

# A Case Study of Secularism in Nepal

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## Abstract

Secularization has constituted the centerpiece of the sociology of religion in recent years. It is argued that this controversy is a particularly important and illuminating site upon which the redirection of the sociological enterprise is being wrought. So far, secularism been seen as an opportunity for religious minorities to claim equal support. The state is given the active duty to enhance and reform religious traditions. The emerging form of Nepalese secularism may not merely contribute to a rethinking of the Western categories of the secular; its continuing evolution may also be most instructive for western countries. The objectives of the research are to know the emergence of secularism in Nepal and to evaluate the consequences of secularism in Nepal. In this paper, I have focused on the debate of secularism in Nepal. Here, I have applied the qualitative methods with case studies. The respondents were selected through purposive sampling. The aim here is to offer a perspective from which to begin to analyze the formation of Nepalese secularism, and the forces which are presently shaping it.

*Key Words:* secularism, religion, freedom, harmony, consequences

## Introduction

Secularism refers to any worldview or principle which defines the secular at a given context, and prioritizes, justifies or promotes it over the non-secular (Bullivant, 2016). The most common definition of secularism is the state, yet it may connote anticlericalism, atheism, naturalism, banishment of religious symbols from the public sphere and much more (Hashemi, 2009). Modern sociology has, since Max Weber, often been preoccupied with the problem of authority in secularized societies and with secularization as a sociological or historical process. George Holyoake's 1896 publication *English Secularism* describes secularism as, secularism is a code of duty pertaining to this life, founded on considerations purely human, and intended mainly for those who find theology indefinite or inadequate, unreliable or unbelievable.

Its essential principles are three: (1) the improvement of this life by material means. (2) That science is the available Providence of man. (3) That it is good to do well. Whether there be other good or not, the good of the present life is good, and it is good to seek that good (Holyoake, 1896). Copson (2017), defines in his book 'Secularism – Politics, Religion, and Freedom' by using principles from the work of French historian and sociologist of secularism, Jean Baubérot: 1) separation of religious institutions from the institutions of state, and no domination of the political sphere by religious institutions; 2) freedom of thought, conscience and religion for all, with everyone free to change their beliefs, and manifest their beliefs, within the limits of public order and the rights of others; 3) no discrimination against anyone on the grounds of their religion or non-religious worldview, with everyone receiving equal treatment on these grounds.

On May 18, 2006, Nepal's House of Representatives declared Nepal a secular state and suspended the political powers of the king, thus putting an end to the two-centuries-old Hindu kingdom. Nepal's secular status was reiterated in the Interim Constitution of 2007, without specifying which model of secularism should be established, and finally the Constituent Assembly declared Nepal a secular federal, democratic, republic on 28 May 2008. How is secularism understood and how can it be implemented in a country with a large Hindu majority, where Hinduism and the state have, until very recently, preserved a symbiotic relationship through the institution of Hindu kingship (Sharma 2002&Toffin 2006). Since the second half of the 18th century, Nepali rulers have styled themselves and their culturally and ethnically diverse subjects as Hindu, making Hinduism an essential component of national identity. Even today, Hindu influence remains a reality in the legal system and everyday institutional practices, and there has been little attempt to reform the numerous legal provisions that are inconsistent with (what the West thinks of as) secularism or to minimize the government's interactions with religion (CCD, 2009:1).

The state is still involved in the management of trusts associated with Hindu gods and temples; government funds are spent on Hindu religious festivals; cow slaughter and conversion are still outlawed; many laws are based on Hindu norms and values; Hindu temples are found in government buildings, schools, military camps and courts; public holidays are mostly Hindu festivals; and the President of the Republic has in many instances replaced the former Hindu king at public religious functions. In short,

secularism seems to face many challenges. Questions about the future of secularism in Nepal assume and reify secularism as a part of a modernity package that is challenging the deeply religious and traditional Nepali society. However, a recent debate in the social sciences has historicized the very notions of secularism and secularization and questioned their intrinsic association with modernization (Cannell, 2010).

In this paper, I will emphasize the major debates on secularism in Nepal. I have discussed the thematic aspects of secularism. I have divided this paper into four sections: introduction of the secularism, secularism in the recent debate, secularism in Nepalese context and conclusion.

### **Secularism in the recent debate**

Distinctions between the religious and the secular are embedded in a modern era which also imposes a range of other differentiations, notably that of public and private. Many of these are closely linked to states and their administrative practices – indeed, both in colonial and in domestic administration states helped to create the very category religion as one that would subsume a whole class of ostensibly analogous phenomena. But the differentiation of states from market economies, sometimes understood to be self-moving, is also powerful. These differentiations shape modern social imaginaries which in turn help to the world. That is, by distinguishing politics from religion or the economy from both we inform our material practices and the way we build institutions in the world. The distinctions take on a certain material reality, thus, but they can also be obstacles to a better intellectual analysis. The distinction between the secular and the religious is a case in point. It obscures both ways in which religious people engage the temporal world and ways in which states and other this world institutional structures inform the idea of religion itself. (Calhoun, 2010).

More generally, Max Weber famously argued that the differentiation of value spheres - religious, economic, political, social, aesthetic – was basic to modernity. The notion of value spheres is informative, but we should also be clear the differentiations reflect (and reproduce) tensions among projects not just values. The making of the world is pursued by both religious and non-religious projects. There is contention among these projects over the nature of institutions. Some of that contention is between the religious and non-religious. Part of the advance of what we call “the secular” stems from creating new domains of this-worldly efficacy and action. Science

is important in this way, not just as a clashing value system or ideology. Medicine is not just another domain of knowledge but now meddles with the very nature of life through genetic engineering. The economy, the state, and social movements all involve world-making projects. These may contend with each other as well as with specifically religious projects. But the expansion of reliance on this-worldly institutions and practices is an expansion of the secular even when it is compatible with or carried out by religious people. (Calhoun, 2010).

The main characteristics of secularization—a decline of religious beliefs and practices correlating with increasing modernization; the privatization of religion; and the differentiation of secular spheres (state, economy, science), understood as their emancipation from religious norms and institutions (Casanova, 1994) are all interrelated in European history. Therefore, there is a general assumption that they are part of the global modernization process. However, the debate has recently shifted to the religious and historical context in which secularism evolved, and has led to 'an unpacking of secularity as a religious-free neutral and universal development of European modernity' (Göle, 2010: 43). So it has been acknowledged that secularization makes sense only within the context of a particular historical transformation of Western European Christianity: the generalization of secularization as a universal process correlated with modernization and transferred to other world religions and other cultural areas is highly problematic (Casanova, 2009). As early as the 1980s, the anthropologist T.N. Madan (1984) questioned the thesis that the historical process of secularization, which separated the two domains of 'the religious' and 'the secular' in Western society, with the former being confined to individuals' privacy, was a precondition of modernity everywhere. However, to acknowledge that secularism is a product of Western history specific to Latin Christendom does not imply that it is not suitable for non-Western civilizations. Rather, what needs to be considered is how the Christian Western European dynamic of secularization has been globalized and how religious traditions respond and are reinterpreted, producing multiple formations of the secular in different historical and political contexts. These multiple secularisms should not be approached as replicas or 'deficient copies' of the Western original, but as distinctive formations. José Casanova suggested recently that secularism, a 'western essentialism', should first be deconstructed by emphasizing the various patterns of secularization within the West: protestant/catholic,

European/ American, etc. This should open up the way to a less Eurocentric and more comparative analysis of patterns of secularizations in other secular maternities (Casanova, 2010). In the same way, as Bhargava (2010) writes, we should attend to the histories of secularism and examine the transnational and historical development of the secular idea: Secularism too has a history made at one time largely by Europeans, then a little later by North Americans, and much later by non-western countries. Non-western societies inherited from their western counterparts specific versions of secularism but they did not always preserve them in the form in which they were received. They often added something of enduring value to them and, therefore, developed the idea further.

The task is not to catalogue the variety of secularisms in the world, but to develop new concepts and identify practices at work outside the secular/religious opposition (Cady and Shakman Hurd, 2010: 8). Scholars are calling for a 'de-secularizations' of our secularist and modernist categories (Casanova 2009) to describe contemporary religious developments. Indeed, the categories that have been used until now, such as the 'de-secularization of the world', the 'return of religion' or the 'deprivatisation of religion', all point to a simple reversal of a postulated previous process of secularization, and remain therefore within the same paradigm. The notion of the post-secular expresses the need to coin new concepts and to find ways of accommodating religious claims in liberal institutions (Habermas 2008, Casanova 2009, Molendijk et al. 2010, Rosati 2011). The post-secular debate shows that modernity does not necessarily mean the disappearance of religions from the public sphere, and invites us to abandon the model of secularity as a public space free from religious arguments, religious symbols and religious groups (Casanova 2011).

Talal Asad (2003) has argued that the religious and the secular are neither immutable essences nor opposed ideologies and that their mutual construction as interdependent concepts gain salience with the emergence of the modern state. While secular rationality was defining law, economic relations, and statecraft in the modern world, it was simultaneously transforming the conceptions, practices and institutions of religious life (Mahmood, 2009: 836). Through state and civic institutions, secularism 'has historically entailed the regulation and reformation of religious beliefs, doctrine and practices to yield a particular normative conception of religion (that is largely protestant Christian in its contours)' (Mahmood 2009:

858). The normative impetus internal to secularism reorganizes religious subjectivities in accordance with a liberal political rule that is retrospectively called 'a religiously neutral political ethic' (Mahmood, 2006: 328). This is why secular consciousness cannot meet the challenges of increasingly plural societies where different forms of religious subjectivity need to be recognized and legally acknowledged. Mahmood's reflections are relevant to the case of Nepal, as we shall see that the notion of dharma exceeds the notion of 'religious' constructed and regulated in opposition to the 'secular'.

### **Secularism in Nepalese Context**

The declaration of Nepal as a secular state has been a cherished goal of the religious minorities and ethnic groups since 1990, when the People's Movement overthrew the Panchayat regime, and provided the context for the rise of ethnic-based political identities. Nepal's diverse populations (collectively defined with the neologism *janajati*) appeared on the public stage, demanding that the new constitution guarantee ethnic, religious and linguistic minority rights. Nepali citizens began to openly criticize Hinduism's political role in maintaining social and economic inequalities in favor of high-caste Hindus. In this context, Theravada Buddhist monks and laymen began a movement which demanded that the forthcoming constitution should abolish the Hindu state and declare the country secular. This was perceived as a way to achieve a multicultural, inclusive, democratic society (Leve, 2007: 84). For the activists, secularism would not banish religion from public life but would recognize religious diversity and bring an end to Hindu high caste domination. Secularism was redefined as 'the institutional instantiation of freedom of religion and religious equality' (Leve, 2007: 94). 6 Religious activism and the movement for secularism were thus tightly linked. The same Newar intellectuals, both laypeople and monks, who introduced a reform of Newar Buddhism through Theravada-inspired modernist and rationalist ideals, also campaigned for this kind of secularism. They were soon joined by *janajati* activists in search of their ethnic identity (Letizia forthcoming & Krauskopff 2009). They even united in a common project of awareness camps to spread Buddhism among the *janajatis* and increase the number of Buddhists in the National Census of 2001 (LeVine & Gellner 2005: 234 & Letizia 2006). Although the 1990 constitution officially recognized ethnic minorities, it continued to declare the state to be Hindu. The campaign contributed to the shaping of Nepali secularism none the less. The state and religion were not separated; instead, the democratic state had the duty to recognize and be the patron of all religions equally.

Nepal is a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious nation through democracy. Freedom of religion is also guaranteed by the Nepali constitution, but conversion to other religions from Hinduism is prohibited by law. Nationalists have recently protested against secularism and want to return to Hindu theocratic state. 'Secularism', translated by the expression *dharma nirapeksata* ('autonomous from/ indifferent, impartial to dharma'), was introduced as a contribution to the modernization of 'New Nepal'. The concept is now embedded in public speech, at least in urban centres. If the 'package' has been delivered, it has also produced local responses that need to be examined with a view to empirically testing the western secular/religious opposition. In recent years, religion has become a crucial sociological variable for self-identification. The Hindu religion in particular remained a philosophical guide for Shah Rulers to rule the country for more than 240 years (1769-2006) before Nepal eventually became a secular state. Nevertheless, various religious groups lived side by side with the Hindu religion over the years. The number of people practicing various types of religion has increased in every census record since the 1952/54 census onwards. Compared with the 2001 census, two more religious groups were added in the 2011 census: Prakrit (Animism) and Bon, an old religion of Tibet and Nepal. The absolute number of people has increased in all religions over the last 60 years. However, the percentage of the Hindu population has declined gradually since the 1981 Census. Although there was a 5.89 percentage points decline of the Hindu population between the 1991 and 2001 censuses, the number and percentile of the Hindu population has increased in the 2011 Census by 0.72%.

The strength of this vision of secularism as 'equal respect and opportunities for all religions' was sustained in the period of transition towards the republican regime and its first governments. The first step considered 'secular' by media and the public was the declaration by the Nepal government in late 2007 of a number of Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, Madhesi, Tharu and Kirant festivals as national holidays in a calendar hitherto permeated by Hindu festivals. Although this was considered as a minor gesture by activists who expected the government to take bolder moves towards implementing secularism, it was nevertheless welcomed by the religious minorities, who felt that they had been heard, and newspapers contributed to this positive appraisal. As Deepak Thapa notes, 'Even that little has certainly helped religious minorities feel greater ownership of the

state, and that can only be considered a progressive step' (Thapa, 2010). Even among the politicians who supported the inclusion of secularism in the Interim Constitution, there was no strong commitment towards it and many did not really want it, nor were they clear about its implications. For them, secularism was above all else a move against the king, in the hope of removing the religious basis of his power, rather than a more specific project of society. From 2008 onwards, public spaces such as Khula Manch in Kathmandu were at times taken over by Muslims, Christians, Tamangs, Gurungs, and Madhesis for national meetings and ceremonies: as a result of secularism, the capital city is becoming visibly multi-religious.

**Table: 1 Religions in Nepal**

Religion	Population	Percentage
Hinduism	21,551,492	81.34%
Buddhism	2,396,099	9.04%
Islam	1,162,370	4.39%
Kirat	807,169	3.04%
Christianity	375,699	1.41%
Prakriti (Nature Worship)	121,982	0.46%
Bon	13,006	0.04%
Jainism	3,214	0.01%
Bahá'í	1,283	0.01%
Sikhism	609	0.01%
Others/Unspecified	61,581	0.23%
Total	26,494,504	100%

Source: CBC, 2011 Census

Table 1 shows that there are religious categories reported in the census 2011. The highest percentage 81.3% of the Nepalese population are Hindu, 9.04% are Buddhist, 4.39% are Muslim, 3.04% are Kirant, 1.41% are Christian, 0.46 are Prakriti, 0.04% are Bon, 0.01% are Jainism, 0.01% are Bahai, 0.01% are Sikhism and others are 0.023%.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The declaration of Nepal as a secular state has started a new discussion and this might even lead to a religious conflict. Moreover, the increasing discussion and clashes have put many doubts on the topic of sustainability of Secularism. It is important to understand the significant reasons for the



emergence of secularism in Nepal and examine how the Hindu dominated country Nepal would sustain itself as a secular state. Thus, the research endeavours to answer the following questions.

1. How Nepal emerged as a secular State?
2. What are the consequences of secularism in Nepal?

### **Objectives of the Study**

The general objective of this research is to examine the sustainability of the secularism in Nepal. This will further enhance the research to determine measures to maintain the religious harmony in Nepal. More particularly this research will try to closely examine the religious beliefs of Nepalese and their desire regarding the state's relation with the religion. Hence the specific objectives of the study are:

- To know the emergence of secularism in Nepal.
- To evaluate the consequences of secularism in Nepal.

### **Significance of the Study**

This research will add a new insight in understanding the issues of secularism as a major issue in Nepal. This research also determines the sustainability of secularism in Nepal that helps to envisage the probability of religious conflict in Nepal. Hence, this research will be useful and purposeful to all students, scholars and security personnel. Moreover, this research can be helpful to political leaders and religious leaders in determining measures to maintain the religious harmony in Nepal. Right decision and wise steps by these leaders can definitely move this country toward more democratic, peaceful and stable country where religion will not become the cause of violence. This research can be useful to national leaders, international community, & international leader on the effect of transforming a country with heterogeneity like Nepal, having religious domination of one religion into secular state.

### **Research Methods**

#### **Study area**

To perform this research, Kathmandu the capital city of Nepal has been chosen as a study area. Being a capital of the country, any political decision or events get more attention here. Moreover, the major and famous religious sites of almost all major religions are located inside Kathmandu. Hence, for this research religious site of Kathmandu valley was the primary study area.

## **Research Design**

The research is explorative in nature. The qualitative research methods is applied with the case studies.

## **Universe & Sample**

Since the study is related with the religion, religious people were taken as sample. For this research, sample from only four major religion of Nepal; Hindu and Christian were included. Four respondents were selected through purposive sampling for the case studies.

## **Nature of Data**

Data for the research was collected both from primary and secondary sources. For the primary data were collected through the case studies.

## **Data Collection**

For the collection of data case study methods adopted for this research. For the case study, this research relied on primary & secondary sources. Cases published or broadcasted in any visual or audio media as well as printed and web based medias are taken to justify the research topic. During research, I put forward case explained by sources during interview. The research also attempted to study the issues in the country.

## **Results and Discussions**

### **Case No.1**

#### **Manav Khanal (Name Changed), Age 68 years.**

A Hindu priest blame that, Christians are trying to increase their number by erasing Hinduism. They are disturbing society. They are giving money and other support to people for changing religion. They are buying people's religion. Strengthening Christianity in Nepal is perceived as a challenge to Hinduism hence often Hindu activists treat Christians as an offender. Secularism will give a free way to cow slaughter, hurting the feelings of Hindus: people will kill cows. Secularism allows conversion, attracting poor and illiterate people through money to another religion.

It is a politically imposed decision that is not supported by the population, which is majority Hindu and should have the right to decide by referendum. No country in the world has real secularism, as it is a contradiction in itself.

He said that before secularism Christians were on slow pace, they used to feel shy or afraid of coming in front. But now, they are coming door to door. If we ask something, they reply they do have equal rights as we have. They talk about legal things. It seems they are coming with well prepared. Christianity is strengthening in the loss of Hinduism, we are losing people. If they continued like this Hinduism will be finished, we must protect it and save it, it is our duty and responsibility.

It shows that after secularism, Hindus have become more hostile and aggressive. Hindu hardliners are mobilizing people and organizing different religious activities. Interviewees tend to equate secularism with religious tolerance. They observe that secularism is not necessary because religious harmony has always prevailed in Nepal and that Hinduism itself is a secular religion, all-encompassing, tolerant, and respectful of all religions, neither dogmatic nor proselytizing. Proselytizing religions is therefore considered a disrespectful disruption of tolerance and harmony.

### **Case No. 2**

**Mina Pariyar (Name Changed), Age 32 years.**

An active Christian woman said they (Christians) do not give or receive money to people for the conversion. She said they are just helping people who are really in need. She mentioned that they help people who are in need, they do not give money, and they support the Christian families on the education of children and improving livelihoods. They also mentioned that kind of humanitarian assistance is not only for the Christian people but for other religion too.

It reveals that the secularism was one of the greatest achievements of minority religious groups. Globally the concept of secularism is contested so as it happened in Nepal too.

### **Case No.3**

**Maya Thapa (Name changed), Age 57 yrs.**

She has two sons and their children. In order to pursue good future two brothers came to Kathmandu. They worked hard and earned good amount of money. During their stay in Kathmandu younger brother changed his religion to Christianity. Since then relation between two brothers was deteriorated and it affected relationship of the second generation as well.

Their father died on 2073 B.S. because of heart attack and the conflict among the two families reached to climax. The younger wanted to bury father's body and run the ritual according to Christian religion whereas elder one wanted to conduct all the rituals according to Hindu religion. Debate pulled the local residents. On advice of locals, ritual was carried out according to Hindu religion. Younger brother did not attend the ritual of father. This incident heightened the misunderstanding among the family and has kept the family separated since then.

It shows that proselytizing has created a distinct division in Nepalese society which in the long run can further weaken the solidarity in community. Taking this incident as a representing issue, it can be concluded that social cohesion has been weakened and replaced with hatred which may lead to religious conflict.

#### **Case No.4**

##### **Sita Shrestha (Name changed), Age 48 yrs.**

She is a social worker and belongs to Newar family. She is living in Kathmandu valley with her in laws. Her husband has gone to Korea for foreign employment. While interacting with her friends she came to know that she can get rid of frequent scissors if prayer was offered at Church. Condition put forward to her was proselytizing. She accepted proposal. After prayer her frequency of attack was decreased. Finally she mentioned that she is not having scissor anymore.

She is still living with her in laws. She had still been able to strike balance on her family life. She mentioned that every Saturday she keeps on going to church and is happy with her change of religion.

From the case study it reveals that proselytizing based on propaganda is also deep rooted. However ability to make adjustment within society will contribute to maintaining religious and social harmony.

#### **Conclusion**

So far, secularism has not prevented the state from financing Hindu religious institutions, but has instead been seen as an opportunity for religious minorities to claim equal support. The state is given the active duty to enhance and reform religious traditions. Bhargava argues that Indian secularism has to differ from the classical liberal model, which dictates

strict separation between religious and political institutions and recognizes individuals and beliefs but not groups and practices. The circumstances of India (and the same could be said for Nepal)—an enormous diversity of religious communities; social practices emphasized over individual beliefs; many discriminatory religious practices in need of reform—dictate that religious freedom must also include the right of religious communities to carry their own practices, and that equality of citizenship applies also to the religious groups to which citizens belong.

However, I suggest that this distinctive form of secularism could find more acceptance in Nepal 'by embodying the idea of respectful transformation of religions'. The notion that religious traditions must accept the challenge of modern times is widely accepted and allows for substantial reforms to take place without hurting the 'religious feelings of the people' that are recurrently invoked by fundamentalists. While I have suggested in this article that secularism in Nepal should not be appraised with reference to a normative western model, I have also attempted to demonstrate that the redefinition of secularism as a local version of 'religious harmony' cannot satisfy the claims for equality and inclusion for which *dharma nirapekshata* has been a rallying call since the 1990s.

Finally, I should recognize the prominence of a secularist ideology that goes beyond affirming the virtues of the ostensibly neutral. The demarcation between religion and the secular is made not just found. The secular is claimed by many not just as one way of organizing life, not just as useful in order to ensure peace and harmony among different religions, but as a kind of maturation. It is held to be a kind of developmental achievement. Some people feel they are "better" because they have overcome illusion and reached the point of secularism. That ideological self-understanding is itself powerful in a variety of contexts. It shapes even the way in which many think of global cosmopolitanism as a kind of escape from culture, national and religion into a realm of apparently pure reason, universal rights, and global connections. I might, by contrast, think of cosmopolitanism as something to be achieved through the connections among all the people who come from and are rooted in and belong to different traditions, different social structures, different countries, and different faiths.

It could be argued that secularism in Western countries (which is a product of a particular religious history, producing a particular concept of religion)

also presents itself as a neutral space and considers diverging religious subjectivities as exceptional. Both Hindu tolerance and Western secularism imply the norm of a majority offering a neutral space for religious minorities. A way of these normative models can be found only through the identification of pragmatic solutions in a process of continuous, respectful and self-reflexive compromise. The emerging form of Nepali secularism may not merely contribute to a rethinking of the Western categories of the secular; its continuing evolution may also be most instructive for western countries. In any case, secularism is not simply the project of some smart people reflecting on problems of religion. It is a phenomenon in its own right that demands reflexive scholarship, critique, and open-minded exploration.

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