Jakob De Roover


The book under review argues two main points. First, secularism—conceived as founded on a positive and normative distinction between the religious and political domains—is indebted to earlier Christian theological paradigms, from which even modern theories of the secular have never really liberated themselves. Second, due to its parochial nature and cultural presuppositions, secularism as applied in India represents a European transplant that has failed to take root in its new environment. Drawing on the theories of S.N. Balagangadharada, who argues that ‘religion’ is a Christian concept with no empirical referent in traditional Indian society, Jakob De Roover reaches a parallel conclusion: namely, that ‘secularism’ is not a universal category and should not be deployed uncritically as a scientific category and normative ideal outside of the post-Christian European context.

The introduction and Chapter One set out the main claim that secularism is unintelligible as applied in India. Chapter Two contrasts various historical accounts of secularism, moving from hagiographies of the Enlightenment as an overcoming of religious superstition to debates over the theological origins of secularism (e.g., between Karl Löwith and Hans Blumenberg) to Balagangadharada’s approach. Chapter Three provides a genealogy of the Christian idea that society is divided into ‘Two Kingdoms,’ corresponding to Church and State, or religion and politics. Chapter Four reviews the early modern European debates over religious toleration that were based on this distinction. Chapter Five contends that later Enlightenment arguments for toleration never succeeded in transcending their theological origins. Chapters Six and Seven turn to India in the colonial and postcolonial periods, ending with a review of contemporary scholarly debates over the viability of secularism in that country.

De Roover’s argument is carefully constructed and lucidly expounded. The longest, and most persuasive, part establishes the theological background of modern European political theories, including that of John Locke (pp. 139 ff.). If the separation between the Two Kingdoms can be traced back to Pope Gelasius I in the fifth century, or even to the New Testament idea of “rendering unto Caesar” (p. 87), then this separation cannot be ‘secular’ in the sense of non-religious. As De Roover argues (e.g., pp. 144–145), there exists a direct connection between the idea of Martin Luther and other reformers that religion under the Gospel is free and spiritual, and the later, ostensibly secular idea of religious freedom or toleration. These arguments were based heavily on Christian supersessionism and on the claim that Judaism and Catholicism were ritualistic, legalistic, and persecuting religions (p. 216). Others, including myself,
have told parts of this story before; but De Roover’s formulation presents this material in a more thorough and systematic way.

Chapter Six and the beginning of Chapter Seven, which deal with colonial Indian history, are by comparison less original. De Roover tells a version of the story that the British codified and fixed Hindu tradition, as colonial authorities and their indigenous interlocutors turned to Hindu scriptures in order to defend or prohibit practices such as *sati* or widow-burning. Here De Roover depicts Christianity and other monotheistic traditions as inherently exclusivist and intolerant, because they insist on a single canon of scripture and mode of worship. The tension between the tolerant Christianity described in earlier chapters and the intolerant, colonial version is never fully resolved.

More problematic is the slippage between De Roover’s contention that secularism is inadequate as a theoretical model for describing intercommunal conflict in India, which appears solidly grounded; and his stronger claim that “liberal secularism resulted in a rise rather than decline in conflict between Hindus and Muslims” (p. 3), in other words, that European colonialism is at least partly responsible for the current intercommunal strife in India. Prior to the advent of secularism, “Indian society never disintegrated in spite of [its] diversity” (p. 9), but instead lacked “systematic persecution and oppression on the basis of comprehensive doctrines” (p. 51). “Hindu fundamentalism” (but not religious toleration, apparently) was a product of the colonial adoption or imposition of the Christian category of religion as a model for Indian traditions (p. 198; see also pp. 230–231). Whereas the poison of ‘religion’ was thus absorbed into the Indian body politic, the accompanying antidote, namely secularism, was not. Seemingly contradicting himself, De Roover elsewhere states that, even today, communal violence by Hindus against Muslims is “not driven by a mutual clash of truth claims” (p. 221), i.e., is not religiously motivated, and therefore is not comprehensible in terms of the religious-secular binary. Others, including Talal Asad, have pointed out that labeling violence ‘religious’ may obscure its true causes; but the problem here is that De Roover wishes to both have his cake and eat it too.

In this part of his argument, De Roover makes some further claims that appear questionable. For example, that “Medieval Sanskrit texts […] did not even identify Muslims along religious lines” (p. 199) ignores Sheldon Pollock’s argument that the identification of Muslims with demons (*rākṣasa*) and of Hindu kings as the legendary Rama, who fought against such demons in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, began already in the twelfth century and was based on indigenous sources.1 De Roover’s contention that “the inclination to find the Hindu tradition in a com-

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