The Secular Production of Religion

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Introduction

The theory of secularization is one of the most deadly master narratives in the social sciences. The boredom that takes hold of almost any audience when one speaks about contemporary religion is a striking effect of that narrative. Indeed, we already know everything that there is to be known about religion, namely that it declines. The success of industrialization, science and technology has made religion in the modern world obsolete. In sociological theories of modernity the transition from the pre-modern, rural community to the modern, industrial and urbanized society is marked by the decline of religion as an expression of the moral unity of society. Of course, there are differences of opinion and some debate does occur in this field. Most important among them is probably the debate between those who, like Bryan Wilson (1982), think that secularization is a modern process in which religion loses the central place in social life it previously occupied and those who, like David Martin (1978), think that the significance of religion varies immensely in different societies and that the overall assumption that religion was very important in the pre-modern period is indeed nothing but an assumption and probably a false one. Of these two schools of thought David Martin's is clearly preferable. Martin's ideas open up a field of inquiry instead of assuming that we know already everything there is to know.

We have to recognize, however, that all these theories of secularization only deal with Christianity in the West, that is Western Europe and the United States of America. Secularization theory then is a particular argument about the changing place of Christianity in modern Western society and not about religion as such. In the European discussion of secularization it is decline of church attendance and of numbers of churches which are good indicators of change. In the last decades of the nineteenth century there is such a decline in England which is aptly called 'the Victorian crisis of faith'. In the Netherlands, however, we do not have it in that period, but only almost a century later. In the United States we still do not see too much of it and there is no reason to expect that we will ever see it. The American

churches have always been very creative in recruiting church members, as is witnessed over the last decades by televangelism. For Christianity church membership and church attendance are good indicators and from them we can only conclude that the historical picture is rather different from one Western society to another, so that a generalized secularization story will not do. This is not only true for the facts and figures of church attendance and membership, but also for the causal explanations of industrialization and rationalization, offered by secularization theory. For example, there is more evidence for religious expansion during the Industrial Revolution in England than for secularization. Similarly, there is currently a consensus among historians that the impact of scientific discovery, such as the one of Darwin, on the decline of religion has, previously, been much exaggerated.

If the secularization theory does not account for the history of Western Christianity, it is even less applicable to the history of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and most other religions. In the latter cases the question about church attendance and membership cannot even be raised, since there are no churches. The organization of religion, the place of religion in society, the patterns of recruitment are so different that not only secularization theory itself, but also the empirical and theoretical problems which are derived from it in the context of Western Christianity, become meaningless. This has not prevented social scientists like Ernest Gellner (1983) to universalize this ill-founded story about the West to include the rest. Since all societies modernize and secularization is an intrinsic part of modernization, all societies secularize, the rhetoric, dressed up as argument, goes.

In this paper I want to argue that our rejection of the theory of the secularization of society should not prevent us from looking at the more rewarding question of the secularization of the state or, in other words, the separation of state and church. To my mind state formation is the most important process affecting the location of religion in society. This is definitely not to say that the state is the determining factor which can explain everything, but rather that we have to examine the historical process in which the relation between state and society gets defined to understand the shifting place of religious institutions and their hold on their constituencies. I will first examine the rise of the nation-state and its role in determining the place of religion in Europe, and especially in Britain. Secondly, I will discuss the role of the colonial state in British India in this regard. To anticipate my argument I will try to show that the secularity of the British state produced opposite effects at home and in the colony.

The secular nation-state

The Protestant Reformation split Western Christianity into Catholics and Protestants. Subsequently sovereigns had to deal with minorities in their realm who professed another faith than that of the ruler. This spawned a number of political

problems in France, England, parts of Germany and the Netherlands which were ultimately solved in a variety of ways which I cannot discuss here. A major issue was the extent to which the state could allow difference of religious opinion. Such difference was invariably cast in terms of political loyalty. Toleration of difference and freedom of opinion was therefore not only an intellectual problem, but primarily a political one. Neutrality of the state in religious matters was clearly not a direct result of the Reformation. In Britain, for example, Henry V created the protestant Anglican Church as a state church in immediate opposition to Rome. Not only Catholic–Protestant conflicts emerged from that decision, but also within Protestantism conflicts between the state church and dissenting groups. In the Netherlands the Calvinist Church became the official public church and Catholics a minority, tolerated but not much more than that.

However long the intellectual discussion of religious toleration may have been in the Netherlands (Erasmus) and England (Locke), it was only in mid-nineteenth century that Catholics in these Protestant states were 'emancipated' from earlier discrimination. In England the enfranchisement of Catholics led to considerable political unrest and the Protestant fear of Rome continued to be a salient factor in politics till the late 19th century. The problematic inclusion of Catholics in what was thought to be an essentially Protestant nation led Cardinal Newman to argue that Catholicism was upholding medieval English spirituality and by that token was supremely national (Viswanathan 1995). What we find in the nineteenth century is the gradual encompassment of religious difference in the unity of nationalism, the religion of the nation. As Durkheim saw quite clearly, the divinization of the king shifted to the divinization of the people. Besides the depoliticized religion of the churches a secular religion of nationalism emerged. Church officials had to show that their church was not less national than that of others, so that political loyalty remained an issue even in the so-called secular nation-state.

This is what happened to the nation, but what happened to the state? Secularization of the state was not the result of the Reformation, but of the American and French revolutions. Both these revolutions carried, among many other things, a protest against the direct connection between state and church. The problem of religious difference of opinion between ruler and ruled was solved by changing the polity through the creation of the nation-state, in which church and state became separated and nationalism the common religion of all citizens. Differences of religious opinion were not anymore the business of the state unless there was a clear conflict with the laws of the land. Liberal theories of the state clearly continued to recognize the need to restrict religious freedom in order to protect the social order. The separation of church and state implied a depoliticization of religion and a new definition of the body politic as the nation. This goes to say that a sharp analytical distinction between state and society misses the nature of that hyphenated phenomenon, the nation-state. The role of the state, though separated from the church, continues to be crucial in defining the place of religion in modern society.

The legacy of the American and French revolutions has not led to a complete separation of church and state in Britain. The Queen is still head of the state church and the bishops, appointed by the Crown on the recommendation of the Prime Minister, are present in the House of Lords. Not only is the state to a significant degree Christian, but also British politics, at least till World War II, cannot be understood without taking religion and church–state relations into account. The old saying that the Church of England was 'the Tory party at prayer' shows the extent to which the Church was, at least in the past, perceived as related to the Conservative party. Similarly, there is a case to be made that there has been a connection between the Nonconformist religious groups and the Liberal party and later the Labour Party. The Victorian period especially shows a considerable amount of religious politics.

For these reasons it is simply unwarranted to see Britain in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the period of High Colonialism, as a secular society. The state is not secular and the nation is not secular. Nevertheless, there is a gradual decline of church membership and attendance in society and a concomitant gradual diminishing of the role of religion in politics from the turn of the century. As I have already argued above, these developments cannot be explained by secularization theory. Instead we need to look at a process at the turn of the century in which the state expands its activities of welfare and education precisely in those areas which were previously dominated by religious organization. It is this expanded activity of the state which gradually alters the social significance of religious organization in the twentieth century. The gradual intrusion of an activist state in all spheres of social life fundamentally transforms an earlier dependence on religious institutions into one on state institutions. This is never a unilinear, clear-cut process, but still we can see a gradual transformation which leads after the second World War to the post-industrial welfare state.

The colonial state

State formation in Europe cannot easily be compared to that in other parts of the world. Instead of the European transition of the absolutist state to the nation-state one finds in Asia huge, hardly integrated, imperial state systems which are gradually replaced by colonial states (van der Veer 1995). Moreover, the religions of Asia, such as Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, are so different from Christianity that the issue of the secularity of the state cannot be simply raised in terms of the separation of state and church. That issue has a number of different implications in both the pre-colonial and colonial periods. Let us, for instance, look briefly at the eighteenth-century realm of the Nawabs of Awadh in what is now Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in India. This was a large kingdom comparable in size to France or England. The Nawabs were Shi'a Muslims who had been important officials in Delhi, the capital of the Mughal empire, before they became more or less independent rulers. Their control over the

kingdom was considerable, but still limited, since they constantly had to deal with the possible loyalty or disloyalty of powerholders, such as the Hindu raja of Benares. The population of the kingdom was in majority Hindu, but there was also a sizeable Sunni Muslim minority and a small Shi'a Muslim population. An important element in the Nawabi administration was the role of the Hindu caste of Kayasths who supplied the ministers and main officials. A certain tolerance of religious difference was essential to such a kingdom. This does not mean that religious difference did not matter politically, but simply that toleration was necessary for this kind of kingdom to exist. The expansion of the British from Bengal into this kingdom at the end of the eighteenth century seriously weakened the power and authority of the Nawabs. It was only in 1856 that the British dissolved the kingdom and made Awadh (Oudh) a province of British India, but long before that they already effectively controlled most of its administration. It was the decline of the Nawab's power that enabled religious leaders of various communities to upset the delicate balance that had characterized the kingdom. Some serious religious conflicts occurred in the holy city of Ayodhya just before the British took over power entirely.

The meaning of this story is that toleration of religious difference in this pre-colonial kingdom very much depended on political will and power. Centrifugal tendencies of a religious nature or otherwise could be repressed by an administration which could not simply be identified with one group or another. This is not to say, however, that the kingdom of Awadh was secular. On the contrary, it was a state, symbolically legitimized by Shi'a rituals and discourses, in which Shi'a religious specialists were state officials. This kind of state, however, depended on the cooperation of elites whose cultural differences were clearly recognized, but not the main subject of politics. All this was changed by the British.

India may have been full of religion already, but the British brought again another religion into play. However much they emphasized their religious neutrality, they were perceived as Christians. Each of their administrative innovations was thus not only seen as modern, but also as Christian. The British did much to disavow any connection to the missionary project and to Christianity as such, so that one can speak of a definite secularity of the British state in India which was much stronger than in Britain itself. There was a very sharp separation of Church and State which the British thought essential to their ability to govern India. Externality and neutrality were the major tropes of a state which tried to project itself as playing the role of a transcendent arbiter in a country divided along religious lines. The fact remains, however, that the Indians did not make that clear a distinction between British state and Christian church. Indeed, as I have argued above, such a distinction did not make much sense to them anyway. A distinct feeling that the modernizing project of the colonial state was Western and thus Christian in nature remained important. Although the legitimizing rituals and discourses of the colonial state were those of development, progress and evolution and meant to be secular, they could easily be understood as essentially Christian. The response both the state and the missionary

societies gained was also decidedly religious. Hindu and Islamic forms of modernism led to the creation of Hindu and Muslim schools, universities and hospitals. Far from having a secularizing influence on Indian society the modernizing project of the colonial state, in fact, gave religion a strong new impetus.

In the following account I will, briefly, indicate how the colonial state, despite its professed secularity, in many ways stimulated the expansion of indigenous religion. While the state projected itself as a neutral outsider it directly interfered with every aspect of Indian society, but most notably with gender and caste. To start with gender the British involvement with this area set off a whole chain of reformist reaction in Hinduism which led to a considerable expansion of religious activity. I am referrring here to the colonial interference with the practice of SATI (widow-immolation) in India which the British abolished in 1829. It is an instructive case, since it shows that, although the colonial state only interfered with practices which offended liberal sensibility too much, the unintended effects of such interference were much larger.

Rammohan Roy (1772–1833), sometimes called 'the father of the Bengal Renaissance', wrote between 1818 and 1832 a great deal on the subject of SATI. In January 1830 Roy, together with 300 residents of Calcutta, presented a petition to Governor-General William Bentinck in support of the 1829 prohibition of SATI by the British. Rammohan rejected the practice on the basis of his reading of Hindu scripture. He distinguished authoritative sources (such as the Vedas) from other sources. It is interesting to note that he did not refer to any authoritative interpretation of these sources by learned gurus, but entirely relied on his private, rational judgement. One of Rammohan's most important objectives was to abolish the rules of the caste-based, hereditary qualification to study the Veda. This brought him in direct conflict with Brahmanical orthodoxy. In 1828 Rammohan Roy founded the first Hindu reformist movement, the Brahmo Samaj. This was a small movement, propagating a deist and universalist kind of religion, based, however, on Hindu sources and especially the Upanishads and the philosophical commentaries on the Upanishads (together known as the Vedanta). The intellectual Vedantic and Unitarian views of the Brahmos left them to an important extent isolated from the larger Hindu society. On the other hand, the Brahmo Samaj was perhaps not smaller than the circles of Deists in England or Freemasons in France and Holland which are the subject of European writing on the history of the Enlightenment. The question remains, however, how modern reformist thought reached a broader Hindu audience and could thus serve as a basis for Hindu nationalism.

A major role in bringing Rammohan's intellectualist ideas to a broader public was played by Keshabchandra Sen (1838–84), one of the most influential Brahmo leaders. He no longer wished to speak English, the language of colonialism, but his mother tongue Bengali. He moved to the rural outskirts of Calcutta and introduced an ascetic lifestyle among his followers. The next step seems to have been his encounter with the contemporary guru, Ramakrishna (1836–86), a priest in a temple for the Mother

Goddess Kali in Calcutta. In his two newspapers (one in English, one in Bengali) he introduced Ramakrishna to the wider, reading public as a true saint in the authentic Hindu tradition. In that way he authorized this illiterate Hindu ascetic as an acceptable guru for the Hindu middle classes. In a recent book on Indian nationalism Partha Chatterjee (1994) portrays the meeting of these two personalities as constituting the 'middle ground' occupied by the emergent middle classes, between European rational philosophy and Hindu religious discourse. In his view this 'middle ground' enabled the anticolonial nationalists to divide the world into two domains – the material, outer world which is dominated by Western science, and the spiritual, inner world which is dominated by Hindu values. As a consequence nationalism became decidedly Hindu in nature with an emphasis on the domestic sphere, symbolized by the modest, Hindu woman. The abolition of SATI by the colonial government thus set a far-reaching series of Hindu responses in motion which led to the formation of modern conceptions of public and private through which nation and religion got defined.

Another set of unintended consequences resulted from the colonial project of enumerating and describing the Indian population. The power of the secular, colonial state to define people's identities, their customs and general characteristics, their languages and their religions to an important extent created and/or reified the phenomena it had set out to describe. At one level this documentation project was necessary for the state to be able to govern a vast, unknown population. At another level, however, it constituted, by its very logic, new senses of identity and category. For the census operations, starting in the 1870s, this has been powerfully argued by Bernard Cohn (1987). In particular the phenomenon of caste received a new salience as the major census category. The census tried to rank castes hierarchically and used the Brahmanical system of Brahman (priest), Kshatriya (warrior), Vaishya (commoner), Shudra (slave) to do this on an All-India basis. The documentation and certification of difference in hierarchical terms obviously created considerable efforts on the part of the classified to enhance their ranking. Caste associations emerged to petition the census commissioners to change their ranking. Caste groups in different parts of the country which had had nothing to do with eachother 'discovered' a common cause. Since the caste rankings were ultimately compiled on an All-India basis jockeying for better status also got organised on that basis.

Through their efforts the census collectors created a nation of castes. This was further enforced by connecting spurious caste characteristics to job and educational opportunities. For example, the British thought that some castes were 'martial', others 'intellectual' or 'effeminate' and the recruitment for certain services came to be limited to castes which had the required characteristics. In this manner casteism worked as a kind of racism and, indeed, there was a direct connection between arguments about 'caste' in the colonial ethnography of India and 'race' in the Victorian science of human evolution (Bayly 1994). Much was made of the racial distinction between 'Aryan' and 'non-Aryan' castes and tribes. The missionary Robert Caldwell

based his linguistic and ethnological theories about Dravidian languages and peoples on that distinction. In the second half of the nineteenth century he developed a myth of the Aryan (Brahmanical) invasion of South India and the subsequent subjection of the Dravidian people to a Hindu caste system in which the invaders were on top. His argument was meant to support his own missionary work among the 'original' Dravidian population by delegitimizing Brahman priests, but ultimately his theory of a Dravidian race was used in the South for political purposes which had nothing anymore to do with Christian conversion (see Dirks 1995).

Very important was also the colonial effort to improve the situation of disadvantaged tribes and untouchable castes by putting them on a list ('schedule') for preferential treatment. For these so-called 'scheduled' tribes and castes places were reserved in education and state employment as well as parliamentary seats in elections. Here a secular colonial government directly interfered with caste society with the most noble of purposes, as in the case of SATI, but with the disastrous consequence that caste reservations have become one of the two most significant political facts in post-colonial India. Besides the scheduled castes the post-colonial state has identified many more so-called Other Backward Castes. According to the official Mandal Commission Report of 1990 the position of 3, 743 Other Backward Castes had to be advanced by government policies. The implementation of that report caused widespread rioting, including the self-immolation of dozens of young high-caste students.

Caste society is directly underpinned by Hindu religious ideas and there can be no doubt that the secular colonial state (as well as its successor) did much to strengthen the political salience of caste. Similarly its project of enumeration, documentation and certification strengthened and altered the political significance of religious community. For example, Richard Fox (1985) has argued strongly that Sikh identity has been the product of British colonial measures such as the specific recruitment of Sikhs as soldiers in the army. In that way a loosely integrated culture, in which 'Sikhs' had a variety of multiple, overlapping identities, was replaced by a more strongly integrated culture based on a 'Sikh' religious identity which had clear economical and political advantages. I find Fox's argument somewhat overdrawn (see van der Veer 1994:55–56), but it is correct to the extent that colonial policies, to an important extent, have assisted the formation and growth of Sikh religious nationalism. The same is true for Hindu and Muslim nationalisms in India. As Arjun Appadurai (1993) has recently argued, separate Hindu and Muslim identities were constructed at the macro-level not just into 'imagined communities', but more directly into 'enumerated communities'. To be a Hindu or a Muslim in different parts of India meant a number of quite different things before the census-operations started to divide and enumerate them. The colonial politics of political representation directly depends on counting and thereby created a political arena, in which 'communities' competed for jobs and services. More in general, this reminds us that enumeration, the division of populations in majorities and minorities, plays a crucial role in modern democratic

politics and, indeed, often a genocidal one, as could be witnessed in the Partition of India in 1946.

Conclusion

The notion of the secularity of the state, shown by the separation of state and church, is obviously a most complex one both in colonizing Britain and colonized India, since it shows the contradictory workings of modern power in the world system. In Britain the state has never been separated from the church, but at the same time it has been gradually able to marginalize and depoliticize religious institutions. The colonial state in India, on the contrary, has been in a number of ways promoting a Christian secularism of liberation and progress without giving support to a Christian missionary effort. It created a separation of state and church in colonial Christianity, but in doing so it failed to depoliticize the indigenous religions. Its modernizing policies transformed and strengthened the force of indigenous religious identities to the extent that they are now the most important political fact in the Indian subcontinent. Under colonial circumstances the secular state created its opposite, a society in which religion had more rather than less political consequences.

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