The challenge of secularism to religious communities in Asia Today

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Introduction:-

The rise of majoritarian religious nationalisms in South and Southeast Asia puts enormous pressure on religious minorities in both the public and private spheres. Except for Philippines, in all other countries in the region, Christianity is a minority religion. Majoritarian religions have become increasingly strident against secularism in its political and cultural expressions. They see it as against religion and seek to remove its influence in the shaping of democratic politics. Christians tend to see secularism as a safe option for religious minorities.

This paper seeks to contribute to the issue of whether Christians should promote a secular basis for politics and law, making common cause with secularists and people of religious faith who have a similar view.

I Secularism: - Its origins

A Definitions: Secularism is ideas, discourse and institutions.

Jose Casanova describes secularism as having three components. (1) Increasing structural differentiation of social spaces resulting in separation of religion from politics, economy, science and so forth (2) privatization of religion to its own sphere (3) the declining social significance of religious belief, commitment and Institutions (Berger: 181)

Secular is an epistemic category and Secularism is a political doctrine and also at times a socio-political movement. Secular as an epistemic category brings together certain behaviors, knowledge and sensibilities in modern life (Assad: 25). Some of them overlap with the religious so secular and religions are not fixed categories. A secular discourse is that aspect of modernity that enables people to deal with many areas of life without reference to any religions definitions of reality (Berger: 50). In a secular society or age life can be described and managed without any notions of transcendence. Charles Taylor calls it "The immanent frame".

B. Origins: Karl Jaspers and Eric Voegelin suggest that in all major civilizations a decisive world view change took place during what Jaspers described as the Axial Age (Eighth to Fifth centuries BCE) (Berger: 51). Prior to that reality was experienced as one unified whole (compactness), in this age " differentiation" opened a gap between Transcendence and Immanence. India and China along with Israel and ancient Greece were the civilizations of this change. The God of Israel dwelt in heaven outside the natural world, the city of the ancient

Greeks was ordered by reason. In India earthly reality while of a different order (Maya) was ruled by Dharma not directly by divine beings. And so also in China.

That separation developed for 2000 years in the West and flowered into modernity 450 years ago. The Europe of the early 17th century was being torn apart by religious wars. Catholic, Protestant, Eastern Orthodox and Islamic states were all active in this period and could not agree on any common ground of negotiation expect the power of arms. Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) coined a phrase and suggested a process out of this morass. He was a Dutch Arminian, very anti predestinarian. He suggested modern societies must operate with a discourse that is strictly immanent, "as if God did not exist" "etsi dues non daretur" (literally, as if God were not given).

This principle was first applied to international relations: the laws that were accepted across national boundaries. Soon it was applied to laws within a nation. Laws did not have to be drawn from sacred authoritative scripture. Such an approach began to be applied to increasing sections of society. The State, Bureaucracy, Economic Markets etc. followed the immanent principle. The discourse of Faith continued alongside.

Political thinkers confronted by apparently intractable differences among extra subjective authorities – differences that led to bloody religions wars, replaced such authorities with new, typically subjective epistemologies in the hope that these new epistemologies would settle disputes through universally shared criteria. In practice it was not a religiously neutral procedure but one that settled for a lowest common denominator of rational discourse (The French Huguenot (Protestants) developed this significantly.

Such a course expelled all explicitly religious discourse or any discourse about values from the public sphere and populated it with facts. The fact value distinction was created.

Secularism developed its own Meta Narrative (Mathews: 111). The Secular also had a theological provenance. For St Augustine "saeculum" was the time after Christ's resurrection and Christ's return. It is an ambiguous time, a field of wheat and tares neither wholly profane or sacred. (Bretherton: 16). Christians and non Christians co exist in the saeculum. The earthly city shapes some and some are constituted by the City of God. The Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world exist side by side, The Christian lives in the confidence that history is moving towards the consummation of the Kingdom of God. For Augustine Christ is the Lord who's Lordship is exercised in the secular time. The secular is the mixed time where no single authority dominates according to Eric Gregory (Bretherton: 82)

C. Trajectories: -

1. A shift in the idea of society took place. Society was a collection of individuals enjoying not only subjective rights and immunities and endowed with moral agency, but also processing the capacity to make independent moral decisions and choices including election of their political representatives. This shift occurred all at once in Revolutionary France and gradually in 19th

century England (Asad: 24) Religion continued but in a new form, so also ethics and politics all subject to an immanent frame.

This shift is the trajectory of Humanism that was at the heart of the European Renaissance. The human person became the centre of all discourses, sciences and art.

2. A second trajectory is the central place of Nature as the ruling concept. This is at the heart of the European Enlightenment. The concept of Natural Law was developed by Catholic theologians. This led to seeing nature as a space that had laws intrinsic to it. And so opened the world to scientific exploration and development to discover such laws and start applying them for practical uses.

It also led to the idea of human beings having rights independent of their civil status but rooted in Natural Law. Richard Tuck describes Active Rights - inherent in the individual irrespective of his social status and relations and Passive Rights - rights in relationship – what one gives and gets from others.

Active rights are based on "Nature". Theories of property rights, Liberty, private rights all developed as active rights based on a view of Nature. Natural Rights were of three varieties, civil, that is liberty of person, speech and thought; political, right to participate in political power and social, right to economic welfare and society.

The supernatural was posited and became an extension of the categories of the natural into a unique space. This also led to the distinction between the Sacred and the Profane. Durkheim saw this as a distinction created by religion itself during this period.

Slowly the sacred became essentialised as an external transcendent power. In the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe the sacred got associated with the superstitious having a false truth status and wrongly endowed with ethical power (Asad: 35).

Reason acts to eliminate the superstitions things from public space, unpacking pretended, traditional powers and replacing them by legitimate power systems, structures and regimes. Conscience as the natural endowment replaces ecclesiastical authority.

This division of the sacred and profane affected biblical scholarship with the German Higher criticism. The text of the Bible was liberated from the authority of inspiration and infallibility and made subject to reason. The source of the bible was open to speculation, the language of the bible represented the real world and faith became a way of knowing.

3. The third trajectory is the way History is understood leading to the disenchantment of the world. Hegel suggested "a harmony emerges between the objective and subjective conditions of the human life resulting from powerful struggles of history, a harmony based on the secular as capable of being an embodiment of truth whereas it was formerly been regarded as evil only, as incapable of good – the latter being essentially ultramundane. (Quoted by Asad: 192)

Humans are self-conscious makers of history. They are not pawns; they have valid and tested knowledge about nature and society and are responsible agents in history. The domain in which God acts without any reference to human responsibility is increasingly limited. The world is disenchanted. Events and matter are explainable without reference to God.

Humans dominate Nature, use its resources as they see fit, develop their identities, individual, social and national and create a nation state that regulates and protects the space where they live, move and flourish.

II. Concepts, Ideas and Institutions: -

Here I will identify key concepts, ideas and Institutions of Secularism that we need to deal within in any dialogue with modern secular discourses.

A. The concept of Public Sphere:-

1.The public sphere is the space where diverse groups with diversity of views and opinions contend to influence the political discourse, policy and law making. It is also the space where the State, that entity which has the coercive power of the law, relates to individuals, interest groups, religious institutions, civil society and communities.

2. Benedict Anderson defines the modern state as an imagined community with two features. All members have direct access to a public space and the other feature is market principles operate in that public space that means all participants of the space are legal equals and no single vision, particularly a religious one, can presume to command comprehensive, confessional and visible authority. Direct access, equality of relationships and contracts, market principles and real time all constitute the modern public square.

3. By its nature that space becomes a secular space in modern states. As secular space it is open, ambivalent (no hegemony or hierarchy of different values) and undetermined. It is an ambiguous spaced neither wholly sacred nor profane. It has space for the sacred and the profane.

Increasingly today's societies are described as having reached a post secular space as far as the state is concerned.

This is the "period in which, for the first time, multiple modernity's each with their respective relationship to religious belief and practice are overlapping and interacting within the same shared predominantly urban spaces.

In that public sphere, a neutral space, or a space of threat and risk to religions or certain type of religions?

B. The concept of Public Reason:-

The modern public sphere is dominated by public reason. Modern democracies are based on two pillars, one, politics as a discourse of public reason and two, universal suffrage - the idea of a collective will, the will of the "People".

John Rawls is best associated with the concept of public reason. Rawls central concern is how those with differing conceptions of the good life can live together in polity and provide justification for the use of coercive political force in terms acceptable to one another". (Bretherton P.46).

Public reason is the way of debating and dialoging between groups with diverse and competing opinions and views that leads to consensus and co-operation rather than unbridgeable disagreement and even violence.

It is an approach of reasoned respect. It is not about the content of a concept like justice or equality but procedures that ensure justice and equality to all who participate in that debate.

"Rawls gives what is termed as a proceduralist theory of equality and justice, that is his account seeks to secure justice by emphasizing procedures rather than a normative and substantive account of what justice consists of " (Bretherton:46).

The goal of public reason is not to arrive at a common truth but a consensus that is workable. It is to practice consensus not to live out a unity of understanding and views.

Public reason excludes as well as includes. Only those able to use public reason in a rational debate to persuade opponents rather than coerce them are included. Some exclude themselves as they will not accept public reason. Some are excluded.

Reason has been vigorously questioned as a myth. The "reasonable person" of Rawls and Habermas is not easily found. Again rational discourses are culturally embedded and can cross-cultured public reason produce consensus?

 Charles Taylor believes it is possible if the focus is on political ethics that can be enforced by the State and the consensus is not dependent on religious convictions as it is about political principles, law, public behavior and relationships.

Rawls admits that there can be no real agreed universal basis for political principles either religious or secular only "Overlapping Consensus". My assessment is that both Taylor and Rawls rest on a natural law argument.

C. Secular and Religious discourses: -

Robert Wuthnow in his important work "The God problem" explores how self-consciously modern individuals, both people of religious faith or no faith, moderate between faith and secular discourses.

Many say yes to the supernatural even if they have only vague notions of it. They say no to its weird expressions like raising the dead.

Alfred Schultz asserts that the consciousness of a person is not one coherent whole, but consists of multiple realities.

There is everyday reality that is finite and there is also a sense of ultimate reality.

What are the possible relationships between religious and secular discourses? They are co-existence, mutual exclusion, dominance of one over the other, subversion, mutual penetration, provincialization, isolation, persistence, conflict, revolutionary universalization.

D. **Religious Diversity and Pluralism:-**

Religious diversity can undermine religious certainties. More interpretative frameworks are now available to interpret reality and not just depend on one inherited or developed.

Rodney Stark and other scholars suggest that the presence of plural discourses and religions increases religiosity as there is no one monopolistic religion.

Berger thinks religious vitality is undermined by plurality.

Diversity is a reality of nearly all-contemporary societies. When differences are recognized it is an empirical and not moral exercise. Next is to acknowledge it is diversity that implies the legitimation of different ways and opinions in the same space. When commonality cannot be achieved it leads to disputes. Dialogue can then continue that may lead to agreement or a state of disagreement.

Some deal with such disagreement with apathy. They do not take the opinions of those they disagree with seriously; they see no value in further conversation. Some see the other as the enemy that must be dehumanized and demonized. . Myths are created to perpetuate such demonization.

Secular and religious approaches to diversity are different. There is an inbuilt suspicion about religious approaches to diversity as sellouts of religious convictions and an assumption that secular approaches are more feasible to produce mutual respect.

Theological reflections

Here I identify areas that require further theological exploration from the contexts of Asian Christianity.

1. Theologies of human personhood:

The idea of a secular person with an ontology that is overwhelmingly rational is not just contested today but effectively discredited. Does a biblical view of persons commit us to an understanding of human consciousness that is capable of holding truth and uncertainty and even possible error at the same time. Some Christians are extremely uncomfortable coexisting with what they see as error while others do not. I believe it has to do with our understanding of personhood. Our plural contexts challenge us to reflect on the nature of persons who can deal with plurality.

2. Theological understanding of the Public Sphere;

The parable of the wheat and tares suggests that the public square will have both till the harvest of the eschatological consummation. How does that relate to the presence of the Kingdom of God in that space? Augustine dealt with this by developing the concepts of the City of Man and the City of God. But Augustine did not face the situation of religious plurality we face today.

We need to explore how we who are part of the Kingdom of God and continue to witness to it in the public sphere with its contending religions and modernity's.

3. Theological understanding of the Secular

A significant amount of work has been done in the west. Much of that work does not take into consideration the context of religious plurality we operate from. Is there a Christian understanding of the secular that will rescue the concept for actively religious plural societies that see the secular as inherently anti religious?

There is still value in the secular as it was secular discourse that focused on human dignity and rights, the protection of the environment to name a few significant social issues. Can Christian theology recover the secular for religiously plural contexts?

4. Theological Understanding of Religion.

A good deal of work is available in the area but more needs to be done by Evangelical Scholars from the nonwestern world. This must begin by looking at the Christian faith itself as religion. Are religions primarily faith communities that live out faith or interpretative frameworks for modern humans?

5. Theology of Nature

Again we need to explore this area in dialogue with the understanding of Nature and the natural in other religions in our contexts. Is it possible that we may be able to find more common ground in our views of nature than in our theistic views?