# RETHINKING THE NOTION OF 'SECULARISM' THROUGH THE IDEA OF THE INDIAN PHILOSOPHY OF VEDĀNTA

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## Abstract

The generally accepted notion of secularism in India is that the State should respect and treat all religions equally. With regard to the historical context, secularism has emerged as a separate idea in the language of Western 'modernity', which envisions that the affairs of the state, and religion should be strictly kept apart. In India, religion has helped in the administration of the state since antiquity. After Independence, India followed Nehru's understanding of secularism which was shaped by both Western as well as the narrow appeal of the liberal or Marxist ideas of secularism. It was post-1980s when the debate on the concept of secularism arose. Ashis Nandy wrote a radical critique of ideological secularism, titled 'An Anti-Secularist Manifesto' (1985) where he stressed the notion of religious tolerance, which was supported by the thoughts of T.N. Madan. This article tries to revisit the notion of secularism through the Indian Philosophy of Vedānta, particularly Advaita Vedānta which discusses the concept of oneness.

**Keywords:** State, Religion, Secularism, Brahman, Advaita Vedānta

## Introduction

In contemporary times, India's political and social discourses are filled with certain political terms which are foreign in origin, and now these terms are being challenged in the academia of India as they convey a false understanding of Indian culture. These terms should be re-examined for conceptual misunderstanding and

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controversies of translation associated with them. We have to realize that 'Western Categories' are not fully capable of explaining 'Indic Categories' (Malhotra, 2011). 'Secularism' is one of those terms. Firstly, this article will examine the Western notion of secularism, its origin, historical background and its development in the West. Then, this article will deal with the growing debate on the concept of secularism by different authors in Indian academia. Lastly, this article will analyze the concept of Vedānta and try to map out its features, which are more harmonious and integral to our society, underscoring the idea of universal human values.

Religion has played an important role in governing the individual and society from ancient times. It has specified the meaning and purpose of life as well as reinforced social unity and stability. Religion has always been looked to for providing a practical moral consciousness in society. According to Voltaire, we must create a god even if there isn't one (Radhakrishnan, 1916). Religion must provide the foundation for the success of moral argument. People are drawn towards religion because of the contradictions in life. On the other hand, politics is an activity that aims to manage the collective and provide the best and highest life possible to its people. Although they have similar objectives, religion and politics have remained a bone of contention throughout history specially in the West where there was the struggle between Church and State for supremacy during medieval times. This led to the separation of affairs of Church and State and gave rise to concepts like Secularism. In contrast, in the East, particularly in India, we do not find this sort of struggle for supremacy. Instead, we find that the affairs of the state were complemented by the morals and ethics of religion in governance. Under the colonization of Britain, the concept of secularism was superimposed on the administration without any consideration of the Indian ethos.

The term 'secularism' was coined by George J. Holyoake (1817-1906) to explain his philosophy of rejecting received wisdom and authoritarian politics and instead to examine all claims in the light of reason and science and with an eye on human progress (Copson, 2019). Jean Bauberot has given a modern definition of secularism which consists of three components: equitable treatment based on one's religious or non-religious worldview, freedom of thought, conscience, and religion for all, and the separation of religious institutions from state institutions (Copson, 2019). This sort of secularism is not entirely implemented in any state and never has been; rather it is an ideal for the working of the political order.

## Secularism in Western Societies

The development of the concept of secularism in the West can be observed in many different time periods. Initially, its origin can be traced to the Greek period but chronologically, the first development can be seen during the Roman Empire which revolved around Christian thought. In the Enlightenment period, thinkers like John Locke, Baruch Spinoza, Montesquieu, Voltaire, David Hume and Adam Smith provided incisive thoughts on this concept. After this, we can find the practical application of secularism, especially in France and America, which became the model for other states. Both countries have applied the concept in their own different ways; in France, the word 'laïcité' was coined to explain the separation of Church and State whereas in America, along with it, the freedom of religion has been recognized.

Although the city-states of classical Greece had public temples and important festivals, the gods and goddesses were not involved in politics as they ordered the affairs of the human community. Aristotle stated that the purpose of the city was 'the best and highest life possible' (Copson, 2019). Here, the 'best' and 'highest' were to be approached entirely in worldly terms, not in divine terms. This appears to be some kind of secularism, where the aims of the state are separate from the aims of religion, but it is not secularism in the complete modern sense. After Aristotle, many states in the ancient Greek world offered an alternative model. This model of a city was to be judged by human standards. Then, the city-state of the Greek world was succeeded by the Roman Empire which inherited its intellectual tradition along with its own approach to religious beliefs and practices, often termed as objectively pluralist.

A perspective of secularism in the West shows us the origin of Christianity in the Roman Empire which can be traced back to the life of a Jewish preacher who became known to his followers as Jesus Christ. In early Europe, there were people of different faiths and beliefs as well as individuals who believed in none of the religions. Christians shared the same belief in a single god as Jews, and with time their social influence continued to grow. Therefore, after 313 CE, freedom of religion was granted by Emperors Lincinius (263- 325 CE) and Constantine (272- 337 CE). Constantine, who eventually converted to Christianity, called a conference of Christian leaders at Nicaea (present-day Turkey) in 325 CE to resolve doctrinal disagreement (Copson, 2019). A systematized Nicene Creed doctrine was drawn up which followed the policy of tolerance for Christianity. When Emperor Theodosius (347- 395 CE) issued the

Edict of Thessalonica in 380 CE, making citizenship mandatory within Roman territories, Christianity became the dominant religion in practice (Copson, 2019). The early trend in Christianity was that the state would serve the religion just as the state had previously served the cult of emperors and traditional Olympian gods.

In the writings of the Bishop Augustine (354-430), the 'City of God' and the city in the regular world of states, laws, and earthly powers have been distinguished. After a Millennium, Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), in his writings, drew a distinction between the law made by human beings (*lexhumana*) and the law made by God transmitted to human beings through revelation (*lexdivina*) (Copson, 2019). Aquinas delineated the roles of temporal and religious powers and he saw the monarch and the church as separate, even if he did not see them as equal. Organised Christianity became a political force as well as a religion in the medieval period. In the 16th century, the Church in Western Europe split into two - the Roman Catholic and the Protestant. This 'Reformation' was initiated by German Priest Martin Luther in 1517, who found theological errors in the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church (Copson, 2019). After three centuries, the American Secularist, James Madison said that Luther 'led the way' in delineating the Church and State.

During the Enlightenment period, many philosophers discussed these issues and developed some new theoretical concepts. In the book *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), Locke addressed the issue of how the government should deal with competing religions among its citizens. He saw religion as a private matter that does not affect others. Locke was also influenced by Baruch Spinoza (1632-77), who saw the state as a defensive wall against religious oppression. Both philosophers were more interested in the state than the church. The key difference between the Christian and Enlightenment way of thinking was the idea that the people had to give their consent to the government for it to be legitimate (Copson, 2019). This idea became a reality in two countries that witnessed revolutions (France and America).

The French Revolution was a decade-long series of innovations from 1789 to 1799 where both the crown and the church were equal targets. At the end of the Revolution, Napoleon came to power, first as a counsel in a triumvirate and then as Emperor of France. In that decade, France experienced what some historians call an attempted 'de-Christianization' of society and politics (Copson, 2019). Throughout the 19th century, there was a struggle for power and influence between the secularists and clericalists in French political and social life. At that moment, the separation of church and state

was referred to by the French word 'laïcité'. The concept of laïcité became famous in the phase of French constitutional history known as the Third Republic (1870-1940). In 1905, a law was passed 'on the separation of church and State', which declared 'The Republic ensures freedom of conscience and the free exercise of Religion' (Copson, 2019).

France was not the first country to make novel claims on the interplay between religion and the state in the 18th century. The American Revolution took a different approach to secularism. The *Declaration of Independence* that was signed in 1776 asserted that 'all men are created equal...endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights'. The claim of the materialist French that "all men are born free" stands in contrast to this recognition of a creator. In 1788, a permanent federal constitution was agreed upon by all the states of the new republic. The section 3 of Article 6 of the federal constitution states that "No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States" (Copson, 2019). According to the first amendment of *The Bill of Rights,* the legislature, among other things, could 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.' These two short clauses became known as the 'establishment clause' and 'free exercise clause' respectively. In 1777, Thomas Jefferson drafted the *statute of Religious Freedom* for the state of Virginia, but at present US law has gone beyond it by establishing the non-religious basis for the state (Copson, 2019). The separation of state institutions from religion, and freedom of religion are two aspects of secularism, introduced by the American constitution.

## The Case For and Against Secularism

The secular systems of different states have varied according to the unique nature of their own particular society and their religious, cultural and political history. Even so, similar arguments have been used to promote secularism as the best religion-state arrangement to provide freedom, equality, peace and democracy in modern society. Andrew Copson in his book *Secularism: A Very Short Introduction,* offers many arguments in favour of secularism and against this concept as well. The argument in favour of secularism is based on individual freedom, which is rooted in a specific understanding of human dignity.It is fairer than the alternatives and the term 'secularism' is considered an essential element for modernity and any democratic state. In the case of France, there is the desire to clear away the ancient rubble of religious institutions, and religion itself, so that

society might make progress. In India, Nehru called secularism one of the 'pillars of modernity'. He believed that a democratic republic could only be secular.

The argument for secularism is relatively simple and, though secularists may differ in their reasoning, they largely agree on the core of it. However, in contemporary times, the case against secularism is stronger as the critics of secularism seek to modify their content and challenge it from a different perspective. The mere existence of functioning Islamic and Christian states poses a challenge to the 'modernity and democracy' arguments for secularism. States like Iran, Denmark and England are officially not secular but they have an important place in the world. Iran has nuclear technology; Denmark has democratic political institutions; England has a vibrant civil society. From this, it can be said that secularism may not be the essential pillar of modernity as Nehru claimed. This also raises the question whether freedom of religion or belief and equal treatment truly depend on the separation of church and state. (Copson, 2019). The question gets more complicated with the argument that, while many states are not officially secular, they have developed a harmonious political ethic in practice. Ashis Nandy in his article "Closing the Debate on Secularism" mentions that, based on R.J. Rummell's data on genocides, of around 200 million killed in genocides in the 20th century, only a fraction was killed in religious violence and most were killed by their own governments. According to his calculations, of those killed by states, a huge majority - at least two-thirds - were killed in secular states (Nandy, 2007, p. 111).

Following this line of argument, President of the Republic of France from 2007 to 2012 Nicolas Sarkozy's comment encapsulates an important aspect of the romantic conservative case against secularism. He argued that when society is cut off from the traditional (religious) sources of its values and ethics, it will become lawless and its members will be immoral. According to him, religion is seen as a guarantor of civil culture and social morality and as an essential aspect of nationality. The same kind of argument has been made by British Conservative politicians, by the nationalist politicians in central and Eastern Europe, and by the regime of Putin in Russia which suggests a return to 'traditional values', but the arrangement is not just for Europeans (Copson, 2019). The most sophisticated case against secularism comes not from its theocratic, nationalist, or conservative opponents but from the liberal critics. They say that, secularism pretends to be neutral but in separating religion from politics it will never be neutral. Rather, it implicitly favours non-religious ways of reasoning, living, and thinking over religious ones.

Many non-Western anti-secularists do see secularism as undesirable because it is Western. For example, the Prime Minister of Malaysia has denounced 'human rightism, where the core beliefs are based on humanism, secularism as well as liberalism' as a package of Western origin (Copson, 2019).

## Indian Secularism

Indian society from antiquity has been characterized by spiritual diversity, and this has also shaped the relation of states and religion. The key concept in philosophy and religion was *dharma*. There is no English translation of *dharma*, and it has multiple meanings in relation to spiritual life. In the 6th century BCE, Buddhism originated in India and spread across Asia. In the 3rd century BCE, Ashoka was influenced by Buddhism. His laws commanded that, in the matter of religion, one should listen and respect the doctrines professed by others, and the official policy was one of tolerance. This can be found in Major Rock Edict VII and XII of Ashoka, which discussed tolerance for all religions and sects. In ancient India, religion and the state were never entirely separate. The Brahmins always guided the king in administrative matters. There was only an abstract distance between religion and state (Copson, 2019). The Muslim conquest challenged this tradition of religious tolerance and of some practical separation between religion and state.

Some Muslim rulers were religiously oppressive, seeking to spread and enforce Islam and its rules for the way of life. For them, there was no separation between the authority on earth and the ultimate authority of God (Copson, 2019). Ziauddin Barani described the ideal sultan as the 'Shadow of God' and Abul Fazl referred to Akbar as the 'Light of God'. On the other hand, Emperor Ashoka of the Mauryan dynasty termed himself as 'Priyadarshani', who is dear to God, not as the avatar of the god. In medieval times, Sufism gained strength in India and actively taught a social morality of tolerance, which is different from the orthodox tradition of Islam.

By the 19th century, Indian society had a diverse range of religions, and its history witnessed an array of configurations of religion and the state (Copson, 2019). During colonial times, the British parliament allowed Christian missionaries to come to India and also introduced new laws like equality before the law for Indians regardless of religion. Consequently, after Independence, India became a secular state with no official religion. However, the word 'secular' was not mentioned directly in the original constitution. Even though the constitution

was always secular, secularism as an ideology emerged during the 1975-77 Emergency, when the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi restricted civil rights (Nandy, 2007).

In recent times, there has been much discussion on the nature of secularism in India. Three broad categories can be used to classify different viewpoints on secularism in India: Firstly, those who support the secular nature of the Indian Republic as mentioned in the Constitution of India; secondly, those who believe that Indian state-led secularism is a form of pseudo-secularism; and lastly, those who argue that secularism is a Western cultural construct.

After Independence, India followed Nehru's understanding of secularism which was shaped by Western as well as the narrow appeal of the liberal or Marxist ideas of secularism. Nehru wrote the preface of the book titled *Dharam Nirpeksha Raj (1961)* by Raghunath Singh, in which he elaborated the concept of secularism. He remarked that finding a Hindi word for 'secular' is difficult. It is incorrect for some individuals to believe that it is the opposite of religion. He went on to say that the state does not permit itself to be associated with any one religion or creed and that it respects all faiths equally and provides them with equal opportunity (Chandhoke, 2021). It was in the post-1980s when the debate on the concept of secularism arose. Ashis Nandy wrote a radical critique of ideological secularism titled *An Anti-Secularist Manifesto* (1985) where he stressed the notion of religious tolerance, which gets support from the thoughts of T.N. Madan. As T. N. Madan has said, "Secularism in its original sense, is the ideology of those committed to bringing about the decline of religion in human affairs" (Madan, 2010). It was obviously deemed inappropriate in India's cultural context. In response, thinkers like Neera Chandhoke and Rajeev Bhargava have defended the concept of secularism. The former focuses on the rights of a religious minority and the latter discusses the concept of 'Principled distance' and 'Contextual Secularism' to show the distinctiveness in Indian Secularism (Bhargava, 2010).

Regardless of his preferences, Ashis Nandy makes a stronger claim that secularism in India is unlikely to thrive in the near future (Nandy, 2007). It is time to consider a new generation of ideas. He adds that the Indians had adapted many foreign customs to their way of life. In the case of secularism, people do not feel compelled to learn, even though many have learnt to say "thank you", use toilet paper, or play cricket. He points to historical figures such as Ashoka, Akbar, Dara Shikoh, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Narayan Guru as examples of those who did not base their beliefs on secularist

ideology, which is why the secular Indian must constantly invoke the non-secular to promote secularism. Nandy (2007) provided three arguments for this contradiction: "Firstly, the traditional secularism icon such as J.L. Nehru has started to deteriorate and lose his charisma; second, secularism has turned into the last resort for the intellectually lazy and those who are unable to face the rationale behind their own cultural and political decisions". Nandy went on to write that they are scared to question why they themselves have been compelled to go back in time and to those who openly and consistently employed religion in public in an effort to create a society that is more compassionate. Lastly, secularism, at least in India, turned out to be a very barren source of social inventiveness on its own.

Generally, the ruling government in India faces criticism for being either in favour of the majoritarian community or the implementation of policies for the appeasement of minority groups. According to Neera Chandhoke, communalism is not simply the opposite of secularism; rather, it is, at best, an intolerant, majoritarian government, and at worst, a theocratic government (Chandhoke, 2021). In recent times, the Bhartiya Janata Party's political discourse has been focused on the revival of Hinduism. Many find nothing wrong with this: the nation is a secular democratic republic with a Hindu majority, the birthplace of Hinduism as a way of life, and the source of guidance for Hindus worldwide. The argument is that Hinduism needs to be conserved for yet another reason. Unlike Islam or Christianity, which are considered as religions; Hinduism is a way of life that was not brought to the world by a single person but rather evolved philosophically over time as a result of the meditative reflection of numerous sages (Sarmah, 2018). Hinduism as a spiritual practice has a lot to offer across the world especially in terms of lessons in universal human values.

## Secularism and The Indian Philosophy of Vedānta

Vedānta is one of the ancient Indian philosophies mainly based on sacred scriptures like the Vedas, Upaniṣads, Bhagavad Gītā and Bādrayāṇa's Brahmasūtra. Vedānta is the philosophical foundation of Hinduism, However, while Hinduism incorporates elements of Indian culture, its applicability is universal and equally relevant to all nations, cultures and religions. In Indian Philosophy, there are many sub-schools of Vedānta. They are 'Advaita (Non-dualism) of Śaṅkarācārya, Viśiṣṭādvaita (Qualified Non-dualism) of Rāmānuja,

Dvaitā (Dualism) of Mādhvāchārya, Dvaitādvaita (Dualistic Monism) of Nimbārka, Shuddhādvaita of Vallabhachārya and Achintya Bheda Abheda of Chaitanya Mahāprabhu'. This paper will analyse the concept of the Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkarācārya in the context of secularism and universal human values.

## Advaita (non-dualism)

Adi Śaṅkara was a sage, scholar, philosopher, dialectician and religious reformer and also one of the main proponents and propagators of Advaita Vedānta, which had come in its nascent form from Yājñavalkya and Uddālaka Āruni of the Upaniṣads to sage Bādrayāna, Gauḍapāda and Govind Bhagvaḍapāda.

Śaṅkara's philosophy is called Advaita Vedānta because he holds that no positive qualities can be imputed to Brahman. One can only describe Brahman as not this, not this (*neti, neti*) as said by Yājñavalkya in Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad. Therefore, we can say that stating that reality is non-dual is not the same as saying that it is one. Thus, Advaita means non-dualistic and not to be understood as monistic. Advaita Vedānta refers to the experience of reality (Brahman, Ātman) as Saccidānanda (Sat means Pure Being, Citta means Pure Consciousness, Ānanda means Pure Bliss). His conception of the identity of Ātman and Brahman has come from the Upaniṣadic teaching that what is within is also what is without, and what is without is also what is within, and whosoever finds the difference between what is within and what is without goes from death to death. As, Śaṅkara rejected the distinction between Ātman and Brahman, self and not-self, this is why his school of Vedānta is known as Advaita Vedānta. Therefore, oneness - which is true secularism - is at the heart of Advaita Vedānta.

## Brahman and Ātman

Śaṅkara has discussed the concept of Brahman and Ātman in a very detailed manner and also explained that Brahman and Ātman are not two distinct realities but rather two names of the same reality. According to Śaṅkara, Brahman is Advaita, there is no second. It is non-dualistic. He said that Reality or Brahman in principle cannot be sublated by other experiences as reality is devoid of all distinction. Brahman is *abhedabheda,* which means unity without a difference. It means one is not different from any other member of any class nor does one have differences in oneself. He further explained Brahman

as Nirguṇa and Nirviśeṣa, which means that it has neither attributes or qualities nor distinctions (Tor-Westen, 1991). Śaṅkara has also distinguished the Brahman from God, who is the product of Māyā, by discussing the two kinds of *Lakṣaṇa* i.e. *Swabhava Lakṣaṇa* and *Tatastha Lakṣaṇa.* According to Śaṅkara, *Swabhava Lakṣaṇa* is sat, chit and ānanda; which are the constituents of Brahman (Sadananda, 2017). They are organically related and cannot be separated. On the other hand, *Tatastha Lakṣaṇa* are accidental qualities such as omnipresence, omnipotence, omniscience and so on. According to him, these qualities are not attributed to Brahman but to God. The critics have objected to the incompatible position on Brahman: how can one be Nirguna and have qualities like truth, consciousness and bliss? Śaṅkara response to this is that they are not attributes of Brahman but are the constituents of Brahman and constituents cannot limit Brahman. According to him, Brahman is indescribable, unthinkable, unperceivable and inexpressible. It is also non-spatial and non-temporal as it exists neither in space nor in time.

According to Śaṅkara, Ātman is the innermost self of man, that is pure and undifferentiated consciousness (Isayeva, 1993). Like Brahman, it is also nameless and formless. He said that men in their ignorance mistakenly identify the Ātman with one or other of the appearances, such as the body, the brain etc. Ātman in reality is none of these things. Like Brahman, Ātman cannot be an object in the world of appearances alongside other objects. According to him, jīva, the empirical self, is the appearance of Ātman under superimposition. He explained that jīvas are also Brahman conditioned with Māyā. It is the product of Māyā. The Ātman, also known as jīva, is the unique human soul garbed in the *upaadhis* or limiting adjunct. As, Space, which is formless, one, and indivisible assumes the form of a container, such as a pot or a room; similarly, Ātman which is nameless, formless, eternal and infinite, appears as finite jīva owing to limitations such as the body and mind. Śaṅkara has established the central insight of the Upaniṣads - the identity of Ātman and Brahman. According to him, Ātman and Brahman are two distinct names for the same reality. Understanding Brahman is equivalent to understanding theĀtman.

## Saguna Brahman

Nirguṇa Brahman conditioned with Māyā, is known as Īśvara or God. The impersonal Brahman has a human component called Īśvara. Śaṅkara made this distinction between God and Brahman by adhering to the Upaniṣads. In contrast to the unconditioned

Brahman, referred to as Para or Higher Brahman, God is also regarded as Apara or lower Brahman.

According to the critics, Advaita's god is a non-existent and ineffective entity. However, they are wrong. The basis of this false assumption is a failure to recognise Māyā's actual significance. God becomes 'unreal' only for those who have realized their oneness with Brahman by rising above speech and mind. God is everything to us. Since Brahman cannot be grasped by finite thought, any discussion of Brahman is actually a discussion of God. In actuality, even the 'unconditioned Brahman' alludes to 'conditioned God'. According to Śaṅkara, "he is the perfect personality. He is innate to the entire universe, which he governs inside. He is both the soul of Nature and the soul of the souls. He is the identity-in-difference, the concrete universal, the ultimate individual and the whole. He is the source of moral life's inspiration. From the practical standpoint, He is all in all" (Isayeva, 1993). Allowing a spiritual seeker (jīva) to participate in the rites of devotion and worship is the main goal of making accommodations for Īśvara. In this gradual process one will acquire knowledge of the self through meditation.

Śaṅkara explained the world of phenomena as the realm of Māyā. It functions in two ways: first, Māyā functions to cover the nature of Brahman, which is called *avaran*. Second, it projects this world to be real, termed as *Vikṣepa*. The empirical world is thus the world of appearances. In explaining the status of the world, Śaṅkara says that "*Brahman Satyam Jagat Mithyā*", which means Brahman alone is real, the world is an illusion. He further distinguishes four kinds of reality:-i) *Pāramārthikasatta* - the ultimate metaphysical reality (of Brahman), ii) *Vyavahārikasatta*- the pragmatic or empirical reality which is experienced by humanity as a whole for all time, iii) *Pratibhāsikasatta* - the apparent reality which belongs to the object of illusions. For example- mistaking a rope for a snake, iv) *Tuccasatta*- inexperienceable reality, some of which may be self-contradictory (Isayeva, 1993). Śaṅkara argues that only Brahman is *Pāramārthikasatta,* all other things are unreal and illusions. He further argues that the world is an illusion only in the sense that it is not as real as Brahman. According to him, the world is *Vyavaharikasatta,* which means it has the empirical reality experienced by humanity as a whole.

## Practical Vedānta and Modern Thinkers

Many modern scholars have advocated the concept of Vedānta to express their views on settling practical problems. Swami Vivekananda

in his lecture on 'Practical Vedānta' in London, on 10th November 1896 said that Vedānta as a religion must be intensely practical and can be carried out in every part of our lives. He said "The fictitious differentiation between religion and the life of the world must dissipate, as Vedānta teaches oneness - one life throughout. It teaches men to have faith in themselves first" (Vivekananda, 2012). As some religious principles imply, a man who does not believe in a personal god outside of himself is an atheist. But Vedānta says that those who do not believe in themselves are atheists. Not believing in the glory of our own soul is what the Vedānta calls atheism.

The philosophy of Vivekananda owes its origin to the thoughts of Advaita. According to Swamiji, "Śaṅkara left this Advaita philosophy in the hills and forests, while I have come to bring it out of those places and scatter it throughout the world and society" (Vivekananda, 2012). He encouraged the practice of Advaita Vedānta in the daily life of people and society. Further explaining the concept of oneness, he said, "the difference between weakness and strength is one of degree, the difference between virtue and vice is one of degree, the difference between heaven and hell is one of degree, the difference between life and death is one of degree, all differences in this world are of degree, and not of kind, because oneness is the secret of everything" (Vivekananda, 2012). All is One, which manifests itself, either as thought, or life, or soul, or body, and the difference is only in degree.

Aurobindo Ghosh, a mystical philosopher of contemporary India has also explained the concept of oneness through his thoughts on Integral Yoga. He said that Integral Yoga helps one see the self in everything and every being in the world. According to him, Integral Yoga is the synthesis of *Jñāna yoga, bhakti yoga* and *karma yoga.* If one practices all three, they can strengthen all cognitive, affective and conative aspects of life. And only then one can develop the ability to solve practical problems. As he said, the essential component of the practice of integral yoga consists of working toward the creation of a social-political order which ensures the material and social well-being of people.

Mahatma Gandhi was more vocal about rejecting the distinction between religion and politics. For Gandhi, politics was like a 'new *Yugadharma* and the most suitable means for active service'. His philosophy believes in the essential oneness of all life, which makes him one of the advocates of Advaita Vedānta. He explicitly stated that he believes in Advaita. Richards writes "He believes in the unity of man and for that matter of all that lives. Therefore, he believes that

if one person gains spiritually, the whole world gains with him and if one person falls, the whole world falls to that extent" (Richards, 1986).

Radhakrishnan also believed that 'politics should be permeated, infused and shaped by spirituality'. Therefore, he did not advocate the separation of politics and spirituality. For him, "A Spiritual way of life does not deny the reality of the world but points out its lower status in comparison with the absolute reality" (Radhakrishnan, 1916). For Rajagopalachari, moral Principles were the foundation of sound polity. According to him, Hindu philosophers have evolved a code of ethics and a system of values from the religious philosophy known as Vedānta, which is consistent with science and is suited as well to be the spiritual basis of a more just and stable organisation (Rajagopalachari, 1959). He believed that "furnishing a code of spiritual values through religious faith and practice would reduce the stress, minimize the flaws in execution and generate a happier integration of thought and action which by itself would be a priceless gain and a source of strength" (Rajagopalachari, 1959).

## Practicality of Vedānta and the New Order

The prevalent conflicts in politics, religion, and science are inescapably detrimental to society's welfare since truth is one and indivisible. Disharmony in these "fundamentals leads to doubt, pain, hypocrisy, and frustration" (Rajagopalachari, 2022). The efforts made by human beings to get rid of this disharmony have been ineffective. What is desirable is that "the philosophy we hold, the laws of nature we are aware of, and the statecraft we practice ought to be brought into harmony and concord with each other" (Rajagopalachari, 2022). In relating spirituality to modern liberal politics, the views drawn from monistic Vedānta ideals are quite relevant. Srinivasan writes that "The goal is a union of two spheres, or at least subordination of the politics to the spiritual realm. To this end, there are exhortations to anchor politics in first principles, transform human nature, and realize genuine swaraj, or self-rule" (Srinivasan, 2014).

Secularism has created a number of challenges in today's economic environment. The concepts incorporated from the West not only brushed aside the religious aspect, but also ignored its spiritual significance in socio-political life. As a colony of the British, India had also accepted the notion of secularism. Although Nehru repeatedly emphasized the spiritual aspect of religion, in practice, he

was more motivated by science which he called 'Scientific Temper'. Consequently, religion has been replaced by science, leading to the 'secularisation of social life'. As a result, we have seen the regression of moral and ethical principles in the socio-political realm.

Contemporary societies are driven by the "pursuit of profit and the notion of individual competitive freedom, which cannot be adequately replaced in a structured, collaborative economy by relying exclusively on external control, regardless of its strength" (Rajagopalachari, 2022). We must "have a culture and a generally accepted code of spiritual values which work as a law from within. Without such spiritual control, mere material planning will ultimately lead to widespread corruption and fraud" (Rajagopalachari, 2022). The philosophy of Vedānta and its associated ethical principles, which are thoroughly elaborated in the Upaniṣads and Bhagavad Gītā, are ideally suited to provide a spiritual foundation for organized communal living based on cooperation. In such a society, individuals would contribute according to their abilities and receive based on their requirements. The principles of Vedānta encourage individuals to perform actions without seeking personal gain, focusing instead on the betterment of society as a whole.

As Heschel writes, "The idea of man is not scientific but creative" (Heschel, 1965; Roy & Ranjan, 2016). It means "the idea of man cannot be empirically derived because of the untold variations in the characteristics - physical, cultural, intellectual and spiritual - of man in time and space" (Roy &Ranjan, 2016). It is because of this that a philosophical perspective becomes necessary to deliberate on the idea of "who am I". This philosophical perspective establishes "the relationship between physical, biological, intellectual and other activities and how their interrelationships influence the establishment of social order" (Roy & Ranjan, 2016). Due to capitalist tendencies in contemporary times, the focus has shifted from 'who' to 'what' i.e. more attracted towards the materialist world. It is the need of the hour to cultivate moral and ethical principles in the young generation from an early age. The state could help with regulations whereby imparting religious education in public institutions and not ignoring it becomes the norm. A comparative study of religion should be included in the school curriculum.

There are three components involved in the principle of secularism i.e. the citizen, the state and religion. Vedānta as an alternative to secularism could work inclusively on these aspects. Vedānta believes in the concept of oneness. Therefore, it upholds neutrality towards every citizen. The state's policy of equal support

for all religions is leading inevitably to politics being entangled with religion. Political parties use these divisions and emotions of the people to win elections and form governments. People are also drawn to these distinctions based on religion, class and caste, and vote accordingly. Consequently, citizens are the ultimate sufferers. Therefore, one must be aware of personal beliefs but also understand the oneness of all which comes from the concept of Vedānta, such as - taking into consideration the welfare aspect while casting votes during elections. Politics imbued with democratic virtues aspires to provide both "public-spirited motives for action and for private choices, as well as friendship conducive to individual flourishing" (Srinivasan, 2014). While the "language of virtues may be invoked in the political sphere for ideological purposes, its prevalence helps citizens understand and assess the emotional and prudent aspects of political behaviour better than conceptions of political morality based on duties or consequences alone" (Srinivasan, 2014).

Lastly, we can have two broad approaches for a spiritual life: firstly, 'God-centred religions', which are theistic, conceived as devotional and ritualistic. All the Abrahamic religions are God-centred. Secondly, 'self-inquiry-based religion' which tends to be monistic (Vedanta Society of New York, 2019). For example, Buddhism and Jainism emphasize inquiry and meditation rather than devotion. Vedānta brings these two approaches together as it implies that 'Ātman is Brahman'. The speciality of Advaita Vedānta is that it does not make any distinction between gods of one religion and another. An individual may accept different forms of god related to various religions, as manifestations of Saguna Brahman and can worship in a temple, mosque or church. Worship at this stage is meant as a preparatory and purificatory discipline and from this one has to move to the next stage of identifying oneself with the supreme spirit (Brahman).

Secularism is the principle of treating all religions with equal respect but Vedānta is a philosophy of oneness that does not identify distinctions between them. As one of the sloka of Vedānta says, '*Aham Brahma asmi, tat tvam asi*'. It means I am Brahman and you are also Brahman. There is no division between the individuals, community and religion.

## Conclusion

Any misalignment between religion and science or between religion and statecraft must be fixed in order to develop a cohesive system

of thought and emotion that ensures a solid foundation for human development. In India, "there is a religious philosophy as old as civilization itself which, though it may seem as strange to the outsiders, is remarkably consistent with science. It has been further evolved into a code of ethics that can be the firm spiritual basis for a rightful social and economic organization" (Rajagopalachari, 2022).

Therefore, Vedānta offers an alternative to the notion of secularism in establishing a more inclusive and harmonious society worldwide. Unlike certain religions, Vedānta does not create differences among human beings on the basis of the mode of worship and concept of God, but it tries to awaken individuals and teaches them the way of integrating with each other, as it says '*Aham Brahma asmi, Tat tvam asi*'.

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