Secularism in modern democracies: a comparative analysis
By Alhad Sethi (2021445)

In this paper, I shall explore the diverse interpretations of secularism as a political theory, drawing parallels and contrasts between them. However, instead of analyzing secularism from a purely academic sense where hypotheticals abound, I shall use real-life examples and stay firmly grounded in reality. Without the sufficient context of the natural world, our discussions on modern political secularism remain futile.

Secularism, in its political sense, attempts to draw a line between the state and religious institutions. As a philosophy, it attempts to shift the focus from the otherworldly concerns of religion to material life on Earth (*Secularism*, 2022). Secularism is better understood through its goal: to ensure the freedom of social and political order from *institutionalized* religious domination and tyranny. Not all religions are necessarily oppressive or unjust, and thus, we define the scope of secularism by faith, the dominance of which it seeks to prevent. (Bhargava, 2008, 275)

It is apparent secularism requires some degree of separation of the state from religious orders. However, the interpretation of this separation can be varied, of which two are prominent and are contrasted in this paper: the 'narrower' and the 'broader' understanding of secularism. The 'broader' view requires the state to be equidistant and impartial towards all religions and maintain neutrality. The 'narrower,' far stricter view requires the state to be infinitely removed from all faiths and have no relation whatsoever with religion. The broader view doesn't forbid the statement from having any contact with religions; instead, it demands an equitable, symmetrical treatment of all faiths (Sen, 2005, 295). Thankfully, there exist authentic examples of the two interpretations described above; the 'narrower' sense of secularism is often espoused by western countries, including France, the model we choose here. As for the 'broader' sense, India is perhaps the sole notable practitioner.

The French concept of secularism (*Laïcité*) relies on separating life in the private and public spheres. It believes that religion exists solely in an individual's private life and demands

individual equality in the public sphere. In essence, it asks the individual to homogenize themselves with the public and appear as an 'ordinary citizen,' de-emphasizing any religious or ethnic particularities. In 2004, the French government banned wearing visible ecclesiastical vestments and symbols in public schools, leading to controversy, debate, and violence about the place of religion in society. Some argue that this law disproportionately disadvantages certain beliefs where the religious symbols aren't discrete (like burqas in Muslims or turbans in Sikhs).

Indian secularism espouses the broader interpretation of secularism and envisions a state equidistant from all religions, yet one that can interfere in some instances. While the Indian constitution was being created, the pervasive social issue of untouchability was in the backdrop and, thus, had an everlasting impact on the nature of secularism in India. The Indian Constitution allowed extensive state interference in the social matter of untouchability and allowed the entry of 'lower castes' into the Hindu temples. Untouchability continues to affect the thoughts of the Indian state on secularism, as seen in the 2018 Supreme Court verdict on the Sabarimala Temple Entry case. Notably, Justice Chandrachud concluded that this exclusion of women was a form of untouchability disallowed by Article 17 of the Constitution. He concluded that the term *untouchability* was to be inferred in a broader sense and, as such, must be given an expansive domain. (Ramchandran, 2022)

As seen by the stark difference between the two examples above, states have different interpretations of secularism, and these interpretations may sometimes even be in direct contrast with one another.

Lastly, we come to a question of identity, empowerment, and politics: by removing religion from politics, do we take away the identity of certain minorities? Their right to be heard? Modern democracies enshrine the rights of minorities, protecting them from majoritarianism and oppression. Imagine a religious minority, one that's being oppressed in the public sphere. What recourse does a member of this minority have but to enter the political spectrum? Whether through protests or elections, the mechanism through which one demands their rights is inextricably linked with politics. If we disallow any religion in the political spectrum, does that leave these religious minorities to their fate? Further, the very act of representation on a political

stage may empower community members. Is depriving them of this power in the spirit of the equality that secularism desires?

References

Bhargava, R. (2008). Secularism. In R. Bhargava & A. Acharya (Eds.), *Political Theory: An Introduction*. Pearson Education.

Ramchandran, R. (2022, June 24). *Sabarimala Temple Entry*. Supreme Court Observer. Retrieved December 16, 2022, from https://www.scobserver.in/cases/indian-young-lawyers-association-v-state-of-kerala-sabar imala-temple-entry-background/

Secularism. (2022, December 9). Encyclopedia Britannica. Retrieved December 16, 2022, from https://www.britannica.com/topic/secularism

Sen, A. (2005). *The Argumentative Indian : Writings on Indian History, Culture, and Identity*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.