

Secularism in India, from Rammohun Roy and the Reformers of 19th and 20th Centuries up to the Present Day

By Apostolos Michailidis*

1. The Attempt to Institutionalize Secularization – The Secular State (dharma-nirapekṣa rajya)

The term *secularism* (dharma-nirapekṣatā) in its Indian version refers to the maintenance of an attitude of neutrality on the part of the State or non-intervention in matters of religious belief, accompanied by the idea of equality towards all religions (sarva dharma sambhāva)¹. Thus, from the early years of India's independence, the term *secularization* (dharma nirapekṣikaraṇ) was associated with the idea of a secularized state which the leaders of the nation sought to create.

The idea of the secularized State, as well as the social changes that this form of state institutes, is recorded in the country's constitution².

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1. The term *sarva dharma sambhāva* is a concept coined by Mahatma Gandhi in 1930 that embodies the equality of the destination paths followed by all religions. This concept is one of the key tenets of secularism in India; it does not separate religion from State, but instead, consists in an attempt by the State to embrace all religions. Regarding that concept, see P. Friedlander, "Reassessing Religion and Politics in the Life of Jaggivan Rām", *Religions* 11, 224 (2020), pp. 76-94, 90; D. E. Smith, *India as a Secular State*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (1963) 2011, chap. 1; G. J. Larson (ed.), *Religion and Personal Law in Secular India: A Call to Judgment*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis 2001.

2. See, D. D. Basu, *Introduction to the Constitution of India*, Prentice Hall of India, New Delhi 1983, chap. 9; J. Majeed, "The Crisis of Secularism in India", *MIH (Modern Intellectual History)* 7, 3 (2010), pp. 653-666, 655, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/>

Thus, according to the first Article of the Revised Indian Constitution of 1979 in English version (which is in force till date, taking into account that exactly the same formula is repeated in the Preamble of the 105th Amendment Act, 2021):

WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a [SOVEREIGN SOCIALIST SECULAR DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC]³ and to secure to all its citizens:
 JUSTICE, social, economic and political;
 LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship;
 EQUALITY of status and of opportunity;
 And to promote among them all FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual and the [unity and integrity of the Nation]⁴.

The phrase “socialist secular” (samajavadi dharmanipekṣ) was added by the 42nd Amendment (in 1976) under Indira Gandhi⁵.

Among other things, the Revised Constitution (1979) provides (Article 15, §1,2) that:

The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them. No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them, be subject to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to- (a) access to shops, public restaurants, hotels and places of public entertainment; or (b) the use of wells, tanks, bathing ghats, roads and places of public resort maintained wholly or partly out of State funds or dedicated to the use of the general public.

It is also noteworthy with regard to the social context of India that in the 17th Article is repeated, once again, the abolition of “untouchability”

modern-intellectual-history/article/abs/crisis-of-secularism-in-india/48E5AEC2D319A8FC98EF508F59B40561 [02.01.2024]. On the legal context of the Indian secular state, see also G. J. Larson, “The Secular State in a Religious Society” in: G. J. Larson (ed.), *Religion and Personal Law in Secular India: A Call to Judgment*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis 2001, pp. 1-11.

3. Subs. by the Constitution (Forty-second Amendment) Act, 1976, s. 2, for “SOVEREIGN DEMOCRATIC REBUBLIC” (w.e.f. 3.1.1077).

4. Subs. by s. 2, ibid., for “unity of the Nation” (w.e.f. 3.1.1977).

5. Nandini Chatterjee, *The Making of Indian Secularism: Empire, Law and Christianity, 1830-1960*, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire 2011, p. 2.

(aspr̥śyatā, pronounced as asprishyata)⁶; a form of social marginalization of “lower” social groups. So, the “untouchability” is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of “untouchability” shall be an offence punishable in accordance to the law. And with regard to the social appreciation of women the Article no. 39 (§ 1) provides that “the State shall, in particular, direct its policy towards securing (a) that the citizens, men and women equally, have the right to an adequate means of livelihood” and the 4th paragraph clarifies “that there is equal pay for equal work for both men and women”.

However, in addition to ensuring individual, political freedoms and rights –which in many cases contradict or even abolish established religious and social institutions– obligations are also defined for the citizen. Thus, according to Article 51A (e) the citizen has as a duty “to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India transcending religious, linguistic and regional or sectional diversities; to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women”. In the next two paragraphs he/she is asked “to value and preserve the rich heritage of our composite culture” (f), “to develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform” (g).

However, what were the reasons that led to the addition of the phrase “secular [...] republic” in the constitutional revision of 1976? And three years later –during the revision process of 1979– to ask the Indian citizen to go beyond religious etc. differences for the sake of “harmony” and “the spirit of common brotherhood” with the imperative, in fact, to develop “scientific temper”, “humanism” and “the spirit of inquiry and reform”? To what extent Western innovations had been introduced in the structures of Indian society? And to what extent the manifestations of traditional Hindu religiosity had been changed?

6. *Untouchability* is a form of social exclusion of people who do not belong to any of the three upper classes (varṇas) of the “twice born”, i.e. Brahmins, Kṣatriyas and Vaiśyas, nor to that of the lower Śūdras. They are defined as “out-casts” (avarṇa, jāti-bahar) or “untouchables” (aspr̥śya, ajuta). It is assumed that they have been originated from unlawful mixed marriages, such as a marital union of a śūdra male and an upper caste female. In addition, the aboriginal inhabitants (Adivasis) of the Indian subcontinent who follow animistic cults belong to that category.

Undoubtedly, secularization as a historical and socially globalized phenomenon has been in contact with the complex traditional society of present-day India. However, this contact has faced obstacles, caution, or even the obvious reaction of traditionalism. In a more general assessment, I could claim that the secular trends are either accepted by some, or are being tolerated with minor reservations. Some others approach them selectively, having in mind a trend of utility, caring to graft or harmonize them –to the possible extent– to tradition and some others react against them with words and deeds⁷.

It is indicative, that for a quite long period (that means more than two decades up to the present), the appearance of the term *secularism* (dharmanirapekṣatā) in the daily periodical press of the country or in the web media makes its appearance periodically⁸. A number of

7. On this point see J. De Roover, *Europe, India and the Limits of Secularism*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 2015, pp. 3-12; Nandini Chatterjee, *The Making of Indian Secularism...*, *op.cit.*, pp. 5-7. A book expressing not merely skepticism concerning the secularism in “Nehruvian-leftist” India, but even rejection of it as identical to colonialism, is that of S. Balakrishna, *70 Years of Secularism: Unpopular Essays on the Unofficial Political Religion of India*, Indus University, Ahmedabad 2018.

8. See for example, PTI, “Secularism has become pejorative for those now in power: Sonia Gandhi”, *The Economic Times*, 02 January 2024, <https://economictimes.india-times.com/news/india/secularism-has-become-pejorative-for-those-now-in-power-sonia-gandhi/articleshow/106478776.cms> [02.01.2024]. Murali Krishnan, “How Hindu nationalism overshadows secularism”, *Deutsche Welle (New Delhi)*, 14/08/2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/india-at-75-how-hindu-nationalism-overshadows-the-promise-of-secularism/a-62790754> [02.01.2024]. Yasmeen Serhan, “The Hinduization of India Is Nearly Complete”, *The Atlantic*, 27 May 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2022/05/narendra-modi-india-religion-hindu-nationalism/630169/> [02.01.2024]. Rajeev Bhargava, “The future of Indian secularism: It is premature to pronounce the end of constitutional secularism; it has only suffered a setback and can be revived”, *The Hindu*, 12 August 2020, <https://thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-future-of-indian-secularism/article32329223.ece> [02.01.2024]. Dhiman Bhattacharyya, “Is India Truly Secular?”, *MyIndia*, 5 January 2020, <https://www.mapsofindia.com/my-india/india/is-india-truly-secular> [02/01/2024]. Madhav Godbole, “Is India a secular nation?”, *The Indian Express*, 12 April 2016, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/speech-by-madhav-godbole-at-indian-institute-of-public-administration-mumbai-is-india-a-secular-nation/> [02.01.2024]. Thakur, Ramesh, “Ayodhya and the Politics of India’s Secularism: A Double-Standards Discourse”, *Asian Survey*, vol. 33, no. 7, (July 1993), pp. 645-664. <http://links.jstor.org/sici=00044687%281999307%2933%3C645%3AAATPOI%3E2.O.CO%3B2-7> [02.01.2024]. India Today Bureau, “Preserving India’s secularism:

articles concern the analysis of the phenomenon and the justification of its usefulness with regard to its further spread and institutionalization or not. References are made to the necessity of its preservation for the support of State institutions and above all to its utility as a necessary means for maintaining the cohesion of India as a unified State and the avoidance of religious and cultural conflicts. From time to time the term *secularism* is being contrasted with the terms *fundamentalism* and *communalism* putting forward the ideologies of “Hindutva” (“Hindu-ness”)⁹ and that of “Hindu rāṣṭra” (“Hindu nation”)¹⁰ which are gaining more and more ground expressed by specific nationalist political parties [e.g. Bharatiya Janata Party (“Party of the Indian People”), Siv Sena (“Shiva’s Army”)], and political organizations [such as e.g. Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (“Voluntary National Service Union”), Vishva Hindu Parishad (“World Hindu Council”), Bajrang Dal (“Brigade of Hanuman”) etc.].

Certainly, the preoccupation of the columnists with these two terms occasioned by cases of socio-political and religious rivalry. The traditional dispute between Hindus and Muslims fueled by the aforementioned political parties and organizations was intense throughout the 90s. The separatist –from time to time– movements of Sikhs, Kashmiri Muslims, Assamese, Tamils, as well as the conflicts between “higher” and “lower” castes pose imperatively the problem to find a solution for the benefit of all, triggering off the relevant journalism as well.

Nevertheless, in the political field India can still boast that it is a secularized State where –legislatively at least– secularism prevails without discrimination towards the believers of the major religions that coexist

Why so much is at stake”, *INDIA TODAY*, New Delhi, 15 May 1991; updated 19 April 2023, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/preserving-indias-secularism-why-so-much-is-at-stake-2362050-2023-04-19> [02.01.2024].

9. *Hindutva*, as a political ideology, was formulated in 1922 by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1833-1966) and it is propagated up to this day by Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and other political organizations, collectively called the Sangh Parivar.

10. The term *Hindu rāṣṭra* was coined by Prof. Benoy Kumar Sarkar (1887-1949), a social scientist and nationalist; it was redefined and promulgated by Madhav Sadashivrao Golwalkar (1906-1973), the second “sarsanghchalak” (“chief”) of the nationalist organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

within its borders; that it has progressed with fast paces in industrialization; that it occupies a prominent position in the field of IT technology; that it is a country that manufactures from bicycles to airplanes and satellites, with its space and nuclear program in full swing implementation and development; with a growing rapidly economy, giving it a prominent position among the BRICS, and the justifiable characterization of being a growing “world power”. And above all, that it is the “largest democracy in the world” – a phrase frequently repeated by Indian politicians.

2. In Search of Theoretical Foundations of Secularization – A Historical Review of the Growth of Indian Secular Thought in 19th Century

Before the attempt to sketch the spread of secular trends into Indian society in relation to traditional religiosity and cultural values, I think it would be necessary to search for the theoretical and historical foundations of the secular phenomenon in India.

There is no doubt that the theoretical foundations of secularization were laid during the period of British rule (or the so-called British raj) in India and especially from the beginnings of the 19th century with the influx of derivatives of Western thought, such as humanism, British empiricism, positivism, rationalism and a little later, Marxism¹¹.

11. The acquaintance with European thought took place mainly in Bengal. The book of Th. Paine, *The Age of Reason* (1794), was translated into Bengali in various installments. A thousand copies of the original English edition had been sent to Calcutta (the present-day Kolkata). At Hindu College, in the same city, H. L. V. Derozio (1809-1831) presented Hume's thought. For several decades A. Comte and his “positivism” exerted considerable influence in Bengal. Herbert Spencer, John Stuart Mill and A. Bain became also famous. Rammohun Roy, “the father of Indian renaissance”, corresponded with J. Bentham as did Vivekananda –years later– with Kropotkin. From the end of the 19th century the British Hegelians and especially F.H. Brandley were well received. The thought of Im. Kant was compared with that of Advaita Vedanta. [Regarding the comparison and fruitful coupling of Kantianism with Advaita Vedanta is characteristic the case of K.C. Bhattacharya (1875-1949)]. Arthur Schopenhauer, the famous admirer of Upaniṣads, received frequent references although few Indians knew his philosophy. The works of J. R. Seeley and J. Ruskin became widely known and Karl Marx became well-

State values –earlier unknown– such as the concept of democracy, equality, isonomy, individual liberties and political rights, were imported in India and slowly started influencing social consciousness. The import of modern technology added also a brick to the edifice of secular phenomenon.

But the influx of cultural values and the new ways of thinking, that either intrude through cultural exchanges and engagements, or through the modern educational system –which differed with regard to the subject and method from the traditional one– as well as the effect of Christian missions (mainly Protestant ones) resulted in criticism by Indian intellectuals towards the traditional values and the appeal for the adaptation of modern technocratic and cultural data. However, getting familiar with the West also causes a tendency toward reserve, or even reaction, what was foreign, as well as the effort to preserve traditional religiosity purged of later accretions and urgent innovations. An important representative and exponent of the second trend was the Arya Samāj movement and its founder, Dayananta Saraswati (1883-1924)¹².

However, the contact with the West, the consequent critical evaluation and new values recruitment, as well as rediscovering and activating Indian cultural values that had been fallen into oblivion, gave birth to the phenomenon of “Indian renaissance”, the representatives of which left their mark not only in the field of philosophical thinking, but in the political and social consciousness of India as well.

known in India from the early 20th century exercising an impressive effect. Concerning the influence of European thought in India see: Pr. Sen, *Western Influence in Bengali Literature*, University of Calcutta, Calcutta 1932; 2nd ed. by Saraswaty Library 1947; Geraldine Hancock Forbes, *Positivism in Bengal-A Case Study in the Transmission and Assimilation of an Ideology*, Minerva Associates, Calcutta 1975; P. C. Joshi & K. Damodaran, *Marx comes to India*, Manohar Book Service, Delhi 1975; W. Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Philosophical Understanding*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1988; 1st Indian edition by Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi 1990; G. Amarandos, *Απόλλων και Κρίσινα – Ελλάδα και Ινδία στη νεότερη ευρωπαϊκή σκέψη και λογοτεχνία*, Hellenic Indian Society of Culture & Development, Athens 2022.

12. C. S. Adcock, *The Limits of Tolerance: Indian Secularism and the Politics of Religious Freedom*, Oxford University Press, New York 2014. Especially see the 4th chapter of the 2nd part “The Arya Samaj, a Political Body”, pp. 85-112.

It is noteworthy that today the contribution and work of these people is a subject of academic research and a series of courses is devoted to them in the curricula of Indian universities.

The list would be very extensive but I will selectively mention the main ones in my opinion. First of all, the “father of Indian renaissance”, Rammohun Roy (1772-1833); then, Radhakanta Deb Bahadur (1784-1867), Ishwara Candra Vidyasagar (1820-1891), Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905), and Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-1884), who evaluated, amended and continued the work of Rammohun Roy. Ardent defenders of Western rationalism and culture, such as Akshay Kumar Datta (1820-1886), Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831) and Jyotirao (or Jyotiba) Phule (1827-1890). Social reformers who combined the Western spirit of inquiry with Indian culture, such as Mahadev Govind Ranade (1842-1901), Ramakrishna Gopal Bhadarkar (1837-1925) and Gopal Hari Deshmukh (1823-1892); Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920, endeared as Lokmanya) and Dadabhai Naoroji (1825-1917) as independence fighters and political leaders; poets and free thinkers like Bankim Chandra Chatterji (1838-1894) and Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941); and finally, world-renowned exponents of regenerative trends within Hinduism such as Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-1886) and his disciple Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902).

Religious and social reforms have their causes and their occasions. We would be helped here by the testimony of a Rammohun Roy’s follower that was published on *Tattva Bodhini Patrika* (“The Principles of Knowledge”) journal in 1865:

At the time when Ram Mohan came to Calcutta, the whole of Bengal was steeped in ignorance; the country was over flooded with the rituals of idolatry. People here not appreciate either the duties inculcated in the Vedas (Karam Kanda) or higher philosophy (Brahmajnan) of the Upanishads; but the festivities in which they used to find pleasure were the sacrifice of animals on the occasion of the worship of Durga, the pastoral songs connected with the ‘Nandotsav’ (mainly dealing with the birth of Krishna), the sprinkling of colour at the time of Holi, the crowds at the pulling of carts at ‘Rath Jatra’ and similar things. People strongly believed that they could escape from the punishment of sin, purify themselves and earn religious merit by bathing in the Ganges, offering money to the Brahmans and Vaishnavas, going on pilgrimage to the sacred places and by

keeping fast. Their religious scruples were mainly confined to the rigid rules in matter of food; the purity of heart depended upon the nature of food [...]. The Brahmins who accepted services under the English used to make particular efforts to maintain their superiority and caste privileges. After finishing their business in the office, when they went home in the evening they would first bathe with a view to be cleansed of the impurities by coming in contact with the Mlechhas [that means the “unrefined”, “impure”, “outsiders”; here, the British], offer their regular daily sandhya mantras and then take their food in the eighth part of the day [...]. The Brahmins, in those days were the newspapers, after bathing in the Ganges early in the morning they would go from door to door with their Kosa Kusi (long copper spoons) in their hands and would spread all sorts of news. People used to distribute their gifts to escape from bad name, and sometimes to get renown although they knew that the Brahmins receiving gifts were in most cases ignorant of the shastras [sacred scriptures]. The influence of the Brahmins over the rich sudras was immense. They used to earn lots of money sometimes by blessing the sudras with consecrated water touched by their feet or the dust of their feet. The learned Brahmins of those days paid more attention to the study of Nyaya and Smritis and their position depended upon their knowledge in those subjects. But they were so ignorant of their original authority – the Vedas, that most of them did not know the meaning of the mantras, they repeated thrice a day [...]. Of the chief amusements of the youth of Calcutta, were the fights of the Bulbuls, and kites and Krishnayatra, musical composition of the Kavis. But they were happily free from the drink of evil; they were not yet contaminated by the evils of the European civilization. On the occasion of the Puja, the rich used to invite to dinner the Englishmen and women but did not dine with them. They were not willing to give up idolatry, but were willing to introduce some changes in their manners and customs¹³.

The above-cited testimony does not include all the characteristics of the Indian society of that time. It must be mentioned that marriage between boys (10 to 16 years of age) and girls (6 to 10 years of age) prevailed in Hindu community. As a result thousands of girls were becoming widows even before meet their husbands as they were coming of age. The widows who belonged to higher castes were debarred from the prospect of a second marriage. And as if it was not enough of this exclusion, Sophia Dobson Collet states that the lot of Bengali women

13. Quoted by M. Ch. Kotnala, *Raja Ram Mohun Roy and Indian Awakening in the 19th Century-Socio-Religious*, PhD Thesis, Agra University, Agra 1970, pp. 23-24.

were too often “a tissue of ceaseless oppressions and miseries, while as the crowning horror, the flames of the suttee were lighted with almost incredible frequency even in the immediate vicinity of Calcutta”¹⁴. In addition, the institution of *pardah*, as a consequence of the Muslim conquest, was another feature of domestic life all over northern India; an upper caste woman could not get out of her inner apartment with her face uncovered. In the words of P. C. Ray she was “condemned to a life-long prison, a helpless, prostrate and pathetic figure, with enfeebled health, her naturally keen sense dulled through inaction, without the light of knowledge illumining her vision, steeped in ignorance and prejudice, groping in the dark – a martyr to the conventions of the society in which she had been born”¹⁵. In a similar way, the life of the “untouchables” was painful; they lived cut off from the rest of society, in specific areas, excluded from schooling, debarred from such privileges as using the village well, and tasked to follow austere rules regarding the conduct with the upper castes.

The hypocrisy and superstition that intruded into the religiosity of India were sketched on an article titled “Rammohun Roy” by Kisory Chand Mitter in *The Calcutta Review* on 1845:

So effectually has the cruel and demoralizing superstition of Hindus extinguished the religious feelings of their nature, and prevented their ideas of the very fundamentals of divine worship, that they never think of worshipping their God except by means of unintelligible and unmeaning mantras. These mantras, which they have been taught to articulate without comprehending their import, are considered to be a passport to heaven. Such lip deep and mechanical devotion is a mockery of worship and a downright insult to Him, who is to be loved with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the soul and with all the strength¹⁶.

14. Sophia Dobson Collet, *The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy*, D. K. Biswas and Pr. Ch. Ganguli (eds), S. Br. Samaj, Calcutta ³1962, p. 61. Quoted also by M. Ch. Kotnala, *op.cit.*, p. 26.

15. Pr. Ch. Ray, *Life & Times of C. R. Das: The Story of Bengal's Self-Expression*, Oxford University Press, Bombay – Calcutta – Madras (1923) 1927, p. 4. See also Kotnala, *op.cit.*, p. 26.

16. K. Ch. Mitter, “Rammohun Roy”, *The Calcutta Review* IV, VIII (1845).

Historians and Indologists generally consider the religious and social reforms and the emergence of secular trends in 19th century India as the highest achievement of the intellectuals of that period. According to Saral Jhingan, “the impact of modern, western, liberal ideas of democracy, equality, justice, dignity of man and autonomy of secular life, really jolted Indian intelligentsia out of their centuries’ old stupor. It inspired several independent socio-religious reform movements in the nineteenth century, collectively called Indian renaissance”¹⁷.

The new ideas, along with realizing and pointing out the anachronistic institutions of the Indian society, stimulated the reformative zeal on the part of the intellectuals, most of whom belonged to Brahmin castes and came from Bengal and Maharashtra; that is to say, the prominent areas of receiving new ideas along with their corollary ideological ferments.

During the first two decades of the 19th century, very few reform movements were taking place throughout the country. They weren’t well-organized, nor could they boast of any substantial successes. However, at the end of that century their branches exceeded one hundred in number. Their effect came off ultimately catalytic as they widened the secularization process of Indian society.

Initially, the struggle for reforms manifested itself in a critical mood against religion. Its oldest exponent was Rammohun Roy¹⁸ (1772-1833).

The Bengali “reformer”, “the Father of Modern India’s Renaissance”, or more simply “the Father of Modern India”¹⁹ was an offspring of an affluent Brahmin family²⁰. He studied in Patna, which was one of the

17. Saral Jhingan, *Secularism in India: A Reappraisal*, Har-Anand Publications, New Delhi 1995, p. 122.

18. I preferred to retain the older spelling of his name, instead of Ram Mohan Roy, because that is how himself signed it.

19. Satis Chandra Chakravarti (ed.), *The Father of Modern India. Commemoration Volume of the Rammohun Roy Centenary Celebrations, 1933*, Rammohun Roy Centenary Committee, Calcutta 1935; Br. C. Robertson, *Raja Rammohun Ray: The Father of Modern India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 1995; Gopal Madal, “Ram Mohan Roy: The Father of Modern India’s Renaissance”, *RESEARCH REVIEW International Journal of Multidisciplinary* 8, 8 (2023), pp. 154-158 (<https://doi.org/10.31305/rrijm.2023.v08.n08.026>), <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1VSTfAoA2KrKXo0Dhkixqn23-PrsOKyXi/view> [05.01.2024].

20. Regarding the life of Rammohun Roy, see A. P. Sen, *Rammohun Roy: A Critical Biography*, Penguin, New Delhi 2012; Mary Carpenter, *The Last Days in England of the Rajah*

major centres of Islamic studies in the country. He was obviously affected by the Islamic environment in expressing resentment towards image worship. The learning of Persian and Arabic language brought him into contact with Sufism and Aristotelian logic. His mother's family, which was orientated to the Mother-goddess' worship, exhorted him to go to Varanasi in order to learn Sanskrit, but he gave himself preference to Persian studies. The conflict with his parents on the issue of worshipping sculptures and images of Hindu deities and his subsequent expulsion from his parental home led him at the age of 16 in Tibet or Bhutan. There he came into contact with monks of Tibetan Buddhism and debated with them on the question of lama worship. In the 25th year of his age, after he had already become reconciled with his father and accepted his father's name inheritance (1796), was a successful real estate agent and lender to employees of the East Indian Company. In 1814, he settled in Calcutta as an employee of that company. He already was fluent in English, as well as in Sanskrit and he had obtained some knowledge of Greek and Latin languages. Having a secure living, he engaged in the study of religious texts, and in the writing of monographs and articles that led to the inevitable conflict with representatives of Hindu traditionalism and the Baptist missionaries of Serampore. Although he had a great respect for the moral teaching of Christianity, he could not accept the divinity of Jesus Christ and the existence of miracles²¹. Carried away by the study of Western philosophical tradition and scientific thought, he approached Hinduism with a rationalistic spirit which led him not only to reject the image worship of Hindu deities, but also the miracles and the concept of reincarnation. Being abhorred of certain practices of Hinduism, he led a campaign for social reforms. His campaign against the "voluntary" immolation of widows (satī, or suttee) on their husbands' funeral pyre was so effective that caused its legal ban by the governor William Bentick in 1829²². Being convinced

Rammohun Roy, E. T. Whitfield, 178 Strand, W. C., London 1875.

21. A. Al-A. Ghazi, *Raja Rammohun Roy: Encounter with Islam and Christianity and Articulation of Hindu Self-Consciousness*, Xlibris Corporation, Bloomington 2010, pp. 100-126.

22. Pr. Soman, "Ram Mohan Roy and the abolition of sati system in India", *International Journal of Humanities, Art and Social Studies (IJHAS)* 1, 2 (2017) pp. 75-82, <https://airccse.com>.

of the value and utility of British education system, to the point of asserting that the sovereignty of the British in India was due to Divine Providence, he claimed the entrance of girls and women in the educational institutions. Apart of schools, he also founded the Hindu College in Calcutta, which opened its doors in 1819. He opposed to the plans of British to support the useless –as he believed– Sanskrit studies. Being excited by the enshrining of constitutional freedoms in the U.S.A., in the post-Napoleonic Europe and Latin America, he envisioned a similar development for India. On behalf of prominent citizens of Calcutta, he appealed to the colonial government protesting against a decree of 1823 which restricted the freedom of the press. In 1827 he protested against the law which excluded Hindus and Muslims from serving on a jury in cases where the accused was a Christian. Both legislative measures were withdrawn few years later. In 1828 he founded the Brahmo Sabha association (later renamed Brahmo Samāj, that is “Society of Brahma”, or “Society of God”). Its members, Hindu monotheists, met once a week to listen passages from the Upaniṣads, to attend discourses, and chant hymns –usually composed by Rammohun Roy himself– to the One and Only God.

Prayer was not part of this rather cold, intellectual approach of the divine, which was addressed mainly to the intellectual élite of the time. Having in mind the 18th century European deism, he was pushed in search and revival of the primary purity of Hindu worship. In the last years of his life, he undertook a five-month journey to England breaking the taboo of his caste to cross the “black waters”, that is, not to leave the motherland of India (in fact, a scandalous choice to his fellow Hindus). He submitted his proposals to a committee of the British Parliament for the betterment of the government of India, suggesting various ways to limit the abuse of power on the part of employees of the East India Company. He died in Bristol in 1833, sick and poor.

His first published text was a short treatise in Persian language titled *Tuhfatu’l murwahhidin* (“A Gift to the Monotheists”, 1803). The orientation of the treatise in question is deistic. He also tries to track down the

idea of the one and true God in all religions, but his approach is quite confusing; it scales from clarity to confusion, to a point that gives the impression that the author manifests atheistic tendencies²³. It is not that Rammohun Roy denies the existence of God and the other world; he just accepts them with reservation for pragmatic reasons²⁴. His reservation is based on the finding that neither the existence of God nor the existence of the other world could be proved. Nevertheless, he accepts the role of religion as a factor maintaining social cohesion:

They (mankind) are to be excused in admitting and teaching the doctrine of the existence of the soul and the next world (although the real nature of both is hidden) for the sake of the welfare of the people (society), as they simply, for fear of punishment in the next world and of the penalties inflicted by the earthly authorities, refrain from the commission of illegal deeds²⁵.

Then he looks for the origin of religion and locates it in the field of social needs and relationships. He rejects its revelational origin; religion is nothing more than a mechanism that serves to preserve existing property relations and to regulate social contact. With his own words:

Although it cannot be denied that the social instinct in man demands that every individual of this species should have permanent regulations for the [different] stages of life and for living together, but social laws depend on an understanding of each other's meaning (or ideas) and on certain rules which separate the property of one from that of another, and provide for the removal of pain which one gives to another. Making these the basis, the inhabitants of all the countries, distant islands and lofty mountains, have according to their progress and intellectuality, formed words indicative of the meaning and origin of faiths on which at present stand the governments of the world²⁶.

23. K. N. Pannikar, "Culture and Consciousness in Modern India: A Historical Perspective", *Social Scientist* 18, 4 (1990), pp. 3-32, 5, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3517525> [26.09.2023].

24. Ibid, p. 5.

25. J. Ch. Ghose (ed.), *The English works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, The Panini Office, Bahadurganj, Allahabad 1906, p. 947.

26. J. Ch. Ghose (ed.), *The English works of Raja Rammohan Roy*, op.cit., p. 947.

That “sociological” interpretation of religion led him to the question and rejection of religious doctrines (dogmas) and miracles. He assumed that both of them were not necessarily integral and inherent in the original character of religion. Both of them, doctrines and miracles, were a part of an evolutionary process devised by the religious leaders purely for their selfish interests. They achieved their goal by cheating unsuspecting believers using as effective instruments supernaturalism and the exclusivity of the scriptural knowledge for themselves. So, all religions, their doctrines and practices, assumed the character of human deception²⁷.

Tufatu’l muwahhidin is the first and last text where Ram Mohun Roy attributes the origin of religion to social deeds and relations. In his later works, his criticism is not directed towards the origin of religion; instead, he criticizes its organizational structure and its official representatives, overemphasizing at the same time the uniqueness of God and the purification of Hindu tradition from extraneous elements.

His first book in English language under the title *The Translation of an Abridgement of the Vedant, or, Resolution of all the Veds* (Calcutta 1816) begins with the following words:

The greater part of Brahmins, as well as of other sects of Hindoos [Hindus], are quite incapable of justifying that idolatry, which they continue to practise. When questioned on the subject, in place of adducing reasonable arguments in support of their conduct, they conceive it fully sufficient to quote their ancestors as positive authorities! And some of them are become very ill disposed towards me, because I have forsaken idolatry, for the worship of the true and eternal God! In order, therefore, to vindicate my own faith, and that of our early forefathers, I have been endeavoring, for some time past, to conceive my countrymen of the true meaning of our sacred books; and to prove, that my aberration deserves not the opprobrium which some unreflecting persons have been so ready to throw upon me²⁸.

He also explains that the sacred texts were classified and presented in abridged form by the sage Vyāsa, “but from its being concealed within the dark curtain of the Sanskrit language, and the Brahmins permitting

27. K. N. Pannikar, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

28. R. R. Roy, *Translation of an Abridgement of the Vedant, or, Resolution of all the Veds*, Calcutta 1816, p. 3; see also, J. Ch. Ghose, *op.cit.*, p. 947.

themselves alone to interpret, or even to touch any book of the kind, the Vedanta, although perpetually quoted, is little known to the public; and the practice of few Hindoos [Hindus] indeed bears the least accordance with its precepts!”²⁹. On that point he breaks up with one aspect of Brahmanical tradition. “The black curtain of the Sanskrit language” should have to be lifted, so that the content of the major sacred texts become known to Indians and Europeans through translations into “Hindoostanee and Bengalee languages” and in English³⁰. With this rationale translates in three-year period (1816-1819) the Kena, Īśa, and Kātha Upaniṣad into Bengali and English, simultaneously, and the Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad only in Bengali. He believes that the contact of the Hindus with their sacred texts would awaken them from the “dream of error” leading them to a religious and social renaissance. At the same time, the English translation of the texts would indicate to the Europeans that the “pure spirit” of Hinduism should not be associated with some practices of its followers, because “the superstitious practices which deform the Hindoo [Hindu] religion have nothing to do with the pure spirit of its dictates!”³¹.

The sacred texts, as he constantly repeats, do not provide any justification for the spread of formalism, the polytheistic idolatry and the prejudices of contemporary Hinduism. He turns to the sources of tradition in search of primordial religiosity of Hinduism in order to demonstrate the later distortive additions and degenerative tendencies. For him the “authoritative texts” are above all the Vedas and the Vedanta, meaning the Upaniṣads and the Vedānta-sūtras of Bādarāyaṇa along with the commentary of Śaṅkara (788-820 by tradition). In addition, he refers extensively to Bhagavad-gīta and to the “Laws of Manu”, i.e. Manusmṛti (pronounced, Manu-smṛiti). He also refers to Purāṇas and Tantras which “[...] are of course to be considered as Śāstras [Śāstras, holy scriptures] for they they repeatedly declare God to be one and above the apprehension of external and internal senses”³².

29. J. Ch. Ghose, *op.cit.*, p. 3.

30. J. Ch. Ghose, *op.cit.*, p. 4.

31. *Ibid*, p. 4.

32. R. R. Roy, *Translation of Several Principal Books, Passages, and Texts of The Veds, and of some controversial works on Brahmunical Theology*, Parbury, Allen, & Co., London, 1832, p.

He turns to Upaniṣads to fight idolatry. Against the view of Brahmins that direct knowledge of the Absolute, the Brahman, is impossible without contemplation on idols, he responds with the Upaniṣadic saying “worship only the Ātman”, i.e. the individual self that is identified with Brahman, and asks: “Does the scripture ask you to do something that is impossible? Are you prepared to attribute such an absurdity to the scripture?”³³. To justify his position, he refers to the way Muslims, Protestants and Sikhs worship God. He resorts to sacred texts to strengthen his position against widow burning, appealing for “compassion” and mentioning “the civilized nations of the world”³⁴.

In general, his thinking is governed by the conflict between faith and action, sacred texts and customs, real meaning and misinterpretation. The purified, genuine monotheism is what he conceives as the true message of the “religious books”³⁵. This monotheism is manifested –in his opinion– in the Vedas and Śaṅskara’s monistic Vedānta. It can still be found in the Purāṇas and other texts on the condition that they will be interpreted in a correct way³⁶. That means, it should be understood that their metaphors and allegories concern those persons who are not still able to acquire “genuine” knowledge. Because, in the final analysis, the major texts teach the uniqueness of God and “the rational worship of the God of Nature”³⁷. His belief is that “reason” and “common sense” walk hand in hand with the real meaning of the sacred texts. Beyond the “natural tendency of the ignorant” is the selfishness of the Brahmins and the traditional scholars (pandits) who distorted their true meaning. His appeal to logic and common sense is also a call for liberation from the blind adherence to traditional norms and prejudices. Merely continuing the behavior of one’s ancestors would be appropriate for animals, he explains in his book

84.

33. Quoted by V. S. Naravane, *Modern Indian Thought*, Orint Longman, New Delhi 1978, p. 26.

34. Concerning Rammohun Roy’s argumentation against idol worship see V. S. Naravane, *Modern Indian Thought*, op.cit., pp. 25-26.

35. W. Halbfass, *India and Europe*, op.cit., p. 205.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 205.

37. R. R. Roy, *Translation of Several Principal Books, Passages, and Texts of The Veds, and of some controversial works on Brahmunicipal Theology*, op.cit., p. 92.

titled *Vedāntagrantha* (1815)³⁸, written in Bengali language. Nevertheless, he finds that logic and common sense have their limits, stating clearly that they are in no way able to supplant both religious tradition and the authoritative texts in order to undertake the people's guidance: "When we look to the traditions of ancient nations, we often find them at variance with each other; and when, discouraged by this circumstance, we appeal to reason as a surer guide, we soon find how incompetent it is insufficient, alone, to conduct us to the object of our pursuit"³⁹.

Rammohun Roy never described himself as an innovator. On the contrary, he even gave this designation to representatives of orthodox Brahmin circles, such as Raghunandana (who lived in the 16th century, but was assigned to a more recent date by Rammohun Roy), who added, as he thought, foreign elements in the ancient Vedic tradition. However, he wanted to assume the role of the reformer, having in mind, as an example, the Protestant Reformation for which he considered that it removed the deviations that corrupted the Christian tradition restoring it to its original authenticity: "I begin to think that something similar might have taken place in India; and similar results might follow from a reformation of popular idolatry"⁴⁰.

He was succeeded in the leadership of Brahmo Samāj by Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905) who rested on the Upaniṣads in order to proclaim the belief in the one and only God. After a research in the holy city of Benares (the present-day Varanasi), he rejected the notions of infallibility and authority of the Vedas considering them as later additions that are not attested in the oldest tradition. Following Rammohun Roy's footsteps, he disapproved idol worship and sacrificial ceremonies. However, in contrast to Rammohun Roy, he posed the question as to the authority of the Hindu holy scriptures in a very direct and explicit manner. As Wilhelm Halbfass mentions "together with his friends, he tried to determine how much of the traditional material was indeed binding

38. See, R. Roy, *The Only True God: Works on Religion. Selected and translated from Bengali and Sanskrit by D. H. Killingley*, Grevatt & Grevatt, Newcastle upon Tyne 1982, p. 13.

39. R. R. Roy, *Translation of Several Principal Books...*, op.cit., p. 46.

40. Letter to A. Duff, quoted by Sophia Dobson Collet, *The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy*, op.cit. p. 280.

and reliable and could be accepted once and for all as the valid basis of the ‘religion of the believers in Brahma’”⁴¹. Being influenced by Muslim tradition he rejected, unlike its predecessor, the monism of Advaita Vedānta. He did not accept the identification of individual self with God because it does not serve, according to his opinion, the development of a new religious and social life. He thought that the Upaniṣadic saying “tat tvam asi” (“that you are”, which means the identification of the Absolute with the individual self)⁴² limits man’s independence. And, any teaching that limits his independence contradicts the spirit of monotheism. “This universe”, he once said to the famous Bengali mystic Ramakrishna Paramahansa, “is like a chandelier and each living being is a light in it [...]. God has created men to manifest His own glory; otherwise, who could know this universe? Everything becomes dark without the lights in the chandelier. One cannot even see the chandelier itself”⁴³. He thought he could replace Śaṅkara’s commentaries on the Upaniṣads with his own interpretation. In his opinion, from the multitude of texts of the Indian literature only the Upaniṣads are worth talking about because they speak the language of the heart:

I came to see that the pure heart, filled with the light of intuitive knowledge (ātma-pratyayasiddhajñānojjvalita viśuddha hṛdaya), – this was its basis. Brahma reigned in the pure heart alone. The pure, unsophisticated heart was the seat of Brahmanism (brāhmadharmer pattanabhūmi). We could accept those texts only of the Upaniṣads which accorded with that heart. Those sayings which disagreed with the heart we could not accept⁴⁴.

His teaching on intuitive knowledge and his interpretation of religious texts as records of inner experience paved the way for the contact of Hinduism with other religions. They also paved the way for the expression

41. W. Halbfass, *India and Europe*, op.cit., p. 223.

42. Chāndogya Upaniṣad, 8.7.

43. “M”, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, transl. S. Nikhilananda, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras 1986, p. 650.

44. *The Autobiography of Maharshi Devendranath Tagore*, transl. S. Tagore – Indira Devi, Macmillan & Co, London 1914 (repr. 1916), p. 161 (Bengali original: *Ātmajīvanī*, ed. Satīśacandra Cakravartī, 4th edition Calcutta 1962, p. 124). Cited also by W. Halbfass, op.cit., p. 223.

of neo-Hindu views such as that of Prof. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975), who saw in all valid religious texts, either within or out of Hinduism, as records of “experiences”, and thus understood “intuition” and “experience” as the basis and not only of all religions⁴⁵ but as the common denominator on which a universal religion could be built⁴⁶.

The syncretic trends and the dynamics for the prevalence of a universal religion, which exist in a rudimentary form in the thought of Debendranath Tagore, manifest themselves more obviously in the work of his associate Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-1884). The latter had graduated from the Hindu College, influenced by the study of T. Carlyle and R. W. Emerson. He joined the Brahmo Samāj in 1857, taking a leading role in side of Devendranath Tagore. Due to his activity the message of the Samāj transcended the borders of Bengal. On his own initiative the Samāj rejects the rites of passage (saṃskāras) of Hindu tradition by inventing its own. Nevertheless, the Samāj disintegrated due to a controversy that erupted concerning the caste question. Keshab Chandra Sen renounced caste system and called upon the “twice-born” (dvijati) to remove the “sacred thread” (yajñopavītam) that distinguished them from the members of lower castes and the outcasts. Devendranath Tagore and the more conservative members of the Samāj did not respond to his call, so that Keshab Chandra Sen and his followers established in 1866 the Brahmo Samāj of India (Bharatvarśiya Brahmo Samāj). Under his leadership the Samāj worked for the improvement of the women status and the abolition of child-marriage. Moreover, it promulgated intermarriage, breaking the rules of the caste system, and supported a second marriage for the widows. These efforts were considered revolutionary against the prevailed tradition.

Concerning his main ideas, he intensified the rejection of the authority of the Vedas by giving priority to “intuitive knowledge” over any written “revelation”. He looked for “inspired” sources beyond the Hindu literature in order to demonstrate the existing harmony between the various religious traditions. In 1880 he proclaimed the start of the “New Dispensation”

45. W. Halbfass, *op.cit.*, p. 224.

46. S. Radhakrishnan, *Eastern religious and Western Thought*, Oxford University Press, Delhi – London – New York (1939), 1985, pp. 306-348; R. N. Minor, *Radhakrishnan: A Religious Biography*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1987.

(Nava Vidhāna), which by following the “dispensations” of the Old and New Testament, was intended to establish the Universal Church and the harmony of all religions. In his *Ślokaṣaṃgraha* (“A Collection of passages”), a counterpart of Debendranath’s *Brāhmadharmagrantha*, quoting from sources of five religions (Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Islamic, Chinese), states the following:

I believe in the Church Universal which is the deposit of all ancient wisdom and the receptacle of all modern science, which recognizes in all prophets and saints a harmony, in all scriptures a unity and through all dispensations a continuity, which abjures all that separates and divides, always magnifies unity and peace, which harmonizes reason and faith, yoga and bhakti, asceticism and social duty in their highest forms and which shall make of all nations and sects one kingdom and one family in the fullness of time⁴⁷.

With this confession it becomes clear that Keshab Candra Sen understands history and soteriology in a non-exclusively Hindu way. He had already approached Christianity, characterizing it as the “religion of Humanity” and “worship of Humanity”⁴⁸. However, the concept of “universality” keeps him at a distance from it; Jesus is nothing more than a ṛṣi (pronounced as rishi), a great visionary like Buddha, Caitanya, Moses, Kabīr etc. All of them through the “power of the heart” constitute an “indissoluble organic unity”⁴⁹.

In his attempt to find the criterion of truth and to establish the validity of “intuition” and the “voice of the heart”, which he perceives in himself as well as in the testimony of the “seers”, Keshab Candra Sen, like Debendranath Tagore previously, adheres to the Western philosophical terminology of 18th and 19th centuries. He uses Western philosophical conceptions, such as “instinctive belief”, “common sense”, “a priori truths”, “moral sense”, “primitive cognitions” and a complete arsenal of corresponding concepts⁵⁰. Being familiar, thanks to his readings, with Western culture he looks forward to cooperation, complementarity and

47. W. Halbfass, *India and Europe*, op.cit., p. 225.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 225.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 225.

50. S. Tattvabhushan, *The Philosophy of Brahmaisam*, Higginbotham & Co., Madras 1909, pp. 93 ff. Cf. W. Halbfass, op. cit, p. 225.

mutual correction between East and West, especially between India and Europe. The latter could donate to the Indians its science and exact thought, while Europeans in turn could be taught “ancient wisdom from India”⁵¹. That coupling of scientific thought and religious spirituality would be emerged a little later by the founder of Ramakrishna Mission, Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), presenting it as typical of neo-Hindu identity.

Despite his wish to win over Christianity and to connect the “New Dispensation” with the Holy Bible, he considers himself a representative of Hinduism. Only Hinduism could complete the world domination of Christianity and at the same time perfect itself therein. Speaking of Jesus Christ, he states: “The Acts of his Hindu Apostles will form a fresh chapter in his universal gospel. Can he deny us, his logical succession?”⁵².

In Sen’s thought the assimilability and the versatility of the Hindu tradition become evident. The “Christianization” of India means at the same time “Hinduization” of Christianity.⁵³ His program was presented by Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907), a journalist with patriotic zeal, known for his anti-British polemic, who, even though had been converted to Christianity –first as a Protestant and then as a Roman Catholic– believed that he had not betrayed Hinduism. He had merely actualized the spiritual universalism immanent in his “Hinduism”.

At the time when Brahmo Samāj was extending its activity by establishing branches in various regions of India, in Maharashtra the Prarthana Samāj (“Society of Prayer”) led by judge Mahadeva Govind Ranade (1842-1901) propagated ideas similar to those of Brahmo. Its members were monotheists who opposed the idol worship, rejected the authority of Vedas and the concept of reincarnation. They advocated that their theism was nothing more than a continuation of bhakti (loving devotion to the divine) movement (12th to 16th century A.D.). The activism of Samāj in the social level had been important as it sought the uplift of the oppressed castes. In his book titled *Ekeshvarvada kaifayat (Defense of Monotheism)* Ranade advocates the belief in a personal god, describing monotheism

51. See *Lectures in India*, London 1901-1904, vol. I, p. 325.

52. *Lectures in India*, vol. I, p. 466.

53. W. Halbfass, *op.cit.*, p. 226.

as a view that steers between the two extremes of absolutism of Advaita and materialism. Absolutism leaves no space for freedom and materialism degenerates freedom into anarchy, belittling morality. Monotheism, on the contrary, preserves moral and religious values and the individual's freedom as well. He considers Absolutism, as proposed by Advaita philosophy, to be "destructive of God-realization"⁵⁴. He also points out the repeatedly revealed contradiction in Indian history between the monotheistic "spirit" and the polytheistic "practice" of Hinduism. He described it as "a puzzle that baffles understanding".⁵⁵ Concerning this "puzzle", he states: "I offer no solution. I have been thinking about it for a long time, but I have not been able to find a rational and consistent explanation"⁵⁶. His followers described his view as "rational theism", though he did not use that term. From the circle of his followers Ramkrishna Gopal Bhandarkar (1837-1925) and Gopal Hari Deshmukh (1823-1892) were distinguished. The former considers that by resorting to the sources of each religion we will find that "the temple in which we should find and worship God...is the heart of man" and "[...] that mere morality will not exalt the spirit or satisfy the heart's craving"⁵⁷. And as for man's salvation, that "depends upon God-the Father, Friend and Saviour"⁵⁸. So, Bhandarkar's religious thought is distinguished by its versatility, its opposition to formalism and its focus on the uniqueness of God. He described the Prārthanā Samāj as a "New Dispensation" which had "cleared our religious vision"⁵⁹, recalling at this point Keshab Chandra Sen's attitude. Deshmukh was known for his opposition against the prejudices and superstitions of the folk and the Brahmins' pretensions. He rejected the revealed texts by saying that "the senses and the mind are the sole sources of knowledge and spirituality"⁶⁰. He claimed also that "the human mind is the greatest śāstra [sacred scripture]. All other śāstras are subordinate to it"⁶¹. Via ironic tones he

54. V. S. Naravane, *Modern Indian Thought, op.cit.*, p. 45

55. *Ibid.*, p. 45

56. *Ibid.*, p. 45

57. R. G. Bhandarkar, *Collected Works*, vol. II, p. 615.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 615.

59. V. S. Naravane, *op.cit.*, p. 46.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

railed against the ascetic ideal, claiming that “the worldly are nearer to God than ascetics” and “if God had wanted us to be wild, he would have made us like brutes and placed us in caves”⁶².

The so far mentioned reformers and reform movements, represent that side of Neo-Hinduism which worked against the retrogressive aspects of Hindu society of that time. However, in no case do they inveigh against religious belief or against the divine. Their motives were mainly humanitarian and less religious. Nevertheless, due to the fact that the retrogressive aspects of the society were overlapped by the religious tradition, the reforms were promoted through a reinterpretation of tradition and its purification from later additions. On the one hand, the reinterpretation, combined with the monotheistic orientation, facilitated the success of the social reforms and, on the other hand it initiated critical research and the re-evaluation of religious tradition.

On this point Vishvanath S. Naravane states:

The Indian thinker has approached western thought warily, because, while accepting rationalism and humanism, he cannot swallow materialism and he believes, rightly or wrongly, that western civilization is committed to materialism. He is prepared to accommodate many new values, but his world outlook is predominantly religious. From Ram Mohun Roy to Radhakrishnan, the common assumption has been that, though Indian thought needs reorientation, it cannot abandon its traditional concern with the transcendental and the timeless [...]. In the West, intellectual revolutions have usually taken place in opposition to religion. In India every aspect of the modern enlightenment, and every movement through which it has been expressed, reveals the foundational role of religion⁶³.

On the other hand, there were movements, like New Bengal in Kolkata and that of atheist Ramaswamy Naikar in Tamil Nadu region that turned more strongly against Brahmanism and tradition. Especially the former, the first members of which were students of Hindu College, influenced by the ideas of their teacher, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831), openly rejected everything they considered irrational and illogical in Indian society. That movement strengthened its activity by issuing journals and establishing new branches. Some of the “Derozians”

62. V. S. Naravane, *Modern Indian Thought*, op.cit., p. 47.

63. V. S. Naravane, op.cit, p. 16.

renounced Hinduism, presenting their renouncement to the public by consuming beef and drinking alcoholic beverages. Due to that attitude, the reaction of the Hindu community leaders was immediate. Although Derozio tried to justify his position by stating that he was making known the views of atheist intellectuals, he was forced to resign. In the mid-19th century the New Bengal movement declined. However, its contribution to the field of social changes was noteworthy.

The activity of the reform movements of the 19th century had an impact only on the Hindu community; apparently due to the fact that the prevailing social evils described and focused by the reformers characterized only that community. The Muslims were uninvolved in the struggle for social changes during that period.

The reformers were aware of the contradictions and reluctance of the Hindu society. Most of them recognized the utility of Western thought and even believed in a fruitful collaboration with British overlords. At least, to the most of their requests for the abolition of antiquated institutions and customs the colonial government responded by abolishing them by law.

3. Secular Thought in the 20th Century

In the 20th century the figures of Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar and Jawaharlal Nehru, are typical on the way that paved secularism.

Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), considered as the father of Indian secularism, did not find out any inconsistency between science and religion. "I reject any religious doctrine", he used to say, "that does not appeal to reason and is in conflict with morality"⁶⁴. He also rejected the doctrine of the infallibility of scriptures by asserting repeatedly: "I exercise my judgment about every scripture, including Gītā. I cannot let a scriptural text supersede my reason. While I believe that principal books are inspired, they suffer a double distillation. Firstly, they come through a human prophet, and then through the commentaries of interpreters.

64. Quoted by Saral Jhingran, *Secularism in India*, p. 265.

Nothing in them comes from God directly”⁶⁵. He also proposed the removal of the word “god” from the National Congress declaration and thus it is not mentioned neither in the Congress Party program nor in the Indian constitution. However, the connection between religion and politics in his thought is well-known. His socio-political activity is inspired by religion without preventing him to claim that a person’s value rests on his/her human nature and not in his religious identity.

Bhirao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956), one of the main architects of the independent India’s constitution and a member of the Māhār (untouchable) caste, believed that Hinduism and Islam stood as obstacles to the fledgling state’s efforts for social reforms. His words are revealing:

The religious conceptions in this country are so vast that they cover every aspect of life, from birth till death. There is nothing which is not religion. There is nothing extraordinary in saying that we ought to strive hereafter to limit the definition of religion in such a manner that it shall not extend beyond belief and such rituals as may be connected with ceremonials which are essentially religious... I personally do not understand why religion should be given this vast expansive jurisdiction, so as to cover the whole life and to prevent the legislature from encroaching upon that field. After all, what are we having this liberty for? We are having this liberty in order to reform our social system which is so full of inequities, discriminations and other things which conflict with our fundamental rights⁶⁶.

History showed that B. R. Ambedkar had a serious disagreement with Gandhi about the future status of the untouchables. Gandhi wanted the untouchables, the “Harijans” (“Children of God”) as he called them, to be admitted in the caste system, by joining the Śūdras, the lowest social unit (varṇa) within it. On the contrary, Ambedkar favoured the complete abolition of the caste system. Already, by 1927 he had begun with public demonstrations and marches to open up public drinking water resources for all the low castes and the untouchables. In a conference in late 1927, he publicly condemned *Manusmṛti* (The Laws of Manu), the classic Hindu legal text, for ideologically justifying caste discrimination and “untouchability”, and he ceremonially burned copies of it. In the same

65. Saral Jhingran, *op.cit.*, p. 266.

66. Quoted in Saral Jhingran, *Secularism in India*, pp. 183-184.

way, on 25 December 1927, he led thousands of his followers to burn copies of *Manusmṛti*. He also started a struggle for their right to enter Hindu temples. In 1930, he launched the Kalaram Temple movement in the city of Nashik after three months of preparation. About 15,000 volunteers assembled at the Kalaram Temple making one of the greatest processions of Nashik. Women and men walked with discipline, order and determination to see the statue of god for the first time. But, when they reached the temple, the gates were closed by Brahmin authorities. Finally, Ambedkar, annoyed by the continuing discriminations based on caste status within the ruling Congress Party, he left Nehru's cabinet and publicly in Nagpur on 14 October 1956 renounced Hinduism and converted himself to Buddhism, along with his wife and around 380,000 of his supporters at the same ceremony⁶⁷. So, Ambedkar was born as a Hindu but died as a non-Hindu. Generally, he viewed Hinduism as an "oppressive religion". In his book *Annihilation of Caste*, he claims that the only lasting way that a true casteless society could be achieved is through destroying the belief of the sanctity of the Śāstras and denying their authority. In his book titled *Riddles in Hinduism* (1954-1955), he is critical of Hindu religious texts and epics. Nevertheless, he was critical also of Christianity considering it incapable of fighting injustices.

However, Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), the first Prime Minister of independent India, was essentially the exemplary representative of secular trends in the country. He was an agnostic and opposed in general to religion; especially in its organized form. He thought that such a religion breeds a temper against science, and is characterized by narrowness and intolerance. As an enthusiastic defender of critical temper, scientific approach and reason⁶⁸, he considered that all these should not only concern theoretical pursuits, but also be a way of life in society. He believed that "as knowledge advances the domain of religion in the narrow sense of the term shrinks"⁶⁹ and that the need for some

67. R. E. Buswell Jr. and D. S. Lopez Jr., *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford 2013, p. 34.

68. S. Khilani, "Nehru's Faith", in: Anuradha Dingwaney Needham and Rajeswari Suner Rajan (eds.), *The Crisis of Secularism in India*, Duke University Press, Durham and London 2007, pp. 89-103, 91.

69. Saral Jhingran, *Secularism in India*, p. 265.

belief in “things of spirit” as well as “ethical, spiritual and idealistic conceptions or anything else, they have no anchorage, no objectives or purpose in life”⁷⁰.

Nevertheless, for Nehru the Indian version of secularism does not imply hostility towards religion. He states: “It [India as a secular state], of course, does not mean a people lacking morals or religion. It means that while religion is completely free, the State including in its wide fold various religions and cultures, gives protection and opportunity to all, and this brings about an atmosphere of tolerance and cooperation”⁷¹. In the same vein Bimrao Ramji Ambedkar states: “It [India’s being a secular state] does not mean that we shall not take into consideration the religious sentiments of the people. All that the secular State means is that the parliament shall not be competent to impose any particular religion on the rest of the people”⁷².

Conclusively, the Indian version of secularization does not entail the denial or elimination of religion. Its proponents accepted that religion plays an important role in man’s life and they tried to adapt it to the formation program of the new state.

4. Is Indian Society Secular Nowadays?

It is not easy to answer that question just with a “yes” or “no”. Both the Hindu religious tradition and Hindu society are no longer those of the Vedic age, nor of the 19th or the early 20th century. Sixty years ago, the distinguished Indologist Arthur L. Basham (1914-1986) was completing the epilogue to the second edition of his *The Wonder that was India* in the following words:

Much that was useless in ancient Indian culture has already perished. The extravagant and barbarous hecatombs of the Vedic age have no long since been forgotten, though animal sacrifice continues in some sects. Widows have long

70. *Ibid.*, p. 265.

71. V. Pr. Luthera, *The Concept of Secular State in India*, Oxford University Press, Calcutta 1964, p. 159.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 160.

ceased to be burnt on their husbands' pyres. Girls may not by law be married in childhood. In buses and trains all over India brāhmins rub shoulders with the lower castes without consciousness of grave pollution, and the temples are open to all by law. Caste is vanishing; the process began long ago, but its pace is now so rapid that the more objectionable features of caste may have disappeared within a generation or so. The old family system is adapting itself to present-day conditions. In fact the whole face of India is altering, but the cultural traditions continue, and it will never be lost⁷³.

Probably the British indologist was overly optimistic concerning the elimination of the caste system. Social changes in Indian society are generally slow and they mainly concern the rising –in economic terms– “middle class” which started to be formatted in the early '90s. Secularization and modernization have certainly knocked the door of the urban centers of India, noticed mainly in youth's behavior, in the religious indifference of a small part of population and in the formal participation in the worship of larger one. And in the Indian province the villager will not first run for treatment to the deity of smallpox, but to the nearest physician or hospital. Additionally, secularization is being noticed in the shrinking of private worship – even that practiced by Brahmin castes. Certainly, the role of the priestly Brahmanical castes has been limited and the strict prohibitions of the past that determined communication between upper and lower castes have been in general relaxed. However in some parts of the country, e.g. Rajasthan, Gujarat, discriminations against the lower cast of Dalits are still valid, though in contrast to the law⁷⁴. So, much remains in this field to be done⁷⁵.

Concerning the gender equality issue, considerable progress has taken place. In the sphere of local and national politics women have been

73. A. L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India*, Rupa & Co, New Delhi 1990, p. 486.

74. Ap. Michailidis, «Νταλὶτ καὶ Ἀνθρώπινα Δικαιώματα», *Πρακτικά Διεπιστημονικοῦ Συνεδρίου «Θρησκείες καὶ Ἀνθρώπινα Δικαιώματα» (13-16 Φεβρουαρίου 2019)*, Department of Social Theology and Religious Studies of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, University of Athens Publications, Athens 2022, pp. 255-264.

75. Neelima Shukla-Bhatt, *Hinduism: The Basics*, Routledge, London and New York 2023, p. 151: “A number of upper-caste Hindus acknowledge the historical injustice done to the Dalits and make efforts to correct it. Yet, as mentioned a few times earlier, the goal of equality remains far from achieved. The Dalits still face discrimination and at times violence”.

prominent figures, including the Prime Minister (e.g. Indira Gandhi) and Presidents (e.g. Pratibha Patil, Draupadi Murmu) of the country. Due to prolonged efforts of female activists, Hindu women have gained equal rights to property as wives and daughters. In the religious sphere, some of them became well-known as religious instructors and gurus (e.g. Anandamayi Ma, Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, Anandmurti Gurumaab, Anasuya Devi, Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi, Srimad Sai Rajarajeshwari, etc.). However, as Prof. Neelima Shukla-Batt mentions “complete gender equality is still a dream, especially in the areas of leadership positions in business and other professional fields as well as in household chores”⁷⁶.

Generally, the average Indian civilian is a religious person. The concepts of religion (dharma), marriage, family, caste, play an important role in his life. The co-existence of various religions is generally understandable to him/her and the idea of tolerance, as an Indian interpretation of secularism, is strong. An example in the social context could be the orientation of well-to-do Hindus to access Christian schools (mainly Roman-Catholic ones) for their kids⁷⁷. Moreover, a survey conducted in 2019 by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), a think tank based in Delhi, revealed that nearly 75% of Hindus declared that India belongs to all religions, dismissing the idea of Hindu *rāṣṭra* (Hindu nation)⁷⁸ – a demand made by the most of the Right-Wing organizations and parties. Another report conducted by Pew Research Center, based on a face-to-face survey of 29,999 Indian adults carried out between

76. *Ibid*, p. 151.

77. Nandini Chatterjee in her *The Making of Indian Secularism: Empire, Law and Christianity, 1830-1960*, *op.cit.*, mentions on page 247: “One might say that if the laws and the debates over them represent the formal and articulate side of Indian secularism, the cultural side is implicit but even more widespread. This culture enables Indians to access Christian schools and other forms of ‘public service’ without being constrained by doctrinal considerations, often not perceiving any such conflict at all while subscribing to a pejorative view of the ‘Indian Christian’ as a distant and dismal creature”.

78. It should be mentioned that the survey was conducted between April and May 2019, across 211 parliamentary constituencies in 26 states and a total of 24,236 voters were interviewed. See, NH Political Bureau, “Does India Belong to Only Hindus? Nearly 75% of Hindus say ‘No’, Finds CSDS Survey”, *National Herald*, 14 June 2019 <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/does-india-belong-to-only-hindus-nearly-75-of-hindus-say-no-csds-survey> [14.01.2024].

late 2019 and early 2020 -before the COVID-19 pandemic- revealed that most Indians (84%) value religious tolerance, saying that to be “truly Indian” it is very important to respect all religions. The report further states that “Indians also are united in the view that respecting ‘other’ religions is a very important part of what it means to be a member of ‘their own religious community (80%). People in all six major religious groups [that means Hindus, Muslims, Christian, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains] overwhelmingly say they are very free to practice their faiths, and most say that people of other faiths also are very free to practice their own religion”⁷⁹.

On the other hand, most of the Right-Wing Hindu organizations like RSS, Bajrang Dal, Vishwa Hindu Parishad have demanded that India should be declared a “Hindu nation” (Hindu *rāṣṭra*) by constitution to safeguard the rights and life of Hindus in the country⁸⁰. And not only that: On 2020, July 28, pleas were filled in the Supreme Court of India to remove the words “secular” and “socialist” from the Preamble to the Constitution of India⁸¹. More recently, Subramanian Swamy, an ex-Rajya Sabha member (that means, member of the Parliament), appealed to the Supreme Court of India for deletion of the afore-mentioned words from the Preamble to the Constitution of India⁸².

79. J. Evans and Neha Sahgal, “Keys Findings about Religion in India”, *Pew Research Center*, 29 June 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/06/29/key-findings-about-religion-in-india/> [14.01.2024].

80. That was a demand of over 342 delegates representing 132 right-wing organizations from across India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka who attended for four days “The 6th All India Convention” at Ramnathi in Ponda, Goa, in June 2017. See, “Declare India a ‘Hindu Rashtra’: Hindu Convention Resolution”, *Hindustan Times*, 17 June 2017, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/declare-india-a-hindu-rashtra-hindu-convention-resolution/story-Nu4lUVWtQZ9ETPQ9BfuYVM.html> [14.01.2024]. See also, DHNS, “India to Become Hindu Rashtra by 2025, Hints Organizer of All India Hindu Conference”, *Deccan Herald*, 12 June 2022, <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/india-to-become-hindu-rashtra-by-2025-hints-organiser-of-all-india-hindu-conference-1117613.html> [14.01.2024].

81. “Plea in SC Seeks to Remove Words ‘Socialist’, ‘Secular’ from Constitution’s Preamble”, *Firstpost*, July 29, 2020, <https://www.firstpost.com/india/plea-in-sc-seeks-to-remove-words-socialist-secular-from-constitutions-preamble-8650391.html> [14.01.2024].

82. “Subramanian Swamy Seeks Deletion of ‘Socialism’ & ‘Secularism’ from Preamble”, *The Statesman*, September 2, 2022, <https://www.thestatesman.com/india/subramanian->

Despite the strong presence and activity of Hindu nationalists, motivated by the idea of “Hindutva” (“Hindu-ness”) and their desire since the time of its first exponents and promulgators [i.e. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1833-1966), Keshav Baliram Hedgewar (1889-1940)] to constitutionally enshrine its Hindu identity, the in force constitutional designation of the Indian state as “secular” is rather difficult to be removed. For example, on the website of the ruling now-a-days nationalist Baratiya Janata Party (BJP), in the section “Our Philosophy”⁸³, it is stated:

Secularism, a leitmotif of Indian politics has been distorted beyond recognition. Secularism had emerged in the West as a reaction to clash between Papal control of politics. It talks of separation of the State and Church. In India, neither was there theocracy ever, nor it can be in future. Indian culture is a culture of ‘equal respect for all religions’. It can be translated as ‘sarva panth samabhaav’ or ‘panth nirapeksha’. Unfortunately, in India Secularism has been reduced to minority appeasement, that too at the cost of majority. This what Shri Lal Krishna Advani called ‘Pseudo-Secularism’. When we say ‘Ram Rajya’ or ‘Darma Rajya’ we mean an ethical governance based on rule of law of Constitution. It is not linked to any faith or way of worship⁸⁴.

And a few lines below, the fifth of the five principles (Pancha Nishthas) declares that the guide the political path of BJP is the “Commitment to positive secularism (sarva dharma sambhāva)”.

That means, primarily, that the unity and cohesion of Indian society, despite the cultural and religious differences could not be jeopardized. So, “sarva dharma sambhāva” it is not only an idea, it is, above all, a necessity.

swamy-seeks-deletion-1503106881.html [14.01.2024]. See also, “Subramanian Swamy’s Plea To Delete ‘Socialism’ & ‘Secularism’ From Preamble To Constitution: Supreme Court To Hear On”, *Live Law*, Sep 23, 2 Sept 2022, <https://www.livelaw.in/top-stories/subramanian-swamys-plea-to-delete-socialism-secularism-from-preamble-to-constitution-supreme-court-to-hear-on-sep-23-208199> [14.01.2024].

83. <https://bjp.org/philosophy>.

84. Concerning the issue of “Pseudo-Secularism” as it is meant by BJP, see G. J. Jacobson, *The Wheel of Law: India’s Secularism in Comparative Constitutional Context*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford 2005, pp. 147-148.