

Studying Indian Secularism to Understand the US

By Daniel Jasper

Many, if not most, of the readers of this journal believe that the study of Asia helps US students develop their critical thinking and analytical skills. Far too often, however, the study of Asia is relegated to courses that focus solely on Asian studies. This approach emphasizes the need to understand the specific historical, cultural, social, and political contexts that shape different Asian developments. In this essay, I present a model for a comparative approach that introduces selective comparisons between Asia and the US in introductory- and intermediate-level disciplinary-specific courses. Specifically, I explore how the comparative focus on the regulation of religion in India and the United States helps students better analyze the place of religion in modern societies, while also encouraging students to better understand their own taken-for-granted assumptions about religion. This comparative approach has the effect of introducing a larger population of students to the study of Asia.

In my Introductory Sociology and Sociology of Religion courses, I have found that introducing comparative examples from India pays dividends for student learning. When I introduce topics from India, the students' initial response is to expect a sharp contrast with the United States. The majority of US students have been acculturated to think of India as "different" from their own society. Yet the parallels between India and the United States are striking and set the stage for enlightening comparisons. India and the US are both pluralistic societies characterized by religious diversity. India and the United States are both liberal democracies with secularism as a foundational principle of public life. As students learn about these similarities, they expect to see common or at least similar models of social development. Yet the ways in which secularism is understood, enacted, and organizing of social experience are profoundly different in India and the US. Exploring these differences helps students develop a perspective on society that emphasizes the need to question and analyze rather than to take for granted.

Secularism is itself a difficult concept to teach because of its multiple meanings and uses. Within sociology, secularization has been understood as shorthand for the decline of religion. In everyday political usage, the term serves more as a sorting device, with particular actions classified as either religious or secular. In practice, this sorting takes place in different realms, such as through the judicial system or in the sphere of public opinion. Actions might be sorted differently in these different realms, and the classification may be contradictory. Exploring these different ways in which secularization is understood, however, helps illustrate to students that secularism is a political process focused on regulating relationships between religious people and groups, and the larger society in which these exist.

Secularism has been an organizing concept within sociology since the earliest days of the discipline. Emile Durkheim, a founding figure of sociology, emphasized the structural differentiation of society, with the diminished functional role for religion.¹ Max Weber, another pioneering sociologist, highlighted the process of rationalization with the corollary of disenchantment.² From these founding influences, secularism was attached to modernization theories that predicted that religion would wither as societies modernized. This approach was dominant in sociological inquiry for most of the twentieth century.

The secularization thesis has been challenged and critiqued from different perspectives and disciplines in recent years. Scholars such as anthropologist Talal Asad³ and Gil Andijar,⁴ a scholar of comparative literature and religion, have emphasized that secularism is deeply bound up with Christian understandings of religion. Anthropologist Saba Mahmood focuses on how secularism does more than just describe a set of relations. Mahmood presents secularism "not simply as the doctrinal separation of the church and the state but the rearticulation of religion in a manner that is commensurate with modern sensibilities and modes of governance."⁵

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These critiques all emphasize that secularism is not singular, but is instead shaped by the distinct contexts and history of where the principle is applied.

Within sociology, rational choice theories, emphasizing individual actions, have noted the continuing strength of religious belief and belonging in the modern world.⁶ Identifying three distinct meanings embedded in the secularization thesis, sociologist Jose Casanova argues that secularization remains a useful concept for comparative social analysis even if aspects of the secularization thesis have proven faulty.⁷ For the purpose of this essay, I use the concept of secularization as a shorthand to refer to the interplay among the state, society, and religion. With a focus on how religion is regulated, secularization is an inherently political process.

When first exposed to the concept of secularism, US students tend to be confident that they understand the term. Students can quickly cite the First Amendment to the US Constitution, with its guarantee of the free exercise of religion. Many students are able to cite Thomas Jefferson and his idea of a wall of separation between religion and the state. In short, many US students have a taken-for-granted or commonsense understanding of secularism as a natural feature of the modern world, where religion and politics occupy and operate in completely separate spheres of social life, and individuals have freedom of religion while a wall of separation prevents the state from imposing a religious worldview on any individual citizen. Of course, the reality of US secularism is much more complicated than this understanding. Secularism is about the management of state and religion, and the ongoing conflict between these realms to claim authority over the other.⁸ In these conflicts, religion invokes moral authority while the state claims temporal authority.

To teach students to think sociologically about secularism is thus to encourage them to see the history of how religion and politics have interacted. Students come to identify the ways in which religion is regulated by state authorities, how religion sometimes resists this regulation, and how social forces and dynamics shape these processes. When students encounter the Indian model of secularism, they are more willing to suspend their taken-for-granted understanding of secularism that is rooted in the experiences of the United States.

The Indian model of secularism challenges three assumptions embedded in the taken-for-granted understanding of secularism held by many US students. First, the Indian model forces students to take seriously the rights of religious groups, not just individuals. Second, the Indian model challenges the assumption that state and judicial authorities are neutral arbiters enforcing separation. Instead, the Indian case shows that arbitrating at times means intervention, showing that regulation of religion is an active political process. Third, the Indian case shows students that secularism is not a cold, detached, bureaucratic process with a fixed outcome. It is, instead, a dynamic and interactive negotiation where the outcome is determined by the context of the conflict.

Group Rights and Individual Rights

In recent years, political theorist Rajeev Bhargava has been one of the most prolific writers about the Indian model of secularism.⁹ In presenting the Indian case, Bhargava emphasizes that India recognizes individual rights, but places equal emphasis on group rights. In presenting the multiple values balanced in the Indian model, Bhargava states that these rights are “not conceived narrowly as pertaining to individuals but interpreted broadly to cover the relative autonomy of religious communities ... as well as other more basic values such as peace and toleration between communities.”¹⁰ This emphasis on communities, and especially the rights of communities, directly challenges the individualistic approach assumed in the commonsense understanding of US secularism.

US students take for granted that the First Amendment to the US Constitution grants individuals the freedom of religion. This approach is intuitively and logically consistent with the ideology of individualism

that undergirds much of US culture. Yet this approach is also predicated upon an understanding of religion that locates religion within the heart and mind of a person who can freely select which religion to follow, or whether to follow a religion at all. In this individualized approach, religion is an achieved social status. The Indian model, while accepting that individuals may selectively choose to change their religion, also recognizes the ascribed nature of social status and its connection to social groups. These groups have a right to advance their shared interests, just as individuals have a right to pursue their interests.

When they begin to see that not all rights are associated with individuals, US students begin to better understand that the individualism so prevalent in the United States is not necessarily the natural order of things. This awareness opens up space for discussions about the history of culture and religion in the US. These discussions allow a comparative perspective to be brought into the classroom, decentering the US experience as normative. These discussions also provide space for students to struggle with their own assumptions about whether religion should be a purely private matter. For many, this becomes clear when they reflect on how their own parents might react if told their college-aged child decided to convert to a different faith.

Principled Distance

When the rights of groups are put on an equal footing with the rights of individuals, the state needs to take a different approach to adjudicated disagreements. It is for this reason that in the Indian model of secularism, the state takes the position that Bhargava calls “principled distance.” With principled distance, the state does not stand at a remove from religion so that it can serve as a neutral arbiter. Instead, the state plays a proactive role and deliberately intervenes when necessary to advance specific principles. Bhargava describes this approach as “a flexible but value-based relation that accommodates intervention as well as abstention.”¹¹ The modern democratic state regulates religion in order to diminish domination.

Domination is a deliberately broad descriptor and can refer to relationships within a religious group or among different religious groups. On the one hand, the state regulates the social field where different religions interact. For example, the state might intervene to prevent a majority religion from imposing its will on a minority religion. In this way, the state intervenes to protect minority rights as it would in any democratic polity. On the other hand, the state addresses conflicts within religious communities since the state has an interest in reducing domination in all areas of social life. As is the case with all social institutions, social inequality is present in religion. In India, for example, caste and gender dynamics mean that different individuals have different access to religious sites and rituals.

This approach allows US students to begin to understand the regulation of religion in secular democracies in new ways. The taken-for-granted understanding of secularism leads to binary thinking, where things can be either religious or secular. When the state intervenes to limit religion, it is seen as, in effect, banishing religion from certain aspects of public life or individual action. As Bhargava states, principled distance, on the other hand, “allows the state to intervene in religions, to help or hinder them without the impulse to control or destroy them.”¹² In terms of intrareligious domination, US students quickly begin to pose questions about whether the state should intervene to limit gender-based inequalities and discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals. From this questioning, I have found that students begin to make comparisons between different spheres of social life, asking, for example, whether places of employment and places of worship should be treated similarly by the state.

Contextual Secularism

Through encountering and thinking deeply about Indian secularism, students begin to discard their taken-for-granted understanding of secularism and replace this with a more nuanced, historical understanding of secularism as a way of organizing and regulating relationships. With this

new understanding, students begin to question their own initial responses to specific issues where state and religion come into contact. Students thus realize that the circumstances of each situation matter to how they are resolved. Students, in effect, develop an implicit understanding of another feature of Indian secularism, what Bhargava calls “contextual secularism.” This approach emphasizes that context matters, including the time and place of specific conflicts. Conflicts may need to be resolved differently depending on when and where they occur, as well as depending on who are the involved parties.

Contextual secularism recognizes that secularism is not a stable model that can be universally applied. Instead, secularism is full of contradictions and inconsistencies that result from the need and desire to balance competing rights. This is a model that encourages mutual understanding, compromise, and recognition of a shared destiny. Bhargava recognizes that “the eventual outcome may not be wholly satisfactory to either but still be reasonably satisfactory to both.”¹³ In short, contextual secularism privileges the ethical principle of respect for alternative worldviews and ways of living as the foundation of a pluralistic democracy.

For US students, an understanding of contextual secularism provides them with an analytic tool to better make sense of social dynamics well beyond the sphere of religion. Contextual secularism helps them think about and analyze social conflict and social inequality more broadly. In the context of the United States, for example, students are able to apply the principles of contextual secularism to analyze how differently located social groups might respond differently to celebratory statues of historical figures. In doing this, they debate the ethical principles of reconciliation alongside the desire for collectives to celebrate their past. I have found that this helps students develop a deeper understanding of foundational sociological concepts such as social solidarity. Students recognize how social rituals both include and exclude simultaneously.

As is the case with many comparisons in the social sciences, comparing the Indian and US models of secularism oversimplifies the Indian

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case. Scholars have characterized the Indian case in a variety of ways. As a political concept, secularism has been presented, most commonly, as the opposite of communalism, which emphasizes the differences among communities. This framework emphasizes that secularism is a political strategy focused on balancing the interests of different communities.¹⁴ For this reason, sociologist Badrinath Rao defines Indian secularism as “multiculturalism.”¹⁵ Others see this as a form of majoritarianism, linking secularism to the ideology of nationalism and the legitimacy of the democratic state.¹⁶ Khalidi, a scholar of Islamic history and culture, takes a different approach, arguing that the Indian state, by engaging with religion, in effect, is Hinduizing Indian society.¹⁷

Discussions of secularism in India are further complicated by the historical variety of models of secularism. One significant distinction is between the secularisms advocated by Mahatma Gandhi and India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Gandhi rejected a distinction between the secular and the sacred, advocating instead that values are rooted in a moral worldview. Secularism, thus, needs to be rooted in the cultural fabric of India. Nehru, influenced by European enlightenment thinking, saw secularism as a form of rationalism that would help society modernize. Prominent Indian sociologist T. N. Madan sees this tension between the Gandhian and Nehruvian models as feeding the ambiguity around the term “secularism” in India, allowing the term to mean different things to different people.¹⁸

Some analysts have focused their attention on secularism as a cultural project. In these works, the emphasis is on how cultural productions carry the Nehruvian ideals of secular modernity to the populace.¹⁹ Literature, art, and theater are all seen as vehicles to transmit modern ideas about the world, and where religion fits into this world. In the Indian context, film has been a particularly vibrant field for study.

Conclusion

Students in the US have a taken-for-granted understanding of secularism that privileges individual belief and creates a sharp distinction between religion and the state. This sometimes leads them to think that secularism is hostile toward religion, designed to displace religion from people's lives. Studying the Indian model of secularism helps students view secularism instead as “a critical ethical and moral perspective not against religion but against religious homogenization and institutionalized (inter- and intra-religious domination).”²⁰

A serious engagement with alternate models of secularism helps students develop an understanding of secularism that allows them to see that secularism takes different forms in different social settings. This is the first step toward understanding that the framework of secularism is shaped by the particular cultural and political history of the spaces where the concept is used. Students who initially resist critiques of US secularism as tied to a Christian understanding of religion begin to see that alternative models of secularism are possible.

Engaging with the Indian model of secularism allows students to conceptualize secularism as a neutral system for regulating relationships and boundaries between different groups. For this regulation to be legitimate, it must be guided by ethical principles, the same principles that undergird democratic legitimacy. When applied to concrete cases, these abstract principles must take account of the specifics of each individual situation. The local cultural context, relations of power, and history of social interactions must all be taken into consideration when determining the best path forward.

By studying Indian secularism, US students have a much deeper understanding of US secularism. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, they come to realize that they can better analyze the context of their own lives when they take seriously the alternate ways that different societies organize themselves. This deeper understanding of secularism is not confined to understanding and analyzing the relationship between

religion and the state. Instead, thinking comparatively about secularism helps students develop their skills to analyze social structure as a whole. Further, students learn that there are multiple ways to organize and regulate social relations. There is not one normative model that can be applied to all situations. Rather, models must be adaptable in order to respond to the multiple histories and dynamics that shape social life. ■

NOTES

1. This is most clearly seen in, Émile Durkheim and Lewis A. Coser, *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York: Free Press, 1984) and Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1965).
2. See especially Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner, 1976), and the essays in Hans Gerth, Charles Wright Mills, and Max Weber, eds. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).
3. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity, Cultural Memory in the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).
4. Gil Anidjar, “Secularism,” *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 1 (2006): 52–77, <https://tinyurl.com/y93h7xso>.
5. Saba Mahmood, “Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Dilemma?” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 4 (2009): 836–862, <https://tinyurl.com/ya6uczvd>.
6. See for example, Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival and Cult Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).
7. José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 6.
8. Alfred C. Stepan, “Religion, Democracy, and the ‘Twin Tolerations,’” *Journal of Democracy* 11, no. 4 (2000): 37–57, <https://tinyurl.com/y8sqtjlj> refers to this institutional arrangement as the “twin tolerations” to identify the “necessary boundaries of freedom for elected governments from religious groups, and for religious individuals and groups from government” (39).
9. Rajeev Bhargava, ed. *Secularism and Its Critics* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998). For a concise view of Bhargava's position, see his article “States, Religious Diversity, and the Crisis of Secularism,” *The Hedgehog Review* 12 (2010): 3.
10. Bhargava, “States, Religious Diversity, and the Crisis of Secularism,” 14.
11. Bhargava, *Secularism and Its Critics*, 7.
12. Bhargava, “States, Religious Diversity, and the Crisis of Secularism,” 15.
13. *Ibid.*, 19.
14. For one example of this approach, see Sikata Banerjee, “Political Secularization and the Future of Secular Democracy in India: The Case of Maharashtra,” *Asian Survey* 38, no. 10 (1998): 907–927, <https://tinyurl.com/yb5sejud>.
15. Badrinath Rao, “The Variant Meanings of Secularism in India: Notes Toward Conceptual Clarifications,” *Journal of Church and State* 48, no. 1 (2006): 47–81, <https://tinyurl.com/yc6ld97k>.
16. See, for example, Prakash Chandra Upadhyaya, “The Politics of Indian Secularism,” *Modern Asian Studies* 26, no. 4 (1992): 815–853.
17. Omar Khalidi, “Hinduizing India: Secularism in Practice,” *Third World Quarterly* 29, no. 8 (2008): 1545–1562.
18. T. N. Madan, *Modern Myths, Locked Minds: Secularism and Fundamentalism in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 2, impression.
19. For example, see Rustom Bharucha, *In the Name of the Secular: Contemporary Cultural Activism in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001) and Priyar Kumar, *Limiting Secularism: The Ethics of Coexistence in Indian Literature and Film* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2008).
20. Bhargava, “States, Religious Diversity, and the Crisis of Secularism,” 8.

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