. N. Madan.

23. Ibid.
The tragedy that recently overtook Pakistan confirms the constitution makers' profound faith in secularism. Secularism has an important role to play in the social, political and economic advancement in India. It seeks to destroy from our soil the sectarian conflicts tormenting our society for decades. It rather cements and strengthens national unity.

Religion is certainly container of traditional values and nationalism is the corresponding container of modernisation values. From this point of view secularism permits and to some extent helps India's transition from tradition to modernity.

"The greatest safeguard for the religious minorities in a multi-religious society, besides other things, lies in a secular polity. A theocratic state cannot safeguard the interests of religious minorities so efficiently because of its commitments to one particular religion. On the other hand, the secular state acts as guardian of the religious minorities."

25. Ibid.
Whether India has succeeded in establishing a secular state there can be no denial of fact that religion continues to be a major factor in Indian politics as it is in Indian life. This contradiction between politics and the state is a matter of concern and gets critical attention. It is important to remember that the traditional conception of religion in India equates it with the totality of life. Religion is here constitutive of society. Politics and economics are neither autonomous domains nor are they contradictory of religion. They are simply encompassed by religion. In other words, religion cannot be in any meaningful sense prevailed.

While social life is religious life for everybody, not everybody may subscribe to the same religious faith. The traditional Hindu principle is that an alien religious faith is not to be imposed upon anyone. One is born into a community and its religious faith and therefore, one cannot acquire a new social identity or religion. It has been found that cultural pluralism within the state was an accepted fact and the Hindu king was everybody's protection within the Kingdom. In such a situation secularism (as we understand this from today

had no relevance. Democracy would be hollow if it fails to generate this spirit of brotherhood among all sections of people. They are the children of the same soil, the same motherland.

Art. I of the constitution of Human rights (1948) adopted by the United Nation says:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. "They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood".

It is this spirit of brotherhood that the preamble of our constitution reflects. The unity and fraternity of the people of India, professing humans faiths has been achieved by enshrining the ideal of a secular state, which means that state will protect all religions equally and does not itself uphold any religion as the state religion. The secular objective of the state has now been specifically expressed by inserting the word secular*. In the preamble by the constitution (42nd Amendment) Act 1976'. In the constitution, there is no provision making any religion the 'established church' as some other constitutions do. The liberty of 'belief, faith and worship' promised in the preamble is implemented by in-

incorporating the fundamental rights of all citizens relating to 'freedom of religion' in Art. 525-29 which guarantees to each individual freedom to profess, practice and propagate his own religion without interference. It assures at the same time strict impartiality on the part of the state and its institutions towards all religions.

This is one of the glowing achievements of Indian democracy when our neighbours such as Pakistan and Burma uphold particular religions as state religions. The Hindus form the vast majority of the population in India, but Hinduism is not given any special place in the society. All religions are given equal recognition and protection. There is no state religion in India. When there was discussion in the constituent Assembly, there was a school of opinion in favour of India being a Hindu state just as Pakistan had declared itself to be an Islam state. Loknath Misra asserted in the Assembly "If you accept religion, you must accept Hinduism as it is practised by an overwhelming majority of the people of India". The makers of the constitution reflected this idea. It provides to all persons equally freedom of conscience and the right to profess, practice and propagate religion without any discrimination.

The most of the constitutions of the world that provide freedom of religion do not explicitly guarantee right to propagate religion as a justifiable fundamental right. The federal constitution of the Swiss confederation simply declares under Art. 49, "Freedom of creed and conscience is inviolable". The constitution of U.S.S.R. under Art. 124 provides: "In order to ensure to citizens freedom of conscience, the church in the U.S.S.R. is separated from the state, and the school from the church. Freedom of religion, worship and freedom of anti-religious propaganda is recognised for all citizens".

The constitution of the People's Republic of China says in Art. 88, "Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief". The constitution of Japan under Art. 20 reads: "Freedom of religions is guaranteed to all".

We do not find anywhere any mention of the word propaganda as a fundamental right, relating to religion. Therefore, the individual right of freedom of religion as amplified in Indian constitution is of far greater importance. Particularly, for the minorities it helps in their smooth development. 32

---

It is further in consonance with the provision of United Nations Declaration of Human Rights which say: Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.\(^3\)

It is a matter of controversy whether the right to freedom of religion as provided under Acts 25 and 26 is absolute or subject to certain limitations. Freedom of religion is not absolute and unlimited. Human sacrifice is permissible by certain religions, but it is crime under the law. Judiciary in India has also on various occasions upheld the view that freedom of religion is not an absolute one.

Laknath Misra remarked, "If religion is beyond the ken of our state, let us clearly say so and debate all reference to rights relating to religion".\(^3\) He further says: "This unjust generosity of tabooing religion and yet making propagation of religion a fundamental right is somewhat unseemly and dangerous."\(^3\)

'This limitation of the freedom of conscience of the individual is due to either bad drafting of the article or indiscreet borrowing rather than any conscious desire on the part of the fathers of the constitution to do so. From the debates of the constituent Assembly it becomes very clear that members were much concerned with guaranteeing to the

\(^{3}\) Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Art. 18.

\(^{3}\) CAD, VII, p. 823.

\(^{3}\) Ibid.
individual absolute freedom as regards the choice of his religion. But the provision as it stands, does vest authority in the state which empowers it to invade the realm of conscience of the individual on the grounds mentioned above.36

The spirit of toleration is the foundation of secularism. If Hindu tolerance is not a myth and commands faithful observance among the Hindus even now, still it cannot be regarded as the end of all of secularism. Indian secularism must comprehend much more than tolerance and separation of church and state.

India faces many complex problems, communalism, castism, linguism, regionalism and now sub-regionalism threaten to balkanize India. These are the parochial forces which pose the most serious threat to secularism. The partition of India had a harmful effect on community relations in the country. The Hindus blamed the Muslims for partition and suspected them of being Pakistanis at heart. The persecution of the Hindus in Pakistan, their virtual

36. V.R. Buthera: The concept of the secular state and India, p. 113.
from the west Pakistan, the happening in Hyderabad, the Pakistan invasion of Kashmir intensified the bitterness of the Hindus and aggravated the insecurity of the Muslims. In this state of affairs a climate of violence and vandalism was created and political parties confined to religious groups were formed. The political parties were too many and they divided against themselves.

Nehru admits in his autobiography, "Many a Congress-man was a Communalist under his nationalist cloak".33 Years later he declares: "We say we are against community nation, Casteism, provincialism and all that. And yet you know well enough how poisoned we are to the core... which of us, I or you, is completely free of this".39 Myrdal says that despite "its broad minded leaders and secularist resolutions, the congress was basically Hindu in outlook".40 The other parties also profess but they also do not practise wholeheartedly secularism. Some organisations openly denounce secularism. The Hindu Mahasabha proclaimed: "Communalism is bliss".41 Now the RSS and the Janata Sangha are the standard bearers of Militant Hindu Communalism. Likewise, the Muslim

---

41. Hindu Outlook 3 (August 30, 1963) Indira Prakash, The Hindu Cuftum Brote that the Maharashtra proudly believed that communalism is bliss.
League, Majlise-Mushawarat and Jamiyat-e-Islami and the Akali Dal represent Muslim and Sikh communalism respectively, between the Hindu and Muslim communalists there is a community of interest. They want that communalism should flourish in India and secularism should perish in India. The irony is heard here that if communalism flourishes the Muslims and other minorities will suffer. Therefore, for the religious minorities in India 'there is no other alternative to secularism. It is said that to fight Hindu communalism and militancy their best weapon would be secularism. They must therefore abandon communalism, and strive to make secularism in India.42

In India, it requires replacement of religious loyalties by national loyalties: "The fundamental values are contained in religion in the wider sense of people's experience of sanction given to existing modes of living and working attitudes and institution".43

Some of the modernisation ideals directly need nationalist emotions in order to take root, people must have a conception of the nation as a whole. A change in our conception of religion is essential. Religion, to quote Myrdal again "Acts as a tremendous force fall social inertia".44 Traditional beliefs, particularly those based on superstitions,

42. Secularism, Society and Law in India, p. 58.
44. Ibid., p. 103.
with their related valuations, are normally irrational, for they imply a mystical rather than a rational way of thinking which is inimical to the spread of modernization ideals and to their realization by planning for development.45

It is not suggested here — the constitution, too does not envisage that religion should be vanish from the lives. It needs religions which can enrich and ennoble our lives. It deals not with dogmas and rituals but with higher values of life, which do not conflict with the realization of the goal of modernization. We urge Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists to respect each other’s beliefs without waiting for the theologians.

The changes which have taken place in India since 1977 is the growth of an industrial economy, the commercialization of the rural economy. The way is thus clear for the emergence of a truly secular society in India, a society which combines religious freedom with social equity and economic democracy; a society moreover in which the creativity of the individuals can express itself in a climate free of irrationality and communal strife. The greatest safeguard for the religious

45. Ibid., p. 105-6.
minorities in a multi-religious society, besides other things, lies in a secular polity. The secular state acts as a guardian of the religious minorities. Dangers to secularism may come not only from a dominant majority but also from a militant and fanatic minority. The ultimate court of appeal is human reasonableness. Religious tolerance is embedded in the Indian tradition and is encouraged by the modern scientific outlook. The Hindu concepts of sadvāsanās and samanvaya, the Buddhist theory of Panchsheela and Ahimsā and the Jaina theory of Anekāntavāda—all are conducive to a secular atmosphere of mutual trust and respect. While Christianity and Islam accept proselytizing as a part of religion, the Indian tradition upholds a dharmic view which is much wider a concept than religion as we understand it in the West. Everyone has the right to his way of life and this way of life is Dharma. He has to be encouraged to live in a way that is conducive to the realization of man's ultimate goal. It is true that the Sanātana dharma has lost much of its dynamic character on account of the challenges put by militant religions like Islam and Christianity. But the liberal western education has brought about a secular scientific outlook among the Indian people and fostered greater understand-

46. Minority safeguards in India, p. 82.
ing among them. The solid foundation of the democratic set-
up of the multi-religious Indian society is enlightened
tolerance. The search for man as a creative being in an
open society is the distinctive mark of contemporary Indian
thinking. This has strengthened the secular attitude in our
country.