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Public Religions in a Postsecular Era: Habermas and Gandhi on Revisioning the Political

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An embedded ideology of the religious-secular binary in its various forms has assumed currency in recent continental and Anglo-American political thought. This ideology highlights the difference between religion under modernization, broadly defined by the secularization thesis, and that of religious revival in a period characterized by postsecularism. It reflects the rise of new epistemologies and the dissolution of the antinomies between faith and reason characteristic of a postsecular culture. A common argument found in these writings is that enlightenment secularization, which relegates the sacred to a private sphere, seems to have discovered its own parochialism as religion continues to provide meaning in all aspects of contemporary social and political life.

At the center of the recent contested cluster of ideas on postsecularism are the works of Jürgen Habermas, which have played a pivotal role in the renewed attention to religion beginning in the 1980s. Earlier, Habermas saw religion as irrelevant to the revitalization of a democratically engaged public sphere.¹ His new regard for religion, articulated across several venues since 2001, has led him to embrace the term “postsecular society” in order to demarcate the current moment: as a crucial stage in the historical development of the failure of secularism and as a fruitful ground in the cultivation of new forms of understanding religiosity.² He argues that

1. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

2. Jürgen Habermas, *An Awareness of What Is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), pp. 15–23.

“practical reason fails to fulfill its own vocation, when it no longer has sufficient strength to awaken, and to keep awake in the minds of secular subjects, an awareness of the violations of solidarity throughout the world, an awareness of what is missing, of what cries out to heaven.”³

I also examine Gandhi’s approach to religion for three reasons. First, experts lament that there is no such thing as Indian political thought or that it seems to play no role in the way the social sciences are practiced.⁴ The problem is that many terms Gandhi employed—*shakti* (energy), *satya* (truth), *atman* (soul), *dharma* (right/duty)—to reflect on the Indian experience are not used in contemporary Western political theory. Despite these contestations there is a need to understand the distinctive tradition of social and political thought that fashions and sustains some of the political practices of Indian democracy today. As India becomes a global power, the neglect of Indian political thought is striking and serious. Those who are interested in understanding the nature of this transformation can profit from the way the concepts of the essential unity of humankind and of the philosophical ties that bind different religions have been held by seminal thinkers of modern India.

Clearly while the attempt is to move beyond the limited universality traditionally claimed by the Western canon, the need to reclaim the meaning of secularism in contemporary politics is important, as what constitutes religion and what constitutes the secular has been a bone of contention in public discourse in India for many decades. Since the partition of India, the state has seen separation of religion from secular domains to disarm fanaticism, to accommodate different and potentially conflicting identities, and to create a democratic state. The discourse on secularism has evolved to a point where it would be hubristic to attempt to write its entire role in a democratic vision for India. Consequently, this study is organized around some concepts related to secularism that have been pivotal in a paradigmatic transformation of the Indian polity, as in recent years the relation between political and religious domains takes on new meaning and new urgency as scholars review the attacks on the secular tradition in India.⁵

3. Ibid., p. 19.

4. Norman D. Palmer, “Indian and Western Political Thought: Coalescence or Clash?” *The American Political Science Review* 49, no. 3 (1955): 747–61. See also Sheldon Pollock, “Crisis in the Classics,” *Social Research* 78, no. 1 (2001): 21–48.

5. See Anuradha D. Needham and Rajeshwari S. Rajan, eds., *The Crisis of Secularism in India* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2007).

Another reason for paying heed to Gandhi's work is that there are interesting parallels and divergences between Habermas's discourse mode of settling the claims of contested religions and Gandhi's approach to the pursuit of moral truths. Despite these similarities, not many scholars have studied them together. This may be due to their different historical contexts, conceptual frameworks, and uses of terminology. This study is written with a view to bridge a divide between modern European critical theory and non-Western critical theoretical projects whose central aim is to rethink the premises of secularism.⁶ Habermas is defending a space for religious traditions at a time when nation states have declined but individual freedoms, basic rights of citizenship, and a certain religious homogenization has already been established in European societies. His inquiry is guided by the asymmetrical distribution of the burdens of citizenship in contemporary Europe. He realizes there can be no integration of plural religious traditions without a readiness to tolerate the spectrum of thoughts and cultures of immigrant populations, because religious beliefs inform political choices and these often clash.

Gandhi is writing in a colonial context where individual rights and opportunities are limited or overridden, in which although sensitivity for minority rights is manifested in constitutional proceedings, the urge to mold minorities into a desired homogenous cultural shape is very prominent during formation of the nation state. Later, as separate political representation is withdrawn for minorities, cultural safeguards through institutions (language, culture and religious practices) is provided for the crucial sustenance and survival of religious traditions in India. I try to establish some common ground in their approaches, analyses, and strategies in resolving crisis of their particular age, so that their divergent positions actually interlock on several methodological issues.

I begin by identifying three core arguments in Habermas's recent work, where he stipulates that post-metaphysical thinking remains secular even in a situation depicted as "postsecular" but in this different situation it may become aware of a secularistic self-misunderstanding. Observing that many scholars use the term *postsecular*, we need to ask some questions: Given the inherently amorphous nature of the term and the diversity of approaches, do we really know or agree about the term "postsecular"?

6. For Ambedkar's rejection of hegemonic views, see Shabnum Tejani, "Reflections on Category of Secularism in India: Gandhi, Ambedkar and the Ethics of Communal Representation," in Needham and Rajan, *The Crisis of Secularism in India*, pp. 44–64.

What political forms do religion or beliefs assume in a network society that has contributed to loosening the links that once tied authority to a social body determined by territory? More specifically, how do modern states cope with the challenge of religious revivalism? How should we understand the phenomenon of the return of religion in the postmodern world? Can religious political movements be accommodated within the framework of modern liberal democracies, or do they represent a radical challenge to the system? These are among the troubling questions that have been raised by the “Revenge of God” on “modern man” in a post-secular age.⁷

While the paper tries to address some of these questions in order to sharpen the arguments, it will briefly outline Gandhi’s framing of our predicament in some of his writings in which he interrogates both religion and politics. He introduces the idea of “sarva dharma sambhava” (goodwill) or equal respect for all religions to discuss secularism, which was quite unlike Nehru’s understanding of state secularism based on the principle of impartiality or separation of state from any one religion.⁸ While Habermas is a confirmed agnostic, Gandhi’s life was permeated with religion as he concluded: “Those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means.”⁹ Yet political action that was religious had to be deeply ethical, and that meant belief in *satyagraha* (truth force) and non-violent civil disobedience. Rather than neutralize religion or separate it from other substantive goods, Gandhi aimed to prevent those goods from closing spaces for religion and attaining the foundational status to which they aspire.

My argument is that the notion of a postsecular society is an attempt to look for political-cultural resources instead for a rearticulated political ideology to revitalize the democracy project. Habermas attempts to refigure democracy away from strictly procedural accounts of communication in order to provide the answer to the question of the meaning and motivation

7. Gilles Keppel, *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World*, trans. Alan Braley (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1994).

8. Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister, is seen as closer to a “weak” secularism thesis that claims fair management of diverse religious views as opposed to the “strong” thesis that sees separation.

9. Mohandas K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Government of India: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1961), 59:401.

in modernity through intersubjectivity as a potential bond for democratic legitimacy. His criticisms of secularism arise because he is focusing on conceptions developed in largely homogenous societies with individuals who view themselves as right-bearing subjects of liberal democracies.

Writing in a different context on modernity, Gandhi also sets aside political ideologies when he attempts to translate the likeness of human beings to the image of the divine into the equal dignity of all human beings, which then offers a way of reorienting society's values toward social transformation. In "Hind Swaraj" he argues that adoption of either modernity or tradition has to enhance both the spiritual and material well-being of the individual and society. Does the acknowledgment of either a secularist misunderstanding or "sarva dharma sambhava" have the potential to be constitutive of a postsecular ethic suited to multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies worldwide? An exploration of these approaches and questions, I submit, would be a useful contribution to an understanding of the limits of postsecularism to reclaiming the political. What is lost in this revisioning, I will argue, is the idea of secularism as complex equality that claims individuals are discriminated against only because of their belonging to particular religious groups. As a form of resistance to uniformization and a call for democratization, secularism acquires significance in political narratives against authoritarianism. However, secularism cannot be the only "mantra" (incantation) for revisioning the post-political world. By interpreting politics as a means of pursuing private beliefs or religious practices, it has almost totally obscured the exalted pleasures of engaging in public affairs. In the final section, I also argue Gandhi unwittingly erected the signposts to what would emerge as a much later theory on religion in the postcolonial state, despite his intention in his own times to liberate religion from its dependence on the state framework. This liberation would lead much further down the road, to a kind of "secularization" of the state that redefines social justice in modern India.

An Awareness of What Is Missing

The term *postsecular* has gained currency in contemporary debates in sociology, political theory, and even theology, especially after Habermas's essays on "Religion in the Public Sphere" (2006), "The Dialectics of Secularization" (2007), and "An Awareness of What Is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age" (2011). In these texts and others he suggests that political theory move to a "post-secular self-understanding of society

as a whole in which the global dimension, role and impact of religion in a continually secularising environment must be reckoned with.”¹⁰

The body of argument and commentary that has grown around the notion of the postsecular is expanding rapidly, and indeed is already extensive, so in what follows I will sketch some of the main lines of the debate only. Now the idea of the postsecular has an empirical and normative aspect that is of great interest to us. In its empirical sense, it refers to social orders that have undergone processes of secularization over the course of the past two to three hundred years but in which religious world-views still shape the identities of its inhabitants. It seems to imply a time when religious beliefs and practices ceased to command widespread following and retreated from their age-old presence in the public institutions and structures of societies but have now returned to a position of renewed public prominence. Habermas’s revisioning of postsecularism in terms of political plurality is directed against some of his earlier formulations, but for the purpose of my argument here I will raise only three aspects about the symbolic and cultural influences of religion in our societies today: defining postsecularism, the self-correction of secularism, and the relation between philosophy, religion, and democracy.

The first problem is that social scientists have a hard time conceptualizing and especially measuring secularization, something that is related to the secular.¹¹ By extension it is challenging to assess whether or not secularization has in fact occurred given that there is so much evidence for and against its sociological reality. If secularism is so highly contestable, how can we use it to understand contemporary politics? Habermas argues that postsecular society applies only to those affluent societies where people’s religious ties have steadily or rather quite dramatically lapsed since the mid-twentieth century. In my reading of Habermas, “postsecular” and “postsecularism” carry complicated set of meanings, so for the purpose of this paper I would like to single out his emphasis on why “neither citizens nor the liberal state should expect citizens to justify their political positions independently of their religious convictions or worldviews.”¹²

10. Jürgen Habermas, “Equal Treatment of Cultures and Limits of Postmodern Liberalism,” *Journal of Philosophy* 13, no. 1 (2005): 6. See “Religion in the Public Sphere,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2006); and Florian Schuller, ed., *Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006).

11. See José Casanova, *Public Religions in Modern World* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994).

12. Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), p. 128.

One element of this contestation is the rise of faith identities in political and social life, regarding which Habermas explains three important sociopolitical developments. First, the growing incidents of religiously motivated conflicts and acts of terrorism and the dissemination of news regarding these incidents by the mass media have contributed to the change of two perceptions: religion and religious communities have a persistent place in the secular West, and that processes of modernization will not lead to a progressive shrinkage of religion. Second, the influence of churches and religious organizations in the formation of public opinion and private morality on key issues (euthanasia, animal protection, climate change) has been increasing. Finally, the growing number of guest workers, refugees, and immigrants with their traditional values in a secular society highlights the challenge of pluralism and the painful process of transformation into postcolonial “immigrant societies.” In these changed sociopolitical circumstances, for Habermas, the need of the hour is for people with a changed consciousness to maintain a balance between the increasing religious presence in their lives and the secular social and political order.

To support Habermas we could argue that in their historical origin secular democratic states translate religious discourses in their own vocabulary, so what is at stake here is the curious “difference” between religions under modernization and religious revival under postsecularism. As far as the conceptual innovation is concerned, the “difference” in postsecularism seems to indicate a crisis in the foundationalist paradigm in Western political thought. What emerges in the fissures of the secularization thesis is a new horizon of postsecularism; the conceptual difference between secularism and postsecularism assumes the role of an indicator or a symptom of an absent ground. This difference presents nothing other than an absence in the traditional idea of politics divided by political ideologies. I would argue that each intellectual tradition is open to an internal development of its own approach toward modernity. Therefore it might be better to see the role of religion in the emergence of multiple modernities in Asia and Europe, which further invites us to rethink the presuppositions of a secularization thesis.¹³ A revisionist perspective for Habermas, then, compels us to view modernization as a geographically restricted deviation rather than the matrix for cultural developments worldwide.

13. For analytical clarity a distinction must be maintained between secularization and secularity, which I do not discuss due to the limited scope of the paper.

One correlate of this endeavor is to rethink Habermas's critique of a self-deception in the secularist understanding that sees itself as a natural adversary to religion. This brings us to the second point. Habermas's political thinking gravitates around the need for modern philosophy to engage with religious traditions. Here his concern is less with the larger public institutions, or states, than with individuals in whom the secularist self-understanding suppresses cognitive traces left by monotheistic traditions. In this light, it is appropriate to reconsider how, for Habermas, the pre-political ethics of a secular democratic state are considered religious in origin. What we have is a claim about post-metaphysical thinking that, through self-reflexivity about its origins, has revealed the limitations of its own secularism. Part of that reconsideration must involve recovering the identity of actual traditions and their normative significance for the present.

Many of the cherished concepts of secular moral and political philosophy are demystified articulations of Judeo-Christian tenets. For example, Christians invoke their biblical message that men are created in the image of God and the successful implementation of a peaceful and mutually respected secular society in the implementation of God's design. Most significantly religion has to fulfill these because Habermas explains a version of the historical consequentialist argument for privatizing religion: religion ought to be relegated to the private realm in order to inhibit religious disagreement from escalating into religious strife. A related argument is that religion ought to be relegated to the private sphere in order to avoid disruption and disharmony. He claims that religion has to go through the translation process in order to be free of its inherent destructive potential and gain general acceptance. However much of this kind of Judeo-Christian thought that Habermas is relying upon associated women with an inferior nature of the flesh and men with the spirit, and espoused patriarchal views of sex inequality that have been questioned ever since.¹⁴

Now since Habermas's revised orientation remains concerned about democracy, the threat posed by globalizing forces make the need to discover new political cultural resources for the democratic revitalization project very urgent. Hence he argues that religiously derived norms and ethical intuitions might help in pushing for a rearticulated global democracy. Both the secular and religious need to re-examine themselves and

14. See Susan F. Parsons, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002).

their domains; the secular citizens have to recognize their historical roots in religious discourse and not presuppose that it is an archaic and obsolete ideology. They must also go through a self-reflective transcending of a secularist self-understanding of modernity.

In spite of Habermas's fear that the interests of philosophy and religion are opposed, he believes that rich intellectual benefits are to be gained from sharing a public space with a reconstituted tradition. As it turns out this leads to a proposal for a postsecular public sphere. But how are universal principles for the public role of religion to be formulated in this new context? If "postsecular" signifies some kind of self-correction, does it therefore imply a more openly religious turn or direction of modernity? When Habermas mentions a derailing of modernization, he is implying that this modernity needs to be put back on its tracks; presumably a more emphatic dialogue with religion will put this train of modernization back on its rails so that it can move toward its essential destination.

The third problem emerges when a postsecular defense found in Habermas also acts as a post-metaphysical universalism, having dispensed with the illusions peculiar to theories of the West. In this regard he claims that "modern reason will learn to understand itself only when it clarifies its relation to a contemporary religious consciousness."¹⁵ He reformulates the idea of reason without regard to three assumptions: that reason is able to provide grounds and is transparent to itself; that reason is undetermined by anything other than itself; and that reason can discover an objective standpoint external to history and culture. Habermas's recent approach works with different presuppositions: rather than legislated by a solitary individual who can arrive autonomously at a moral point of view, reason develops through the interactions with religious discourses.

The perplexing quality of this approach is overcome with a certain amount of revisions. In particular he emphasizes the need to come to terms with the idea of a world in which philosophy and religion must live side by side in the public culture. A rethinking of secularism must make room for religion. Of greatest importance are those criteria that religion has to meet in the translation process: (1) religious consciousness must come to terms with the cognitive dissonance of encountering other denominations and religions; (2) it must adapt to the authority of the sciences, which hold a monopoly of secular knowledge; (3) it must agree to the premises of a constitutional state. Thus Habermas's revised orientation entails loosening

15. Habermas, *An Awareness of What Is Missing*, pp. 17–18.

philosophy's relationship to the rationalist tradition so that secular thinking and religious consciousness can both engage in the postsecular condition.

As controversial as Habermas's project may prove to be, it promises for many to recognize the public relevance of religion and of religious ideas in informing civic discourse in liberal democracies. His arguments for defending an expanded space for religious language in the public sphere go beyond the procedural point that it would be unfair to exclude religious worldviews and the citizens who have them.

For Habermas, the current sociological condition is one in which post-metaphysical thinking as the retrospective faculty of culling meaning from the past is a source of illumination. What is unclear is how far this condition, or the revival of religion, can be seen as catalyzed by social developments and how much it is an inner dynamic of metaphysical thinking. Is the postsecular condition just another milestone on the road to philosophy's eventual triumph, or is a postsecular condition the manifestation of something more permanent, e.g., multiple religious faiths, a point taken up by Gandhi in the Indian context? Many of Gandhi's arguments, I will show, support Habermas and extend them by analyzing the historical transformation of Western civilizations. The postsecular age that Habermas sees today in the advanced capitalist countries was analyzed earlier by Gandhi using different categories.

A Dissident Conscience

I focus now on Mahatma Gandhi, one of India's great political thinkers of the twentieth century. In recent years Gandhi's reputation has been growing again as some of his ideas on religion have not only survived the passage of time but have taken on a new relevance in the current debate on postsecularism, for several reasons.¹⁶ Ever since the publication of "Hindu Swaraj," Gandhi's writings have attracted great interest and intense controversy.¹⁷ As a critique of modernity, his seminal essay questioned the belief in progress due to the accomplishments in science and technology. A critique of both the mechanistic explanation and technological instrumental rationality is taken up by Gandhi in his rejection of

16. See Darrell Fasching, John L. Esposito, and Todd Lewis, eds., *Comparative Religious Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011).

17. Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne H. Rudolph, *Postmodern Gandhi and Other Essays: Gandhi in the World and at Home* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2006), p. 4; Romain Rolland, *Mahatma Gandhi* (Kessinger Publications, 2003).

Western civilization. Constituting the core of this civilization is the craving for material comforts that influences the life of individuals in a way that makes them accumulate resources in an unlimited way. In his “My Story with Experiments with Truth,” modern science is criticized for denying the transcendental dimension of reality and rejecting the trans-temporal, divine sources of knowledge and authority.¹⁸ He also hints at a reductionist methodology, which reduces the higher to the lower, essence to substance, and form to matter, and through which modern science seeks to explain the former in terms of the latter. This altogether obliterates the qualitative dimensions of reality and treats all things as uniform material substance. Gandhi, according to Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph, refused to “privilege modernism’s commitment to the epistemology of universal truths, objective knowledge and master narrative.”¹⁹

The disparity of judgments about Gandhi’s aims and achievements is baffling, but I will avoid going into these. Instead I would spend some time on understanding the nature of the divorce of politics from morality, which Gandhi found missing in Western civilization: “this civilisation takes note neither of morality nor of religion.”²⁰ The problem with maintaining a difference or eliminating the tension between Gandhi’s politics and his religion, or in viewing them as linked, is that it attributes to him a view that relieves the individual of any burden of moral reflection when it comes to political obligation and civic duty.

Thomas Pantham, in “Beyond Liberal Democracy: Thinking with Mahatma Gandhi,” confronts this problem when he claims that the Gandhian project is aimed at resolving a fundamental contradiction in the theory and practice of liberal democracy, namely, “the contradiction between the affirmation of the freedom of the individual in the so-called private sphere of morality and its curtailment in the allegedly amoral or purely technical public/political sphere.”²¹ He argues that both Gandhi and Habermas were reacting to the contradictions of the late-capitalist state and its claims to democratic legitimacy, which was overlooking participatory democracy.

18. M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Boston: Beacon, 1957).

19. Rudolph and Rudolph, *Postmodern Gandhi*, p. 4.

20. Anthony J. Parel, *Gandhi: Hind Swaraj and Other Writings* (New Delhi: Foundation Books, 1997), p. 37.

21. Thomas Pantham, “Beyond Liberal Democracy: Thinking with Mahatma Gandhi,” in Thomas Pantham and Kenneth L. Deutsch, eds., *Political Thought in Modern India* (New Delhi: Sage, 1996), pp. 325–46.

They also shared a critical-emancipatory concern with a revitalized public sphere promising a reduction of structural exploitation and violence.

According to Pantham, both Gandhi and Habermas oppose the scientization of politics, both of them favor the proclamation of a political sphere by the people from the technocrats of social power. Habermas criticizes the antidemocratic and amoral trend of modern scientific civilization. He disapproves of the depoliticization of the mass of the population and the decline of the political realm.

While I endorse this interpretation that Habermas addresses the dangers about the “political” being transformed into a code of self-maintaining administrative subsystem, I argue that we now need to revisit this parallel in the current scenario by claiming that the postsecular age, which Habermas sees today in the advanced capitalist countries, was analyzed earlier by Gandhi using different categories. Gandhi is critical of the state of “political” that is supposed to be autonomous from or external to the rest of social life, as the standards that govern the former are assumed to be divorced from private moral standards.

In “The Sarvodaya State,” the dichotomization of social life into the public or political and the private are then presented at another plane when political is reified into the representative state and the social as conflicting interests of the individuals. The latter is the proper sphere for individuals to exercise their private judgment and interests: “I look upon an increase in the power of the State with the greatest fear, because although while apparently doing good by minimizing exploitation, it does the greatest harm to mankind by destroying individuality which lies at the root of all progress.”²²

The idea of “sarva dharma sambhava” used by Gandhi implies broadly religious coexistence, inter-religious tolerance, and equal respect for all religions in society. It is a positive concept of equal treatment of all religions in the midst of diversity and takes precedence over hierarchical structures in Indian religions. He writes that “God has created different faiths just as he has the votaries thereof. How can I even secretly harbour the thought that my neighbour’s faith is inferior to mine and wish that he should give up his faith and embrace mine? As a true and loyal friend, I can only wish and pray that he may live and grow perfect in his own faith. In God’s house there are many mansions and they are equally holy.”²³

22. M. K. Gandhi, *India of my Dreams* (Ahmedabad: Navjivan Mudranalaya, 1947), p. 70.

23. M. K. Gandhi, *Harijan*, April 20, 1934.

From the discussion above, we are in a better position to claim that Habermas and Gandhi, from their vantage points, agree that the traditional secularization thesis needs to be revisited and hence are in agreement on the relevance that religious ideas and ethics have in political debate, in three ways. First, an inclusive view of religion as a potential emancipator of political and cultural resource emerges, a resource that can open up and enhance rather than retard public discourse and that can energize the creation of more deliberative and more participative social institutions. Second, both claim that universal egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and collective life in solidarity, the individual morality of conscience, human rights, and democracy, is the direct legacy of religious ethics of justice and of love. Like Gandhi, Habermas seems to be saying that religion is an important source of meaning and a repository of some truths, and that religion can preserve and communicate certain truths better than philosophy. He believes that “the perspective from which post-metaphysical thinking approaches religion shifts once secular reason takes seriously the shared origin of philosophy and religion.”²⁴ Religion can help in sustaining meanings that are threatened with extinction by an instrumentalized and trivialized public sphere. Habermas is similar to Gandhi in that just as there are certain aesthetic experiences that are beyond the power of rational philosophy to make fully transparent, so too are certain religious experiences that are beyond the power of rational philosophy to articulate and explain. Interestingly while Gandhi believed in the principle of “sarva dharma sambhava,” or in the truth and equality of all religions, he would argue that “God and Truth are convertible terms, and if anyone told me that God was a God of untruth or a God of torture I would decline to worship him. Therefore in politics also we have to establish the Kingdom of Heaven.”²⁵ Paradoxically he does not deny that there are different religions in the world with different scriptures, texts, and symbols, but he believes that they were different roads converging upon one point.

Revisions of a “Postsecular” Religion?

In reframing the question of secularism as a form of separation that makes religion private while making power public, recent scholarship has contributed to generating important restatements of the problem of secularism. William E. Connolly argues that secularism has narrowed the

24. Habermas, *An Awareness of What Is Missing*, p. 17.

25. M. Gandhi, *Young India*, June 18, 1925.

horizons of democratic thought within a liberal mind-set. Secular liberalism has, by a dogmatic insistence on a single form of public reason, failed to engage the rich and contrasting multiplicity of experiences in a democratic order. For this he proposes the need for promoting an ethos of engagement to open up possibilities in which different faiths can coexist.²⁶ Connolly's project bears a superficial resemblance to the comparable efforts of somewhat earlier writers like Carl Schmitt, who explained that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts,"²⁷ meaning that religion has always been central to all social imaginations.²⁷ Charles Taylor in his recent book makes an argument about the way secularism's relation to Christianity, the West, and modernity remain contestable.²⁸

In many ways, both Gandhi and Habermas go overboard with certain propositions found in these writings on the Enlightenment, and there is a clear stamp of modernity in their outlooks. But significant elements of this outlook were revised and gradually reconstructed. In his famous speech in Frankfurt's St. Paul's Church, Habermas evoked the risks of derailing modernism.²⁹ He also attempted to turn the controversy between religion and philosophy toward a new relationship that was reflected in the conversation on the dialectic of secularization he had with Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI.

While questioning elements of Western civilization and its contradictions, Gandhi seeks not only to reform it but to transform tradition and to reveal the capacity of Hinduism to be self-corrective in order to overcome this lacuna. It is Gandhi who acknowledges the need for religion and its moral foundations as largely sustaining community bonds and social life. Gandhi's understanding of caste more specifically is based on an acceptance of social inequalities of Indian tradition. Unlike Western thinkers, Gandhi's motive was not to subvert his cultural tradition but to reconstruct it; hence his instruments of cultural change were not history and science, but religion and its associated symbolic forms.³⁰

26. William E. Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 19.

27. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), p. 36.

28. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007).

29. Discussed in Habermas, *An Awareness of What Is Missing*, pp. 8–12.

30. Dennis Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993), p. 45.

Similarly Habermas is also revising the Western tradition not by rejecting modernity but by reforming secular reason as a distinct method of human understanding by which both religion and modern secularity are analyzed, understood, and made amenable to practices. In his earlier work secular reason cannot be understood in isolation from the real world of politics; it is embedded in power dynamics. Secular reason is being employed by the powerful groups of a particular society in order to reach an arbitrary consensus, which is later enforced and popularized as reasonable or scientific. So the production of reasonable religion or modern secularity depends on the power dynamics of a given society, which is further dictated by some elite sections of a society. Although power dynamics are not so relevant, now secularization in a postsecular society opens up the possibility of unleashing the universal capacity of people to employ secular reason. We can conclude that a postsecular imagination then can be applied to secularized societies in which religion maintains a public influence and relevance, while the certainty that religion will disappear due to modernization has lost ground.

I argue that despite such disparate historical contexts, both thinkers agree that religion needs to be transformed to some extent in a secular state. One minor difference is that for Habermas, within the group of experiences that remain opaque to philosophy there is a subset that could be described as religious/moral experiences (feelings/intuitions). They involve our intuitive responses to moral violations. One such intuition involves our obligations to those who have suffered unjustly. Habermas claims that we seek worldly means to satisfy a moral intuition specially to redeem the souls of past injustice. Gandhi was of the opinion that experience, emotion, and intuition are the other aspects of an individual's personality, and these are as important as reason. For Gandhi it is impossible to make separations between rationality and spirituality as rational ideas are not the only instrument to find out what is right or wrong and to know about truth. Hence faith and belief are the medium through which one may seek divinity, but its existence cannot be proved by reason.

Like Habermas, who is drawn into a debate with religious spokespersons, Gandhi also engaged with the religious orthodoxy on untouchability. Far from aiming to discover an authoritative truth, he acknowledged that human beings "will never all think alike, and we shall see truth in fragments and from different angles of vision. Conscience is not the same

thing for all.”³¹ Gandhi’s basic approach had its obvious advantages, but a reformist discourse also had several limitations. He challenged Hindu institutions and practices largely on the grounds that they were corruptions of an original Hinduism, and so he could not transcend it or subject it to a radical critique. Despite the consistency of Gandhi’s criticisms of some traditional aspects of Hinduism, most of his interpreters assume on the basis of his publicly expressed appreciation of the varna system that he embraced tradition in an uncritical manner.³² However a minority of interpreters have been more willing to attribute strong postmodern connotations to Gandhi’s political thinking. Indeed Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph have argued that in spite of what Gandhi may have thought, his discussions of a hierarchy of moral and political principles agree substantially with the rearticulating of political pluralism that is not premised on a homogenous nation nor dependent on securing the state as site of citizen allegiance.³³

One major difference with Gandhi arises out of Habermas’s argument that the West is essentially secular since the Enlightenment, a contention that he does not undermine. The postsecular for Habermas provides him with a useful analytical device for acknowledging not so much the persistence of religion as the partial failure of enlightenment, a failure that by default brings religion back into the secular. Following this, for Habermas, the secular falls short of its originally intended destination. The important difference is that Habermas still discusses that under some circumstances, we might not need religion as a vehicle to express normative truth. But while Habermas argues for the translation of religion, for Gandhi no religion is an essential ideology or practice to be translated or neutralized; instead we need to recognize the essential diversity and heterogeneity of a religious discourse. We need to question secular modernity that has constructed an imaginary universal definition of religion.

Talal Asad poses serious objections to developing concrete conceptualizations of religion as found in Habermas. He argues that in the world there is no exact thing that is called religion except “the personal quality of faith.” All definitions of religion are the historical product of culturally specific discursive processes. Habermas mystifies religion as something unique that is linked to fundamentalism, bigotry, or fanaticism. He ignores

31. Gandhi, *Young India*, September 23, 1926.

32. Bhikhu C. Parekh, *Gandhi’s Political Philosophy: A Critical Examination* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

33. Rudolph and Rudolph, *Postmodern Gandhi and Other Essays*.

the temporal sociopolitical conditions that give rise to various types of religious fundamentalism, religious extremism, or religious revivalism.³⁴ Asad's objections about proposing the idea of religion as embodying an autonomous essence reveal the ambiguities in Gandhi's views as the latter often argues that "true religion transcends all faiths and creeds in order to establish the universal religion of truth and non-violence."³⁵ Religion is also defined as "obedience to the law of God," which is anchored in both truth and non-violence as sovereign principles of human conduct.³⁶

Conclusion

I began this paper by interrogating the postsecular as signaled by evidence of a growing deprivatization of religion as well as by an ethical and affective life that secularization has been unable to meet in Western societies. The idea that religion enjoys high visibility in the public sphere of many societies has sparked an intense discussion on the doctrine of secularism. I have noted in my analyses of Gandhi and Habermas a common concern for addressing state-sponsored secularism and diverse religious communities in their respective contexts. Whatever the deficiencies may be, both question the claim that faith is only a private matter based on historical experiences of early modern religious wars in Europe. With regard to the postsecular, the analysis seeks to substantiate the thesis that the conceptual difference between secularism and postsecularism indicates the crisis of a foundationalist paradigm.

Now to turn to the Indian experience of state secularism, the debates on religion have arisen in a contradictory and conflicting environment where several diverse religious communities coexist. Today in Western societies, official recognition of religious communities and their culture would mean accepting the immigrant populations and minorities as allies in the formation of values and the constitution of their selves. This requires subverting the rational-critical debate with religion that has proceeded so far on relatively narrow and historically conditioned lines. Many of the struggles of the modern world that require an interrogation and scrutinization of the "private" are issues of religion that need to be now addressed.

34. Talal Asad, "On Re-reading a Modern Classic: W. C. Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion*," *History of Religions* 40, no 3 (2001): 206.

35. Asad's view is not an irrefutable one, but I do not address this here.

36. M. Gandhi, *Harijan*, August 25, 1940.

Since the creation of the Constitution, Indians have continued to imagine their nation's polity as one in which secularism has played a central and unique part. However we may understand the conflicts around religion, secularism has consistently defined itself as valorizing the concepts of equality and diversity under democracy. The Constitution of India conceptualizes secularism by raising questions related to religion and anticipates many of the current problems in the European context. The recognition of group rights for communities in the Indian Constitution allows a coexistence of distinct religious minorities in a diverse society.

Several issues have emerged in the Indian context related to personal laws and uniform civil code in the past. The personal laws that govern civil matters, such as marriage, divorce, adoption, and inheritance, are highly contested at times. Three kinds of challenges emerge for secularism: an internal critique of defining tolerance; a social justice critique; and the freedom of religion.

Many scholars have criticized the idea of tolerance lying in Gandhi's "sarva dharma sambhava," meaning equal respect for all. Such an idea of secularism based on tolerance, as an attitude of leniency toward different philosophical opinions and religious beliefs, has been criticized. Tolerance, even though based on preaching non-interference into one's beliefs, does not actively prevent inequalities nor the "adamant refusal to respect someone else's religion."³⁷ Some scholars argue that the principle of secularism strictly "outside any particular identity was designed to allow people to live together in civility."³⁸ Therefore the secular character of the Indian state does not automatically foster the conciliation of diverging interests or ensure the peaceful coexistence of religious communities. Since communal forces rely on rural and marginalized populations, the strengthening of secularism can come with economic development, reduction of unemployment, poverty, and illiteracy. Some go so far as to claim that the concept of secularism is derived from the principle of democratic equality; "it is a means to limit the power of the (Hindu) majority."³⁹

In recent years many disadvantaged groups claim that secularism constructs and modernizes religious communities, but social justice challenges this homogenization by looking at differences within them. Moreover

37. Rajeev Bhargava, ed., *Secularism and Its Critics* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2007).

38. See Neera Chandhoke, *Beyond Secularism: The Rights of Religious Minorities* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2009).

39. *Ibid.*, p. 300.

by emphasizing external protections the state secularists have neglected social, cultural, and economic disadvantages faced by the members within respective religious communities. Many view secularism as limited and demand that discrimination on the basis of conversion to another religion to be redressed as *dalits* (the oppressed) who converted to Christianity or Islam are denied equal status within their religious communities and do not get benefits of reservations because they are Christians or Muslim.

As Marc Galanter notes, in the context of India, “the freedom that is a principle of the secular state is not ‘freedom for religion’ but ‘freedom for religion as it ought to be.’” He explains that “the ultimate argument for the secular state then is not to maximise the presently desired freedoms but to substitute a new and more appropriate or valuable kind of freedom.”⁴⁰ Galanter argues that the “notion of religion as essentially private and separate from public life is an equally indefensible dogma to those who hold religion to encompass more than doctrine, worship, and private conduct but to provide obligatory principles for the ordering of public life.”⁴¹ Secularism cannot be entirely neutral among religions or citizens when it separates the basis of allegiance from recognition of private interests, which depend in turn upon “choices about the most desirable kind of polity, society and personality.”⁴² Hence the prospects for secularism are bleak unless it reinvents itself by creatively engaging with religion. When it comes to the issue of extending the sense of obligation to those beyond one’s immediate circle, it is not clear that the idea of separation of state from religion can have any role at all in implementing the ideals of social or distributive justice. Secularism cannot even rise up to the task of confronting religious violence and speak a truly democratic language without confronting the received practices and traditions of our society.

40. Marc Galanter, “Secularism, East and West,” in Bhargava, *Secularism and its Critics*, p. 258.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 259.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 266.