Religion and Secularism: An Exploration into the Secular Dimension of Religion and the Religious Dimension of Secularism

Francis X. D'Sa, SJ

Abstract: The debate on secularism has taken a new turn in our times and the nature of the debate has been such that secular- ism is now inevitably being listed in the category of "isms". This is unfortunate because of the real danger that the legitimate concerns of secularism, as A.B. Shah1, the "ideological" champion of Indian secularism, has formulated them, might be trivialised. It is in the interests of religion to dialogue with the concerns that buttress Shah's understanding of secularism; for behind this enterprise lies the intention to acquaint the two sides with points of contact which could help bridge the gap between them. Secularism is not as anti-religious or a- religious as religionists have been led to believe and religion is not as anti- this world as secularists might be thinking.

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An Exploration into the Secular Dimension of Religion and the Religious Dimension of Secularism

Francis X. D'Sa, SJ
Dept. of Systematic Theology, JDV, Pune - 411014

The debate on secularism has taken a new turn in our times and the nature of the debate has been such that secularism is now inevitably being listed in the category of "isms". This is unfortunate because of the real danger that the legitimate concerns of secularism, as A.B. Shah[1], the "ideological" champion of Indian secularism, has formulated them, might be trivialised. It is in the interests of religion to dialogue with the concerns that buttress Shah's understanding of secularism; for behind this enterprise lies the intention to acquaint the two sides with points of contact which could help bridge the gap between them. Secularism is not as anti-religious or a-religious as religionists have been led to believe and religion is not as anti-this world as secularists might be thinking.

1. Religion and Secularism

Historically religion and secularism have been regarded as opposed patterns of thought and behaviour. In India secularism has made it a point to combat religion, especially organised and institutionalised religion. And in some quarters secularism has come to be regarded as a sort of atheism which has to be resisted tooth and nail. What needs to be questioned today is the pre-understanding of religion and secularism that has been operative in the respective camps of religionists and secularists.

Before proceeding I would like to make clear my own stance with regard to religion and secularism.

- Religion is the perspective from which human beings attempt to understand the waters of the transtemporal.

- Secularism is the perspective from which human beings attempt to understand the land of time.

What transtemporal means needs not detain us since what is asserted here is not its existence or otherwise but merely the fact that religion's primary concern is the transtemporal and secularism's concern is the temporal. What is common to both of them is the world of change, that is, of birth, growth and death.

Furthermore, I shall be working in this discussion on the following thesis: Positively, what religion is referring to in the medium of religious language is basically not different from what secularism is advocating in secularist terminology; negatively, the positions of religionists and secularists overshoot

their mark both in developing their own standpoints as well as in interpreting the standpoint of the other.

1.1. The Concerns of Religion

In number definitions of religion seem to exceed the number of religions that human beings practise. This is not astonishing since the nature of religion is such that like a mountain it discloses different aspects to diverse viewers from different angles. In such a context it seems more appropriate to explore the concerns of religion rather than its definitions.

In spite of all the differences in the articulation of their beliefs religions have among other things a common concern with regard to life and its vicissitudes. Religions teach their followers to bear up with the vicissitudes of life in such a way that they are not crushed by them. This is not to suggest that religious traditions thematically propose this objective. No, very few of them even think of it. The point is that religions do teach their followers how to face life and its difficulties with hope and/or equanimity. All religions aim at making their followers look at reality as it really is.

We could begin by asking about the meaning of "the vicissitudes of life". First of all vicissitudes refer to suffering, old age and death. Whatever one's profession, sex, age, nationality or possessions no one can escape suffering. Over a consistent period of time no one can remain unaffected by one or another kind of suffering or trial. It is part and parcel of the human condition. Religions wish to equip their followers

with attitudes ranging from hope and patience through initiative and commitment to equanimity and detachment to deal with life's situations.

However, these attitudes are clothed in language that varies according to the world-view in which the religions find themselves. In general the vocabulary of a tradition is of a piece with the paradigm of that tradition. For instance, the language of the Buddhist traditions is very different from that of the Christian or the Eastern religions. However, it is the reality of life that looms large behind such differences in language and expression – in all traditions. Indeed it is the reality of life's suffering that all religions try to address themselves to, in order to help make sense of it! Whatever else religions may explicitly or implicitly aim at or propagate, directly or indirectly they are all concerned with ways and means of understanding, and of dealing with suffering and death.

Accordingly, religions try to discover in one way or another meaning in suffering, either as an "effect" of one's deeds (or more precisely, of one's misdeeds) or as the means of purifying oneself (=heart, mind and will), or as the hindrance that has to be overcome on the path of enlightenment, etc. However lofty the articulated goal of a religious tradition may be, one of its primary objectives is to teach the practitioner ways and means of being prepared to face the vicissitudes of life.

1.2. The Concerns of Secularism

The language of secularism is different from the language of religion, so

too are their respective concerns. Because of secularism's basic opposition to "religious dogmatism and the obscurantism associated with it" people mistakenly assume that secularism rejects religion. Moreover there is however, an important positive content to secularism which needs to be explored by religionists. A.B. Shah states:

> Secularism does not reject religion in the sense in which Gandhi understood it. But it is opposed to religious dogmatism and the obscurantism associated with it. Instead it relies on reason and scientific knowledge to promote the material and cultural progress of man. It seeks to foster harmony among human groups despite differences of faith by ensuring that these latter would not vitiate life in fields where all have to work and live together.[2]

Secularism, as Shah understands it, works for universal human values, social justice and promotion of material and cultural progress. It discovers meaning in life in and through the promotion of universal human values.

1.3. Religion's "Transtemporal" and Secularism's "Temporal" Concerns

It is undeniable that religion stresses one set of things and secularism another. Whereas the stress in religion is on sin, attachment, delusion, that in secularism is on social values and social justice. Religion concentrates on the will of God, or *Dharma* or *Yoga* but secularism takes up universal human values. Religion aims at salvation, liberation, *Moksha*, etc.; whereas the goal of secularism is material and cultural

progress.

Though one cannot simply state that sin, attachment and delusion are the exclusive concerns of the realm of the transtemporal, and that social justice has to do with the historical still there is a stress here in both religion and secularism that is peculiar and specific to each. Religion does look at the transtemporal through the temporal and secularism concentrates on the temporal as historical. Religion tends to devalue the temporal and secularism discounts the transtemporal.

2. Religion and Revelation

One of the main questions about religion and revelation seems to me to be this: do religion and revelation purport to "inform" us about the "world" they "reveal"? In other words, are we to understand what religion and revelation say about the transtemporal literally, in a historical sense or is their meaning to be found beyond (that is, transcends) the level of the literal and the historical?

For our discussion this is a pivotal point since on it depends our understanding of religion. The point is not whether religion and revelation *claim* to inform us about the world they are speaking about but whether in fact they *can*. Can religion and revelation mean literally what they say about the transtemporal? Doubtless some religionists will answer this question positively and most secularists will in all probability deny that there is any such reality at all. This, I think, is the centre around which our dialogue and discussion will have to take place.

Even though some religionists, basing themselves firmly on the foundation of their belief-system, assert that it is not they but revelation itself that speaks (for example) of a new heaven and a new earth, of a kingdom of peace and justice where every tear will be wiped away, of a second coming of the Lord in power and glory, etc., etc., the focus of our discussion however has to be not just on what Scriptures say but on what they could possibly refer to. Arguably then with this the problem-area of our discussion shifts over to that of the language of religion, since saying and referring belong to the realm of language. Language is primarily concerned with saying something about something [to someone] and hence with referring. We have, therefore, first to ask ourselves how language functions in the normal life of any person (be the person "religious" or "secular").

3. The Quest of Secularism

A mountain can be viewed from different angles. No one point is more true than the others. Every viewpoint has its positive and its negative aspects. Secularism's quest is for wholeness of the land of the living as seen from the shores of time. Though this is a legitimate quest and a legitimate point of view secularism too has both positive and negative aspects.

Standing on the firm ground of reason secularists seek a reasonable understanding of reality. In our thesis we stated that secularism stands on the shore from which it views the land of time, that is to say, secularists are firmly grounded on the shore of time and history. They are fully committed to the quest of making sense of time and history. Whatever belongs to this realm comes under the scrutinising purview of the secularists. They are adamant in not leaving out anything which manifests itself in time and history. At the same time, they are equally adamant about not admitting any thing which prescinds time and history. Thus "God", "eternity", "heaven" etc. are for them postulates which do not belong to the stuff of time and history.

Thus secularists are suspicious about all those concepts which religion might proclaim as being "beyond" time. What secularists cannot accept is any postulate that has no bearing on time and history. In the secularist world-view meaning derives in and through the world of time. No meaning is possible that is not sprung from the soil of time and history.

Time and history – here is the strength and at the same time the weakness of secularism. Strength because any meaning that is more than subjectivistic in character has first to make sense in the soil of time and history. Cultural and inter-cultural communication are possible only because of time and history. Time and history are not a private world but characteristics of an open world, open to all cultures and creeds. It is in such a world that meaning is born, blossoms and flowers into personal and inter-personal communication and brings forth fruits of communion! But even here we have to ask ourselves whether meaning is available just for the asking, whether meaning like an object is just there, as the secularists seem to take for granted.

Thus both from the side of religion as well as from that of secularism we have to ask questions about meaning and language and how they are related to reality.

4. Language, Truth and Reality

What are the different ways in which human beings express their diverse needs? Are there, for instance, different modes of reference in their language-usage? Are such reference-modes restricted to the idiosyncrasies of the individual or are they anchored in the language community to which the speaker belongs?

4.1. The Functions of Language

Predominant in our linguistic universes is the mode of direct reference. It is predominant because it is basic and is presupposed by all other modes of reference. E.g. this is a table, this is my brother Rama, etc. This mode is direct, unmistakable and unambiguous. The referent is clearly identified through "ostensives" like "this". However what is to be noted here is that in spite of clarity and an absence of ambiguity with regard to the referent, knowledge of the referent though direct is only approximate. Unambiguity is achieved through direct pointing out, not through any definition or conceptual explanation. To put it in Heideggerian language, what is referred to, namely the referent, is known through its presence, its "be-ing there", but not through its "essence". We know that it is there and we know it because of its "appearing" there; whatever we know of its "whatness" (its essence, as it were) we know through its "be-ing there".

Obviously then, even in this mode of direct reference our knowing is about the "be-ing there" of a thing. This is the meaning of the assertion that the reference to something though direct is only approximate. It is approximate since it is neither exhaustive nor precise in details. Consider, for instance, the scientifically accepted truth that the earth is round. It is true that the earth is round. But this mode of expression is true only in a certain context of astronomy where it ignores the contours of the earth simply because in the mathematical model it employs the uneven factors are negligible, that is, not only can they be neglected but from the standpoint in question, they have to be neglected.

If we now come back to our examples, "this is a table", and "this is my brother Rama" we shall readily see that the designation "table" is not the "essence" of that which presents itself to us *as* table and that the description "my brother Rama" only approximately describes the presence before us.

What in fact we are doing in the case of direct reference is this: whatever we are saying we are saying primarily of its "be-ing there". The implication is that what we are positing about the referent refers primarily to its "being there" (that is, the ontological) and only in as much as it is "there" does it refer to "what" is there (that is, the ontic). Expressed in simple words: even in the case of direct reference the reference is primarily to the "presence", and only partially and secondarily to the "what" of that presence.

Our pragmatic concerns might mislead us into thinking that our con-

cerns in life are really with the what of the "be-ing there" than the "be-ing there" itself. That this is not so should become apparent from the following. Our concern, first of all, is with the be-ing of what is there; the "what" in itself is something abstract. When we take "human being", for example, we note that this is something abstract which cannot engage us. It is the human being there in the concrete historical situation that arouses our interest, our passions, our love, our hatred, our wrath, etc.

One might object that the "what" is indeed of importance here, for it is the human being as opposed to some other kind of being that interests us. Besides, if the "what" of the "be-ing there" were not of specific interest then any being would do; in that case, the difference between the human and the other kinds of beings would not greatly matter. But we know that this is not the case. Hence the what of the "be-ing there" cannot be unimportant.

The specific manner, in which human beings are present, is so important that it characterises their very mode of be-ing; it is not their "what" that characterises them but their specific mode of presence. Only human beings know themselves as "be-ing there". This refers not so much to their whatness as to their mode of presence. It is in and from this basic mode of presence that other modes of be-ing are recognised and related to the "be-ing there". In this manner of reflecting on "be-ing there" knowing is not a mere quality of humans. Being human is equivalent to "be-ing there" knowingly. The three (be-ing there, knowing and being

human) are phenomenologically (not metaphysically!) almost synonymous. Again to employ Heideggerian language, "be-ing there" is be-ing there knowingly in the realm of openness, that is, in the disclosure of reality. Humans are beings that are aware of their presence in the disclosure of reality.

On a background like this it should be clear that though the above objection speaks of "whatness" it is in fact referring not so much to an "essence" as to a mode of "be-ing there" in the disclosure of reality and that is why the presence of a human being does make a difference. In the light of one's own "be-ing there" one understands the way other beings, especially other human beings, are there present in the disclosure of reality.

The mode of what we have called direct reference then is neither the only one nor the most important one. There is a much more vital mode of reference which human beings make use of than one is aware of. And that is the mode of personal communication. By personal communication is meant not so much communication as communion between persons. The difference between the two lies in the fact that for the former the referent is in the world of perception and for the latter it is in the world of person. The referent in the world of perception can be located directly or indirectly. Not so with the world of person which is a world of communion where there is no separation between subject and object, spirit and matter, and consciousness and reality. It is a dynamic though differentiated world in which be-ing

manifests beings (that is, entities), Truth grounds truths; and be-ing and Truth constitute reality. Reality is the reality of be-ing and Truth.

In such a world the reference is not to the world of perception but in and through the world of perception to that of person. This is the case when we speak of love and warmth and a sense of belonging; when we refer to loyalty and faithfulness, selflessness and service; above all, to joy, happiness and peace. In these examples no specific object is being referred to and in all such cases no one instance nor all the instances put together can be said to constitute, say, love or peace or selflessness.

We can now return to our discussion of the referent of the direct reference. Our "be-ing there" can never be objectified, however much we might think that this is possible. Furthermore, we do not grasp the essence of things. At the most we grasp partial aspects of their presence in the disclosure of reality. The real referent of the direct reference is the be-ing of the referent through these partial (that is, ontic) aspects. It is a colossal fallacy to believe that the reference is to the partial aspects, and not to the "be-ing there" in which they are manifested. This make-belief which is further reinforced by the successful implementation of our plans and aspirations in the pragmatic realm, misleads us into believing that reality is as we believe it to be and as manifested to us in our pragmatic undertakings.

4.2. Naïve Realism

Here we have arrived at the crux of our problem – a problem inherited equally by all, whether religionists or secularists. Naïve realism is a common inheritance; indeed it is so common that it cuts across all kinds of ideologies and belief-systems. And it is not as if just the *hoi polloi* alone were susceptible to it. The learned too are not immune to it; not even professional philosophers and theologians escape its influence.

Naïve realism is based on two pillars: the objectification of be-ing and the subjectification of Truth. This is also the reason why Naïve realism sticks adamantly to the categories of subject/ subjective and object/objective.

Objectification of Be-ing

Objectification of be-ing consists in reducing the ontological to the ontic. Be-ing is reduced to an entity and is treated as if It were graspable by human beings. Of course, to a certain degree be-ing is graspable, that is why we can speak of It. But by no means can It be grasped as if It were an object. What is grasped are the diverse modes of being. These modes manifest be-ing but they are not identical with be-ing. Hence reality cannot be identified without more ado with the modes of be-ing. When we speak of reality we mean both the ontological and the ontic dimensions. Naïve realists neglect the ontological and reduce reality to the ontic. Reality for them is only that which is graspable and grasped by the human mind. They are not aware that the modes of be-ing are graspable *because be-ing has already grasped us in the first place*. Having been first grasped by be-ing through various modes of be-ing we are able to grasp the graspable aspects of

be-ing which are really not be-ing but *modes* of be-ing. Objectification of be-ing means, therefore, reducing the ontological (that is, be-ing) to the ontic (that is, to an entity).

Subjectification of Truth

Naïve realists turn out to be pragmatists whose only major concern is to show that things work as human beings plan for them in advance. And it is from here that both their idea of reality and their criterion for Truth-validation derives. Not surprisingly then, for them reality is what is graspable and Truth is what is grasped by the human mind. For them what is grasped is Truth because what is grasped corresponds to and is a reflection of reality.

In the naïve realistic world-view Truth is primarily a quality of the mind that grasps reality. In as much as it grasps reality it is true. Thus Truth is dependent on the human subject that grasps the object. Truth is not that which is already there but that which comes into existence only when the grasping mind corresponds to reality. Truth being dependent on the grasping mind is thus seen to be a quality, a characteristic of the knowing subject. In short, Truth for the naïve realists is a subjective experience. They "know" the Truth, they can "tell" the Truth, they "search" for the Truth, and with luck, they may even "find" the Truth. In certain extreme cases "we" may even have the Truth! Unlike in the case of Scripture where it is Truth that makes one free, here in the case of the naïve realists, it is they who make Truth free!

Thus both in the case of the ob-

jectification of be-ing and of the subjectification of Truth one and the same spirit, namely, the spirit of reification is at work. In the first case be-ing is reduced to the graspable and in the second what is grasped is declared to be Truth.

Now both the religionist and the secularist, it seems to me, fall a prey to both these dangers but each to a different degree. The secularist is more inclined to the objectification of be-ing and the religionist to the subjectification of Truth.

Secularists while declaredly searching for all that is there to be known do not appear to be sufficiently open to the dimension of be-ing; for them be-ing is the graspable, the knowable that can be grasped. In their world-view there is no room for that which makes the knowable knowable, like light which itself is unseen but makes the visible visible. There is in their scheme of things no space for the disclosure through which be-ing grasps and takes hold of us, no possibility of wholeness, caught up as they are in a world divided into subject and object but unified only in their act of knowing. Paradoxically enough objectification leads ineluctably to subjectification of Truth.

Truth is not *a* truth but the dis-closure of be-ing in which and through which Truth grasps us and en-*light*-ens so that we understand (that is, as R. Panikkar expresses it, stand under the spell of) the truth of the diverse modes of be-ing. Truth is characterised by an ontological openness in which and through which our search for and dis-

covery of the truth of the modes of be-ing can meaningfully take place. Indeed all meaningful search of whatsoever kind is possible because the disclosure of Truth enables us to enter it; this in turn opens us to the truth of the different modes of be-ing.

The religionists on their part are convinced of their truth, which to defend, preach and propagate, they claim, is their birthright. They are concerned most about the truth/s of their religious tradition. Whether they say it explicitly or not, they tend to put their truth at the centre of the universe of religious truths, so that from this centre they can locate and relate all the other traditions, religious and secular. They are convinced that their religious truth is both the centre and the circumference of all truths whatsoever, that every truth has to be subservient to their religious truth, that no truth can go against their religious truth and that therefore every truth is ultimately to be legitimated by their religious truth. Religious truth is the only real, lasting and independent truth, other truths being derivative and therefore dependent truths.

What then is this religious truth that is so central for religionist? From where does its legitimation and validation derive? How does it become accessible to human beings?

For the religionists, of course, the answers are obvious. For them the central truth is the truth of revelation (however this may be articulated by the respective religious traditions). And revelation does not stand in need of any legitimation or validation. Indeed it is that which makes every kind of legiti-mation and validation possible. It is not a human voice that is speaking here. It is the voice that makes every other voice possible. Every other truth is founded in some way or the other on this central truth. The truth of revelation is unquestionable; a question is possible only on this unquestionable background. And every answer becomes an answer in as much as it "participates" in the unquestionable background.

While one may not dispute most of what religionists assert, the criticism that they will not take kindly to is the following: almost all religionists believe that the revelation-truth of their specific tradition stands in a class of its own when compared with the revelation-truth of other religious traditions. For such a subjectivistic stand that refuses to accept that the revelation-truth of other religious traditions could be in the same category there is no reasonable explanation whatever. The reasons that one tradition may proffer in support of its stand do not convince the other traditions and so each tends to absolutize its own stand, even though the reasons put forward may be very much similar to its own.

Now, it is possible that the understanding of truth is such that no rational explanation can be given but the nature of the inconsistency of a religious tradition becomes apparent when its unwillingness to accept a similar stand from other traditions or even from other world-views like those of the secularists surfaces. It is here that its subjectification of Truth becomes evident. The justification for its truth is its originary experience and its validation

for the centrality of this truth is similarly founded on such an experience.

The understanding of truth that is implied in the stances that religious traditions take with regard to the truth of other religious traditions is such that it can be classified as being nothing less than subjectivistic. Religious traditions usually put the truth of their own tradition in the centre and from that vantage point consider the truth of other traditions which is rarely, if at all, considered to be of equal importance. It is paradoxical that each religious tradition considers its central truth central for all but does not accept this centrality for the central truth of other religious traditions. In itself this need not be surprising but it is surprising when we consider the way religious traditions justify their central truth. The experience of faith (speaking homologously) is put forward as the first and last justification for the central truth of a tradition. Again, this in itself may be perfectly justified, as we shall see a little later, but religious traditions which justify their central truth in this manner refuse to acknowledge this mode of justification when employed by the other traditions.

Obviously such a stance is anomalous. The one and the same mode of justification is said to be valid in one's own case but invalid in the case of other religious traditions. On the one hand, we are asked by a religious tradition to accept faith-experience as a valid mode of justification for its central truth; on the other, the same tradition refuses to accept as valid this mode of justification when used by other religious traditions. It is in such a stance (shared by most, if not all, traditions) that the subjectification of truth becomes apparent.

In itself the experience of faith as justifying the central truth of a tradition seems to be a perfectly valid approach. There is, however, a qualification to be added. The experience of faith has to be an experience, not a dogmatic assumption; and if it is an experience it is difficult to see how such an experience can, so to say, go out of its way and make a judgement *about* the experience of another religious tradition. Surely the experience of the central truth of one tradition cannot be an experience that refutes the experience of the truth of another tradition! No experience can refute another experience. No experience can challenge another experience. Wherever this appears to be the case, it is in fact a challenge to the *articulation* of that experience, not to the experience itself. From that point of view all traditions (whether they are claimed to be human or divine) are in the same boat. For when they claim to be speaking of the experience of their central truth they are *speaking* of and *expressing* the experience of their central truth – which obviously is not the same thing as the experience of their central truth.

With the stress on experience there is another point that needs to be clarified. It is from one's own experience that one tries to understand the experience of others. If I have been burnt I understand how another when burnt must be suffering. If I have been burnt in the fire of faith-experience I shall understand in some way another

who is burning with the fire of divine love. My experience will have made me sensitive and open to others who might possibly have gone through a similar experience. It cannot be the case that genuine experience makes us blind to the experience of others. On the contrary, I shall be aware of the difficulties and dangers of such experience, on the one hand, and of the openings and opportunities, on the other. Experience is suspect when it openly supports double standards. Ultimately it is not so much ill-will or dishonesty that is at the root of double standards as a subjectivistic understanding of truth.

We have repeatedly stated that objectification of be-ing is the inverted copy of subjectification of Truth. Objectification of be-ing means that be-ing is reduced to a being, an entity. The beginning of the ocean is overlooked and instead understood as the end of the island. Just as the end of the island can, if one turns around, become the beginning of the ocean, so too a being can be understood as the place of the dis-closure of be-ing. The end of the island is *mutatis mutandis* the beginning of the ocean; a being is the place for the dis-closure of be-ing.

Subjectification of Truth means subjecting Truth to dependence on a subject. Truth is not Truth in itself and by itself; it becomes Truth only when a subject utters it. To paraphrase this, Truth is reduced to truths, truths articulated and expressed by a subject. There is no such thing as Truth. Truth, if it exists, exists in and because of a subject.

Earlier on it was asserted that objectification of be-ing is the inverse copy of subjectification of Truth. In the former be-ing is understood as a being (that is, as an entity) and in the latter, Truth is reduced to propositional truths. But be-ing cannot be entified (or ontified?). If it is, then it is no more be-ing. Be-ing is openness in which beings are manifested; if light is what lights up things, then light itself cannot be lit up. Similarly if be-ing opens up and manifests beings, then be-ing itself cannot be opened up and manifested. This is, of course, what is vainly attempted in the objectification of be-ing.

Truth is the light of be-ing in which truths are dis-closed. Truth itself cannot be the product of the dis-closure; Truth is the light, the openness, the disclosure of be-ing. Hence Truth is neither the abstract noun covering all truths nor the sum of all truths. Truth is the light which helps us to experience specific truths; it is the openness in which we discover beings; it is the dis-closure in which being reveals be-ing.

In other words, where we have arrived at is the need for a new and fresh understanding of be-ing and Truth. Not only are the two interrelated; they are the two sides of the same coin called reality. It is from here that we have to think of be-ing and Truth, or (to introduce Indian vocabulary) *sat* and *satya*. There is no *Sat* without *Satya* just as there is no *Satya* without *Sat*. (Just as an aside, may I remark that the *satyam eva jayate* of the Upanishads is not a moral truth which like "truth will out" will "overcome someday"; the Truth of

be-ing cannot be subjected and overcome; it alone remains ever victorious!)

Clearly the subjectivistic stand is built on an arbitrary foundation; arbitrary because though it assumes "experience" for the truth of its tradition, it is not open to assuming "experience" with regard to the truth of the other traditions. This rejection of the experiential character of the truth of other traditions also reveals the arbitrariness of the truth of its own tradition. For when a tradition is built on experience the nature and conditions of such an experience should become apparent to the believing members of this tradition. From what we have to go by (namely the rejection of the experiential character of the truth of other traditions) it appears that the tradition is built more on a dogmatic assumption hid under the linguistic mantel of faith-experience than on a genuine experience of the truth of the tradition.

Expressed in another way, religious traditions assume that their own truth is the centre of all truth. When they take up such a stand with regard to their own tradition but reject the centrality of the truth of other traditions they are not really in touch with the faith-experience of their own tradition. For if they had been they would understand that the nature of the truth of other traditions is similar to the nature of truth of their own tradition. Hence instead of rejecting it outright they would study how the centrality of the truth of their own tradition is to be related to the centrality of the truth of other traditions.

What we can conclude to from this is that religionists when accepting the truth of their own tradition are as much arbitrary and subjectivistic as they are in rejecting the centrality of the truth of other traditions.

What would religionists have to do to overcome this charge of arbitrariness and subjectivity? For one thing they will have to work out an understanding of Truth that is larger than and supportive of their faith-experience. For another they would have to be more open to and more tolerant of other traditions claiming to have a similar (faith-) experience.

Not only religionists but all those who make Truth depend on their experience are, in fact, guilty of subjectification of Truth. Truth, if it is really Truth, has to be the ground of all truths. Truth has to be more than experience. Experience cannot make Truth; rather it is the other way round. It is Truth that through its dis-closure allows one enter into and undergo the experience of Truth.

At the same time the secularists' stress on time and history poses a danger to holistic living. The perspective of time and history, as we have noted earlier, is both legitimate and valid; however it does not make up the whole fabric of being human. Being human is neither limited to nor restricted by the perspective of time and history which is only one of its "kairological moments". There are other moments which are equally valid and legitimate. Secularists assert that only the world of time and history is real and reasonable, that of the transtemporal being imaginary and fantastic. In such a case, standing within their horizon of understanding they take their approach to reality and

Truth as the standard for all human beings. The danger of the time-and-history perspective is that it excludes other kairological moments. In other words, this perspective is right in what it asserts and wrong when it denies validity to other perspectives.

5. Meaning and *Mythos*[3]

Being human is not a static process; it is dynamic and diverse. It is dynamic because however much individuals may become rigid and ossified the "human spirit" is restless in its quest for deeper meaning. This search is not limited to any one group or any one individual. It can suddenly irrupt anywhere without prior notice as it were. Being human is also diverse precisely because this search for meaning manifests itself in diverse garbs. Slogans like "history repeats itself" and "there is nothing new under the sun" are true only in a very vague and imprecise sense. All serious study of history, however, is a refutation of such a shoddy way of thinking.

The search for meaning is characterised not only by restlessness of the spirit (that is to say, not satisfied with the already given and discovered) but by the mythic realm in which this search takes its origin. This mythic dimension becomes manifest in the specific way of living, thinking, feeling, willing, working, etc., of a people. It is in the mythic dimension that unity and meaning are experienced. Any community of meaning has its source and stability in the mythic dimension. The kind of *"Mythos"* (that is, the horizon of understanding) that a community lives in determines the universe of meaning that

is specific to that community. The perspective of time and history is the product of a specific *Mythos* and it is only in this ambience that time and history have the kind of meaning that they do in fact have. In another *Mythos*, say, of the Hindu traditions, time and history have a different meaning and a different cogency of meaning altogether. The kind of meaning time and history have in the "Western" world-view is cogent only in that world. That this is so is evidenced in the circumstance that such cogency is absent in other world-views.[4]

Community of meaning is present and operative only when and where there is a common *Mythos*. A *Mythos* makes possible a communion which is the base of understanding and consensus, of dialogue and discourse, and of fellowship and common endeavours as diverse as love and labour. Now this communion itself is a mode of be-ing; hence it cannot be objectified. But its "be-ing there" is made palpably manifest in experiences we call understanding, love, joy and peace which also cannot be objectified. There is here, in such instances, a "surplus of meaning" which one can neither prove nor point to but is just taken for granted. Anyone who has had such experiences will have no difficulty in conceding this surplus of meaning. The surplus of meaning is in fact the *Mythos*, the mythic presence in which a community lives, moves and has its being.

Religionists and secularists have to keep in mind that this mythic presence is operative not just in "primitive" peoples but in all human beings. Ac-

cordingly they will have to revise their understanding of understanding. On such a revision will depend the relevance of their respective ideologies and theories. This should not create the impression that with the discovery of the mythic presence we have discovered whatever is to be known about the process of understanding. What is meant is that one's theory has to keep pace with discoveries that have already been made. One cannot do astronomy today ignoring the discoveries of the telescopes that our satellites are carrying.

What has been discussed up to this point is only a prelude to my main thesis: *Religion and secularism are two aspects of the quest for meaning*. Religion tries to dis-cover meaning in life from the viewpoint of eternity and secularism attempts to discover meaning in life from the viewpoint of time.

There is an important point of contact between religion and secularism – both of them have their origin in the common search for meaning without which neither of them would be intelligible. That means, both derive from a common source – the quest for meaning which is made possible by the most fundamental dimension of the mythic presence which constitutes the unity of the human race. The quest for meaning is not restricted to any class, creed or ideology. In the last analysis all human behaviour springs from this source. Our understandings and our misunderstandings, our loves and our longings, our hopes and our expectations, our plans and our ambitions, our desire to know and to discover more and to go deeper into the mysteries of life, our attach-

ments and our detachment, the extremes of asceticism and of consumerism, of exploitation and disinterest – all this is part and parcel of our search for meaning.

Now this search for meaning is itself not a new meaning. It is an openness, an openness to be-ing. But there is a specific perspective to this openness which colours the meanings that are born when this openness encounters be-ing. Raimon Panikkar has called the specific openness of a tradition its *Mythos*.

Mythos is not something static or objectifiable; it is a dynamic diversity in a fundamental unity. There is the fundamental unity of the human race; at this level there is the basic commonality and community-aspect of human beings. Whatever our differences and divergences we all have commonalities like birth, life and death, hunger and thirst, sleep and rest, and the need of communion and community. This commonness manifests itself in the fact that in the greatest of differences some unity and understanding are possible. This level of mythic presence founds the unity of the human race. Wherever there is some sort of common understanding this is made possible by the mythic presence. Whatever the specific *Mythos* one may be shaped by, there is a still deeper level where all human beings are equally shaped and formed as human beings – this is a level which no human being can escape. We have named this the level of the fundamental unity of human beings.

Speaking heuristically there are different levels of mythic presence

which begin at the level of the fundamental unity of human beings and gradually become narrower and narrower, levels that shape us through our specific culture and creed, to say nothing of history, economics and politics. These levels explain more easily why there is more openness to the attitudes and values of one's own culture than to those of another culture. It becomes evident here that not only the limits to freedom and tolerance are determined by the specific *Mythos* in which one finds oneself but even one's understanding of reality and Truth. That Truth is one and absolute we need not discuss but *our understanding* of the absolute Truth will be neither one nor absolute. Depending on the *Mythos* in which we grow up and on which we are fed our understanding of Truth is bound to differ.

When within our own *Mythos* things make sense to us, this "making sense" remains unquestionable: it never occurs to us to question that which makes sense, and even if someone were to question that which makes sense the question itself would not make sense to us. Whenever we have arrived at what makes sense we have in fact arrived (even if it be for the time being) at the limits of our *Mythos*. We simply cannot go beyond that. Even if we were to try to do that we would not be able to understand whatever lies beyond the boundaries of what makes sense.

As a matter of fact all thinking and all patterns of thought function only within the limits of what makes sense. To go beyond is to enter the realm of non-sense and this no human being is capable of. It may be that what an individual does may not make sense to me. But to the individual it somehow must make sense. Trying to understand this is trying to enter into the *Mythos* of the other. For the limits of a *Mythos* are the limits of what makes sense; and in as much as the different *Mythoi* begin to overlap in that much a fusion of horizon begins to take place.

6. The Meeting of Religion and Secularism

It is in the difference of their respective *Mythoi* that the root of the differences between the religionists and the secularists has to be located and identified. The differences are not so much in the Truth as in their perception of the Truth. Each *Mythos* enables a different access to Truth because it enables a different access to be-ing. The understanding of reality and Truth being mediated by a specific *Mythos* is not found outside of that *Mythos*. The significance given to timelessness is as real for the religionists as that given to time and history is for the secularists and vice versa. Hence the question which one is more true is not applicable here since such a question of the truth of a *Mythos* cannot be posed from outside the *Mythos*.

Does this imply that whatever emerges from a *Mythos* is necessarily true. This is a complex question which cannot be dealt with here in detail. It is enough to state the following: our understanding of truth is mediated by our *Mythos*; hence what makes sense to my tradition may not make sense to the other tradition. From my perspective *sati*, for instance, cannot be right but it

could be seen to be right from another perspective. The question cannot be settled as long as our respective *Mythoi* do not encounter each other. It is in a dialogue that leads to a fusion of our horizons that the truth of *sati* has to be settled. The future of our planet depends on such a dialogue, given the different directions in which our diverse horizons of understanding are pulling.

When secularism attempts to understand this world from the viewpoint of time and history, and religion tries to understand it from that of the transhistorical both the viewpoints are from within a specific *Mythos*. There is no such thing as standing "neutrally" outside a *Mythos*. We always and already stand within a *Mythos* and what we have from within a *Mythos* is a viewpoint, the point of view that our specific *Mythos* enables. Without a *Mythos*, that is, outside of a *Mythos*, we would not be able to live since it is the *Mythos* that mediates what makes sense. With this we have arrived at an important point: whatever makes sense, always makes sense only within a specific *Mythos*. It is not an abstract meaning that makes sense but a meaning in a specific mode of mythic presence.

Thus both the transhistorical and the temporal are modes of be-ing experienced from within specific horizons of understanding. What we, whether religionists or secularists, encounter is be-ing and depending on the *Mythos* in which we stand we look at it from the transhistorical or the temporal viewpoint. Is there such a thing as the transhistorical over and beyond

time? Is there such a thing as time without eternity? It depends on the *Mythos* in which you are. Neither time nor eternity are to be thought of ontically (as entities) but ontologically (as modes of be-ing). Here, "is" is not to be understood ontically since "is" is not an entity; we are not speaking of the "essence" of time and the transhistorical but only of the mode in which be-ing is present before (= *pre-esse*) us.

Whether it treats of and believes in "God" (or whatever it may call the Ultimate Mystery) or not, ultimately religion looks at reality from the perspective of the transhistorical and whatever other beliefs (like God, heaven, afterlife, soul, etc.) it may deduce from this main belief they are all different versions of that basic edition called the transtemporal. Whenever religion tends to reify its beliefs secularism will be a healthy antidote. The existence of secularism should have a salutary effect on religious traditions which are in danger of falling a prey to such temptations.

For its part secularism views everything from the viewpoint of time and history and thus ensures the base of all meaningfulness and significance. For, there can be no experience of meaningfulness without meaning in time and history. However, secularism runs the danger of reducing meaningfulness to meaning and here religion should be a reminder that to reify be-ing (from where all meaningfulness derives) is to be blind to the realm of meaningfulness.

Thus religion and secularism are both concerned about the world of human beings. They are both committed to the highest good of humankind, how-

ever much they might differ in their conception of the "highest good". The quest for the highest good makes eminent sense to both religion and secularism. *Whereas secularism stresses the meaning of the highest good, Religion puts the accent on its meaningfulness.* Meaning is the smile on the face and meaningfulness is the joy in the heart. Without the joy the smile is artificial and without the smile the joy will be faceless. This means that there is here a point of encounter between religion and secularism – an area for complementarity and correction.

No model can ever be comprehensive; this is more profoundly true of those models through which one looks at human beings and their world. All our so-called comprehensive models are (bound to be) one-sided. This refers to all models: to those prevalent in religion and to those prevalent in ideologies like secularism. Hence all models, whether their context is religious or secular, though they may offer a whole world-view, are nothing more than mere perspectives. Even when they speak of their concern for the world of human beings and actively strive to promote their highest good, they do this from one specific viewpoint alone, never exhaustively, much less definitively.

Appendix

For those not familiar with A. B. Shah's stance on religion and secularism I am quoting some important passages from his book, *Religion and Society in India*, (Somaiya Publications Pvt. Ltd. Bombay/New Delhi 1981), passages which help in appreciating Shah's approach to secularism.

(a) "However, man does not live by bread alone, and even for producing enough bread it is necessary that those who are called upon to work for development have the right kind of attitude and value commitment. In their absence economic development itself is likely to be inhibited by the ballast of the past as has, indeed, been the experience of almost all the developing countries which became independent after World War II.

"The historical relationship between religion and social change provides a fascinating field of inquiry. Most world religions arose as the harbingers of a social and cultural renaissance and offered to their followers a higher world-view than the one which was dominant till then. This is obvious in the case of Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity and Islam. It is not difficult to show that a similar statement would hold about Hinduism too.

"A new religion comes into existence in response to certain felt needs of its would-be followers. These needs may be briefly formulated as follows:

1. Human being comes across a variety of experiences which exhibit certain patterns of diversity as well as uniformity and which therefore call for a certain intellectual framework within which they may be unified in a satisfactory manner. Every religion worth the name has therefore a body of doctrine which claims to explain the origin of man and the universe, the processes of nature and the decline and fall of civilisations. This constitutes the intellectual core of religion.

2. Besides the need to understand what he experiences, man also feels the need to choose between different alternatives. He has therefore to have criteria for deciding what is in conformity with the world-view offered by his religion and what is incompatible with it. These criteria define the good life in terms of a code of ethics, which forms the ethical content of religion. Morality consists in living according to the ethical injunctions of religion, and immorality in flouting them in one's life.

3. Since religion is essentially a social phenomenon, in the sense that it is to be found only in organised human groups, the good life has to be realised through social institutions. Mysticism has always been an exceptional phenomenon from the point of view of organised religion, which – as in Islam – has sometimes even condemned it as opposed to 'true' religion. Religion therefore also lends sanctity to such institutions as would facilitate a life in conformity with its dictates and condemns as immoral those which would imply a violation of its ethical norms. Every religion thus also functions as a sort of social theory for its followers." pp. 13-15.

(b) "It follows that in any religious system there must be two kinds of knowledge. The empirical knowledge in terms of which man understands and to a certain extent controls, or adapts himself to, the processes of nature and of human life is too important to be denied by any religion. However, since such knowledge can only deal with the world of sensory experience, in the religious view it is of subsidiary, utilitarian value. What is more important is the other knowledge of the transcendental reality which imparts meaning and significance to human existence. The final authority of *this* kind of knowledge can only be faith either in a revealed scripture or in the word of its official interpreters; such knowledge cannot be tested against logic and empirical verification.

"In the religious world-view, the criteria for judging this-worldly actions and for interpreting events have also to be transcendental in the final analysis. Thus not only natural events are interpreted as expressions of the transcendental order, but also ethics itself is defined in terms of conformity to transcendental criteria. In other words, ethics is not, as it should be, a system of norms to govern interpersonal relations but a code of conduct to ensure grace in the eyes of the Deity or liberation from the bonds of earthly existence. So long as religion functions as an effective matrix within which our entire life moves, this does not create any problem for us. But when it ceases to be the sole or even the dominant concern of our thinking self, a situation of conflict is bound to arise.

"Not only ethics but art, science, literature – indeed, all pursuits of men – have to be evaluated in terms of moral criteria based on transcendental values. Moreover, since the human condition is constantly changing and man has to face a new situation at every turn, he needs authoritative guidance in order to reassure himself that he would not go wrong owing to ignorance or other weaknesses to which flesh is heir. It follows that those who are accepted as

authoritative spokesmen or interpreters of the will of God come to exercise total power in all spheres of life.

"In such a scheme of things there can be no autonomy for human reason. Transcendental values are by definition eternal and essentially unchangeable. If change appears inescapably necessary, it has to be within the limits approved by religious authority. There is no scope therefore in religious life for human creativity or for the rights of man in virtue merely of the fact that he is a human being. The human personality has no moral sanctity of its own.

"The history of every major religion shows a common pattern. In the first stage religion appears as a harbinger of change, often radical, and almost invariably seeks to lift society to a higher level of moral consciousness. It has to face the opposition of established interests, generally in the name of the currently prevalent religion, but succeeds because the new consciousness it reflects is better attuned to the changes which have already taken place due to the operation of non-religious factors in other spheres of life. The period of transition may be long as in the case of Christianity, or relatively short as in the case of Islam. In either case, unless the old order possesses sufficient vigour and is ruthless in suppressing dissent, a time arrives when what was once a protest movement becomes the religion of the new Establishment. This is followed by a period of stability accompanied by steady growth and expansion. The world-view offered by the new religion and the value system associated with it meet the needs not only of the cultural but also of the political and economic development of society." pp. 15-17.

(c) "The title of this essay [Meaning of Secularism for India] is in a sense misleading since it is likely to suggest that secularism can mean different things in different societies, whereas being essentially a concept that defines the relationship between religion, on the one hand, and human beings in different capacities, on the other, secularism can only have one single meaning. What may however vary from society to society would be the manner in which secularism is reflected in its laws and institutions, or the specific goals that a society sets before itself in order to ensure that its laws and institutions would be secular. It is in this sense that we examine here the meaning of secularism for India.

"However, before we undertake this exercise it is necessary to define the core meaning of secularism as it has come to be accepted by those who represent the secularist movement in India or abroad. According to them, secularism primarily means the separation of religion from man's secular life. Man lives at three levels – personal, interpersonal, and institutional, the last assuming a variety of forms such as educational, social, economic, political and many others that one can easily think of. Secularism would require that the decisions one takes at any of these levels are governed by considerations which do not stem from religious belief or dogma of any kind." p. 34.

(d) "If one examines the modes of expression of the secular attitude at the three levels considered above, one finds

that the essence of secularism would consist in looking upon religion as a strictly personal relationship between a man and his Maker -if he believed in one. This perhaps needs some clarification in view of the popular misconception that secularism necessarily implies atheism. What secularism requires is not a denial of the transcendental, whether the transcendental is conceived as God in the Semitic sense or as *Brahman* in the Hindu sense, but the acceptance of a truly spiritual view of religion and all that goes with it. Gandhi was a deeply religious man and yet he was completely secular in his view of religion and its bearing on personal as well as public life. Jesus Christ, who unlike Gandhi founded a world religion, was also secular in his approach to life in this world. His admonition to the Pharisees who asked him whether they should pay the taxes to Caesar is probably the first statement of the essential meaning of secularism given by a man of religion." p. 35.

(e) "This modern secularist movement may be regarded as beginning with this demand [for the separation of morals and education from religion] though as mentioned above, its origin can be traced to the New Testament. Consequently, once the power of the Church was broken, the Western man did not experience any serious difficulty in adopting a secular approach to life in this world without ceasing to be a believing Christian." p. 36.

(f) "Gandhi's failure to solve the Hindu-Muslim problem symbolised the failure of the Indian conception of secularism, namely, the belief that the state should treat all religions equally and desist from interfering in the practice of the followers of any of them. It did not go further and demand that in its turn, religion too should not interfere in secular life. In other words, the Indian conception of secularism sought to freeze the status quo in the conflict between religion and the modern conscience at the stage at which the Mutiny found it. For political reasons this was accepted by all parties to the Indo-British dispute – the British, the Hindus and the Muslims, each for reasons of its own. It was only after Independence and the opting out of the predominantly Muslim areas as a separate sovereign state that the national leadership could think of removing the artificial restriction on the meaning of secularism and interpret it so as to justify state action in what till then was regarded as the religious field for the purpose of promoting social welfare and reform." pp. 39-40.

(g) "The cumulative effect of the politician's continued willingness to appease religious obscurantism has been to popularise the *ersatz* concept of secularism which I think was first formulated by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. According to him, Indian secularism means non-denominationalism – which in simple language means that the state does not favour one religion at the expense of others." p.45.

(h) "It is this conception of secularism as much as the obscurantism of organised religious groups which needs to be combated if Indian society is to be integrated into a modern nation on the basis of social equality regardless

of caste and creed. Nor is it a question of choice; equality apart, even stability which is a precondition of survival and development cannot be ensured unless a truly secular spirit informs our national life. For in a major democracy, a non-denominational state must either evolve into a secular state or degenerate into a denominational one. If the latter alternative were to materialize, India would be reduced to a congeries of tribal collectivities in which not only God but man too would be degraded." p.46.

Notes

1. A.B. Shah has been at the forefront of defending and defining Indian Secularism. He founded the Indian Secular Society and its Journal *The Secularist*, a Journal devoted to the Promotion of Secularism, Rationalism and Humanism. Besides being the editor of *The Secularist* he was also founder-editor of *Quest* which was suppressed during the Emergency and which was resurrected in its new avatar as *New Quest*. His *Religion and Society in India* (Bombay/New Delhi, Somaiya Publications Pvt. Ltd., 1981), now out of print, is a classic on the subject. In the Appendix I am presenting some important statements from that book which explain Shah's stance on secularism.

2. In his essay "Secularism and Maharashtra" p. 55, Shah writes : "Secularists would have welcomed government's interest in the preservation of certain aspects of India's cultural heritage, provided such concern was expressed in an enlightened manner consistent with the norms of modern critical scholarship." Shah speaks with approval of Jotirao Phule's 'humanist religion'. He states: "This new religion was based on *universal human values* such as the essential equality of all human beings regardless of caste, creed, sex or race. His method was an indigenous, unsophisticated version of the Socratic dialogue, in which he subjected all traditional beliefs and institutions to a twofold test of reason and social justice, informed by the knowledge that was made available through the Western system of education only recently introduced by the British." *Ibid.* p. 51 [My emphasis]

3. For a deeper understanding of *Mythos* see R. Panikkar, *Myth, Faith & Hermeneutics. Cross-cultural Studies*, New York, Paulist Press, etc. 1979. passim.

4. R. Panikkar, "The Law of Karma and the Historical Dimension of Man," in *Myth, Faith & Hermeneutics*, pp. 362-388.