

# **NATIONALISM IN A NEW AVATAR AND CHALLENGES TO CHRISTIANITY**

*Rethinking Nationalism with the Poor*

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Nationalism in a new avatar is what we are experiencing worldwide. It has got its own Indian version. The resurgence of nationalism has different historical and political backgrounds in different geographic regions of the world. I was made to reflect on the power of nationalism during the days immediately following the September 11 events when I happened to be in the United States. "God bless America" was the expression repeatedly heard during those days in that country – from the lips of president Bush to very ordinary citizens. People were asked to exhibit the national flag everywhere. In the hostels of the university where I was engaged, the students did not fail to drape the American national flag from the windows of their rooms and dormitories. Whipping up nationalist sentiment through the rhetoric of politicians and other agents and institutions, served to mobilize with lightning-speed the people and to justify the war against Afghanistan. It was the moral Waterloo - the children of light in war against the children of darkness. The mood of nationalist upbeat brought about an intense sense of "we are Americans". In this connection, it is interesting to note that a crowd intoxicated by nationalism shouted down a popular actor trying to address a gathering at Madison Square in New York on the events of September 11, in terms of non-violence and reconciliation.

If anyone still holds that nationalism is a matter of the past and that we are in post-nationalist era, he/she will do well to study and meditate on how much nationalism is alive in a very modern country like the United States. In fact, we are assisting in the world two contradictory processes: on the one hand globalisation is supposed to overcome national boundaries and create a new world. On the other hand, we note how nationalism is getting entrenched both in the developed and developing countries, albeit with different backgrounds and motives.

The emergence of the Hindutva as a political and cultural force since the 1980's has brought to the centre-stage the issue of nationalism in our country. The debate on the question is enveloped in ambiguities, contradictions and power politics. Nationalism is practically identified with belonging to the Hindu religio-cultural world. The nationalist sentiments are roused by employing religious and cultural symbols. Be that as it may, we need to take a broad historical perspective and view the turmoils of the present moment with the Hindutva nationalism as part of the struggle the country is going through in three important areas: *struggle for democracy; attempt to live and practice secularism; and finally the struggle for social equity.* All these three areas very much inter-connected, should form part of the search for an alternative vision of nation and nationalism.

The temptation for Christians is to respond to the Hindutva by challenging it as a *religious force*. This temptation should be resisted. What Christians need to do is to rethink nationalism with the poor and the downtrodden. As concerned citizens we need to interrogate what nationalism means for the poor, the dalits and the tribals and other weaker sections. Behind the aspirations and dreams of these marginalized groups, there lies a project of nation which awaits realization. It is the humanistic and inclusive nationalism. In this present article, we shall reflect upon what does inclusive and humanistic nationalism mean. *The response of the Christians is to be active agents in evolving a humanistic nationalism in whose vision and scope the poor and the marginalized will be able to identify their own concerns, hopes and aspirations.*

## 1. Religious Nationalism

To be able to understand more concretely we need to refer to some of the cases of religious-nationalism. This could be seen in Ireland where nationalism is bound up with one's identity as a

Catholic or a Protestant. The Israelite nationalism is through and through religious in character, and it is animated by the ideology of Zionism and in war with Muslims and Arabs within its own territory and outside. Iran is another case of religious nationalism where religion was used to mobilize the masses for a nationalist religious revolution (under the leadership of Aytollah Khomeini in 1979) against the interference of imperialist forces represented by the Shah. We have other cases of religious nationalist movements in Egypt, Algeria, Afghanistan, Tibet, and in Central Asian countries. In India, the operation of Hindutva as a religious nationalist ideology and its political rise in the 1990's has created a new critical situation in the country. In the most of these cases, a secularist approach to nationalism is locked in conflict with religious movements of nationalism.

### **Religious Overtones**

All religious nationalism is not to be equated. There is a difference according to the particular history, context and circumstances in which it arises. The various religious nationalism may bear similarity ("family resemblance" – Wittgenstein), but they represent quite differing phenomena, which, for lack of appropriate terminology, are brought under the umbrella term of "religious nationalism". While speaking of religious nationalism, we need to be aware of the fact that the "religious" is not simply an addition. Nationalism can easily lend itself to be engineered by religious agents and religious ideology, because the "religious" in one way or other seems to be inherent in nationalism, even when it is a question of "secular nationalism". As Alexis de Tocqueville noted regarding French Revolution, it was fought with a religious zeal – through it was an anti-religious revolution. If we analyze the symbols and rituals of nationalism in contemporary times, we find that they bear a lot of resemblances to religious symbols and rituals – whether it be the "amarjyoti" (immortal light) at the tomb of the unknown soldier or the zeal of "martyrdom" for one's motherland, or the speeches of leaders on occasion of national celebrations. Rightly then, Ninan Smart calls religious nationalism "double-decker", because the "religious" is already inherent in the

conception of nationalism.<sup>1</sup> When religion is explicitly added to it, nationalism becomes doubly so. It is opined that in Europe the waning of the influence of Christianity in the public realm was substituted by the emergence of nationalism which had religious character.

### **The Causes of Emergence**

The emergence of religious nationalism in recent decades is due to a wide variety of factors. To begin with, there was a skepticism about secular nationalism which, according to religious nationalists, did not deliver the goods. The establishment of modern nation-state along secular lines has led to corruption and to politics devoid of morality and ethics. In many cases an important reason for the assertion of religious nationalism is to bring back in public life a sense of morality. Closely related to it is the preoccupation that religion did not have any role in the public sphere, which is attributed to the advent of secular thought and practice. Several religious nationalist groups see in this, the imposition of a western ideology over the rest of the world. It should be added here that religious nationalism is not in most cases in opposition to modern forms of governance as democracy. In other words it is not the case of religious nationalism being equated simply with theocracy. Rather, while not rejecting the modern system, religious nationalism would like to determine the politics and governance through religious ideology.

Secondly, religious nationalism claims to make up for the collective character missing in secular nationalism. The latter inspired by liberal ideologies sees the relationship in society in terms of individuals. The primary mode of relationship is that of the individual vis-à-vis the state or nation. On the other hand, religious nationalism is focused on the fact that society consists of groups with distinct identities. Whereas for secular nationalism, a well-determined territory with citizens is sufficient, religious nationalism sees a nation with reference to identities. Ethnicity,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Ninian Smart, *Religion and Nationalism*, Rome: Centre for Indian and Inter-Religious Studies, 1994, p. 12.

race, language, etc. would constitute such identities and groupings. A very important and crucial identity is that of religion. In many cases there is a practical overlapping of ethnic and religious identity, making that particular brand of nationalism "etho—religious". A clear case in point is that of Sri Lanka. The determining identity of the nation in Sinhala understood as a race, a language and both identified with Buddhism. Another most obvious case is that of former Yugoslavia in which the Croats are identified with Catholic Christianity, the Bosnians with Islam and the Serbs with Orthodox Christianity. Religious nationalism exploits for its ends the role religion plays in identity-consciousness. In fact, one of the important means of assertion of sub-nationalities is a shared religious universe, its symbols, tenets and rites. This is illustrated by the case of formation of Sikh consciousness and religious militancy under the leadership of Bhindranwale in the 1980's.

### **The Language of Violence**

What makes the religious nationalism a very questionable option is its proneness to violence. The violence is not simply sporadic. What is worse is that violence gets religious legitimation and sanction, and hence it takes hold of the consciousness of the group of believers. Religions bear in themselves a radical ambiguity. Peace, justice and harmony are very much associated with religious ideals. At the same time, the same religions have been historically sources of some of the worst forms of violence.<sup>2</sup> Some authors tend to think that violence is associated with religion not simply as historical contingent and accidental, but rather as an inherent element. This is for example, the thesis propounded by Rene Girard.<sup>3</sup> The aggressiveness and violence found in human

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Wim Beuken – Karl-Josef Kuschel (eds), "Religion as a Source of Violence?", *Concilium*, 1997/4.

<sup>3</sup> Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, Baltimore – London, 1976. According to the author, many religions in their rituals represent "surrogate victim" or scapegoat on which the violence is symbolically transferred, and hence violence would be in the very nature of the sacred. The rituality performed "sacred violence" at the micro level is supposed to safeguard the society from large-scale macro violence.

nature get expressed through religions, its tenets and rites (for example sacrifices). Religious legitimate violence as for example in the case of the *theory of just war*.<sup>4</sup> Now when the inclination of religions is coupled with ethnic identity, as is often the case with religious nationalism, the potential for violence becomes all the greater.

### Homogenisation and Demonisation

Against the background, we understand how religious nationalism finds it difficult to have any harmonious relationship with other groups and identities subsumed in the nation-state. Religious nationalism tends either to absorb and homogenize other identities through a process of co-optation, or suppress them violently. In the first case, other identities – religious, ethnic, cultural – are to conform to the majority or politically dominant group or face the consequence of being excluded. This is for example the case with Hindutva religious nationalism which takes upon itself to define the Indian nation, and all other religious minorities have to fall within the definition of “Hindu”. The failure to so do would make the Muslims and Christians, for example, as aliens to Indian nation.<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note that, while religious nationalism claims to deal with collective identities over against secular nationalism centered on individual, it restricts the collectivity to itself and does not extend it to other groups and collectivities in the nation. Therefore, religious nationalism everywhere has serious problems with minorities. The solution it has to offer is far from satisfying the basic requirements of minority groups. With its inherent non-accommodative tendency,

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Maria Pilar Aquino – Dietmar Mieth (eds), “The Return of the Just War”, *Concilium*, 2001/2.

<sup>5</sup> Several important studies have appeared in recent times. Let me refer here a few, by way of example. Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India*, Delhi: Viking, 1996; Walter K. Anderson and D. Damle Shridar, *The Brotherhood in Saffron: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Hindu Revivalism*, Delhi: Vistar Publications, 1987; Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.

religious nationalism becomes a permanent source of conflict, violence and confrontation. By constructing insider/outsider polarity, it demonizes those outside its fold within the same nation.

### **Controlling the Past**

The strength and fascination of religious nationalism derive from the fact that it functions as an ideology. A very important ingredient of the construction of ideology is the engineering of history, so to say. It is said that the ones who control the past will be the ones who will determine the future. This is very much true of the strategy and modus operandi of religious nationalism. For religious nationalism, controlling the past is very important for its ideological purposes. Hence we find that religious nationalists are particular about how history is written and presented (historiography). There is an invention of the past in such a way that it justifies the politics and programmes of religious nationalists. Very often religious nationalism transforms myths and stories into histories. Myths so manipulated can be served to mobilize the masses searching for absolute certainties which seems to elude them in everyday life. Speaking of the role ideology plays, Hanseb observes,

Ideological constructions are vitalized and empowered in two ways. The first and most obvious part of their attraction lied in their ability to convert the experience of amorphous, meaningless contingency into ostensibly stable symbolic order that promises to close the gap in social existence through construction of a more harmonious social world.<sup>6</sup>

In this type of religious-nationalist history, what professional historians find primarily objectionable is that the methods and procedures that are part of the discipline of history are simply undermined for ideological ends.<sup>7</sup> Further, the historiography of

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Blom Hansen, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>7</sup> K.N. Panikkar, "Alternative Historiographies: Changing Paradigms Power", keynote address delivered at the National Conference on: *Towards Alternative Historiographies*, organised by the Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, April 2001. (publication shortly).

religious-nationalists presents a picture of India that is one in culture, tradition, history, etc. This is supposed to counter the picture of an internally divided India presented by the colonial history which helped them with the ideological construction needed to legitimize their rule. Given this background, religious nationalists present a supposedly comprehensive history, but which, in fact, sets aside the histories of subaltern peoples. In this regard, the well-known historian K.N. Panikkar notes,

The cultural past the nationalist historiography tried to reclaim was clearly Brahmanical and upper caste. The culture of those outside this circle did not attract any attention. The oppressed and the marginalised did not enter into its reckoning and their voices were conspicuously absent...[T]herefore their interests and aspirations were outside the purview of the nationalists historiography. The nationalist historiography was hence an inadequate representation of the interests of the nation.<sup>8</sup>

### **Essentialisation of Culture**

What happens in the area of historiography happens also in other realms of the life of the nation. Like history, the representation of culture by religious nationalists is the object of contestation for various reasons. The cultural construction of the nation, like its historiography, is made in such a way as to turn some groups of people into outsiders and enemies.

The close relationship between religion and culture is well known to anthropologists and historians of religions. In spite of the fact of the close association between the two, there is also a distinction. But what happens with religious nationalism is that it identifies the religion of the majority or the powerful group with the culture of the nation. A second flaw is that culture is essentialised, that is to say culture is seen as something static. But in fact we know culture is fluid precisely because a culture grows out of constant encounter with peoples and groups. It is this kind

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

of osmosis which accounts for the vitality of any culture. But what happens with nationalism is that it continues to inhabit a cultural world that has changed, and indeed very drastically. The religious nationalists prefer to inhabit an essentialised cultural world of the past and project it as the model, and even more as the norm and criterion for everyone else. This essentialised culture is sought to be further cemented by a presumed common bond of race and blood. The failure to rise up to the dynamics of culture and its movement turn the religious nationalism atavistic and inward-looking.

## 2. Secular Nationalism

### Change of scenario

Secular nationalism is antithetic to religious nationalism, even though, not seldom religious nationalists claim to be true secularists, and brand those not of their ideology as "pseudo-secularists". This already gives us an inkling into the controversies surrounding the concept of secularism at the global level, and especially in our country.<sup>9</sup> If we retrace the path at world level in the past half a century or so, we will note that the secular nationalism was projected as a sign of advancement in as much as it represents overcoming of state and governance based on "primordial identities". It is enough to recall how stalwarts of secular nationalism such as Jawaharlal Nehru in our country and Nazar in Egypt were cult figures in their own times for having risen above the particular identities. But from the late seventies, the scenario changed rapidly. The Iranian revolution of 1979 remains a watershed challenging the projection of secular nationalism as an ideal for the developing countries. Besides, in the context of religious conflicts, the secular is being pointed out as something which is connected with Christianity. We will come back to this thought in the fourth section of our essay.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Rajeev Bhargava (ed), *Secularism and its Critics*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.

### Secularism Contested

The most common problem with secular nationalism is that the conception of "secular" is western in its origin and history. This sentiment is expressed widely and becomes an important reason to challenge its credibility as well as inability in pluralistic and multi-religious societies. This is something very similar to the discussion surrounding the universality of human rights. A cultural argument is being employed by many authoritarian states to stigmatize human rights as Western so that they do not come under scrutiny for the gross violations they make. Like human rights, we may get bogged down by theoretical discussion on the Western character of secularism. But it is important to go more into the content and significance of secularism in connection with nationalism.

One of the things connected with secularism is the relationship between religion and politics, between private beliefs and public sphere. Even though, secularism had at some time in its Western history the connotation of anti-religious, today few would take it in that sense. The question today is more the separation of religion and public life. Here precisely is the problem. What kind of separation is the crucial issue? The distinction between private/public as interpretative category has become problematic, and this is not only with regard to religion but with economy, as well, for example.<sup>10</sup> If we take the practice, it is difficult to find instances in which there is a total separation of the two. In countries like India, given the importance of religious identities, it is unrealistic to expect that people make a complete separation between the two realms.

What we have said is precisely the reason why another interpretation of secularism was evolved in conjunction with the ideal of nationalism. This conception in essence is the way of regulating the inter-relationship among the various identities and groups in a polity, so that they peacefully co-exist. This is the sense

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Peter Beyer, *Religion and Globalisation*, London – New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1997.

in which in India secularism has been understood. It means that the state itself does not become partisan to any particular group, nor does it privilege any particular religion. The equidistance to all religions became the quintessence of secularism and this is ensured in the Constitution.

The crisis of secular nationalism has come about not simply on ideological grounds I referred to earlier, but more from the side of practice. Though the state may be run against constitutionally secular lines, the real politic and practical expediency have led it to support one group or the other according to its political fortunes. Even more, if the state is run under the pressure of numerical majority, the situation becomes very critical for minorities and other identities.

### **The Democratic Mask**

That raises the question about the relationship of formal democracy and nationalism in the secular framework. The secular ideal of democracy is often procedural and formal. If democracy is the prevalence of the will of majority in governance, then this is a very dangerous conception since under the cloak of democracy what would happen is the "tyranny of the majority". Rightly did John Stuart Mill in his time raise the critical question, how could a minority be free when it is forced to conform to the will of the majority. What I am trying to say is that the institution of formal democracy could co-habit with religious nationalism of majority. In this way religious nationalism becomes even more dangerous, because it can easily wear the democratic mask to impose itself on the rest of the identities in a polity. All this shows how a mere liberal and secular nationalism alone cannot respond to the issue of diversity and plurality of identities.

### **Citizenship and National Identity**

A further question concerns the relationship between citizenship and national identity.<sup>11</sup> The secular frame of thought

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<sup>11</sup> T.K. Oommen (ed.), *Citizenship and National Identity - From Colonialism and Globalisation*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1997.

tends in the direction of delinking these two as lasting solution. But we know that here lies a thorny question. The difficulty is not only in countries like India, but also in the West. One needs to only take note of the divergence of views on this point between Juergen Habermas and Anthony Smith.<sup>12</sup> Theoretically, it sounds very reasonable that the concept of state and citizenship would allow room for many "nationalities" and identities, all of which will share the rights and privileges of citizenship. But in practice, such an approach proves to be somewhat idyllic. Multi-cultural and multi-religious societies would call for more complex kind of approach in order to ensure the rights of the various groups in the state.

To put the issue differently, the secular nationalism has to face the question of the relationship between state and nation. Obviously they cannot be equated. Being part of the state through citizenship does not resolve the problem of identity in terms of nation which has other characteristics, and is amorphous and imaginary in contrast to the institution of the state with its well-defined contours. In this connection Zygmunt Baumann observes:

And so there is a clearly defined supreme authority which makes the state itself real and clearly defined: a tough, stubborn, resistant object one cannot wish out of existence. The same cannot be said, however, about the nation. A nation is from start to finish an imagined community; it exists as an entity in as far as its members mentally and emotionally 'identify themselves' with a collective body most of whose other members they will never confront face to face. The nation becomes a mental reality as it is imagined as such.<sup>13</sup>

In sum, the secular approach has elements which are very important in challenging religious nationalism. But there are also many open questions, and some serious limitations. And that leads us to look for a possible new direction.

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<sup>12</sup> T.K. Oommen, *op. cit.*, p. 69ff.

<sup>13</sup> Zygmunt Baumann, "State and Nation", in his *Thinking Sociologically*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, p. 171.

### **3. Inclusive and Humanistic Nationalism**

The humanistic nationalism I am proposing is one which does not deny the secular nationalism. It assumes some of the important values and ideals contained in it. However it widens the scope of the secular nationalism. Further, this nationalism would allow room for the religious traditions to play a role in sustaining the universalistic ideals, without however interfering with the autonomy of the secular and temporal realities. To be able to understand this, we need to go to some of the basic issues at stake with nationalism.

#### **Reconciling the Polarities**

In the life of the individual and groups there is a certain dialectic between the particular and the universal. Humanistic nationalism is an attempt to reconcile these two poles – two important dimensions in human life. Nationalism affirms the particularity of specificity of a group of people bonded together on the basis of language, common history, region etc. Like religion, nationalism claims loyalty of the group, and when the affirmation of the particular becomes absolute, then it is a very dangerous course. History amply bears witness to the devastations effected by an unbridled nationalism. Enough to recall here Hitler's Nationalism and its tragedy. The legitimate particularity needs to be tempered and seasoned by a movement that transcends the particular. In concrete, this transcendence means openness to other groups, other communities and at global level other nations and cultures. In this way, nationalism will be redeemed from the dangers to which its narcissistic particularity may lead it.

#### **The Issue of Ethics**

Humanistic nationalism would bring into play the moral and ethical realms. One of the things which we are witnessing today in the global politics is the absence of even a modicum of ethics and moral consideration. The Chanakkian and Machiavellian approach to power and political expediency seem to rule the political realm. The transcendence and openness I referred to above is the primary way of practicing ethics in the ambit of politics in general and nationalism in particular. The 'religious' character with which nationalism is vested could blinker the vision and call for allegiance of the people for violence, crimes and

inhumanity. There will be no hesitation for ethnic cleansing to uphold the nation and its interests.

### **Conflicting Streams**

Tagore was a thinker who foresaw the dangers of an immortal and parochial kind of nationalism. He was pained by the experience of the nations of the West and was deeply dismayed by the idolatry of nationalism and its consequences to humanity. Against the nationalist thought of the day, Tagore raised his voice of protest recalling the greater ideals of humanity. His humanistic vision comes through in the lectures he delivered in the West and in Japan.

Even though from childhood I had been taught that idolatry of the nation is better than reverence for God and humanity, I believe that I have outgrown that teaching, and it is my conviction that my countrymen will truly gain their Indianness by fighting against the education which teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity...<sup>14</sup>

Historically, the universalistic orientation Tagore called for goes in the direction of one of the trends represented at the time of the struggle for national independence. The two trends of the time could be characterized broadly as particularistic and universalistic. The first trend represented by Arya Samaj sought to bring about national regeneration by purifying Hinduism and by ridding it off those elements which made it appear superstitious and idolatrous. This regeneration of the nation was to be effected with reference to its past – Vedas, Upanishads, etc. The basic attitude is that India does not need others, but can independently grow and flourish. This stream of thought found expression in various ways through the decades preceding the Independence and today is represented by the ideology of Hindutva. The second stream of nationalism was represented by the concerns for reform and regeneration of India. However, it was not opposed to other traditions and cultures. The spirit was that of encounter with the

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<sup>14</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism*, Calcutta: Rupa and Co., 1992 (original 1917), pp. 83-84.

"others". This stream of nationalism was represented by Brahma Samaj.<sup>15</sup>

There is one point in common for both the streams – that is, both of them were *elitist* in character. None of them addressed the issue of social marginality and exclusion. And that leads us to the next consideration.

### **Nationalism and Social Equity**

The test of the universalistic character of any nationalism will be its commitment to social equity. From a theoretical perspective we understand why even secular nationalism is not able to come to terms with this problem. As I mentioned earlier, secularism is a way to ensure the co-existence of the various groups subsumed under the umbrella of nation-state. Secularism believes that this is taken care of when the state takes a position of *neutrality* towards the various groups in the polity. For example, secular would be a state which does not promote any religion to the disadvantage of others; or a state that would promote all religions equally favouring none of them in any special way.

But the point is that this way of considering secularism does not respond to the existing situation of inequalities. All that it is concerned about is the continuation of the situation without interrogating the inequalities among the groups. Neera Chandhoke draws a comparison with what happens in the market when it is promoted without consideration to the existing inequalities, and argues that

[A]n expression of formal equality, secularism is formally devoted to the management of inter-group relations. It is not concerned with the fact that some groups may be dying out for lack of attention, or decaying because they are forced to conform to practices that are not their own. But there is hardly any point of valorising secularism if the very existence of the group whose equality we want to ensure is a matter of

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<sup>15</sup> Charles R. Heimaath, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform*, Princeton, New Jersey 1964.

doubt. Secularism may be instituted, concretizing as it does the principle of formal equality in the domain of religious affiliation, but it may not in the ultimate analysis have a constituency that this principle is supposed to regulate. ..[E]qual treatment of unequal groups reproduces inequality.<sup>16</sup>

Secularism may have a formal approach to equality, but a *substantive approach* to that issue is very crucial for universalistic and inclusive understanding of nationalism.

### **Inclusive Character**

As it is, there is the general impression created that some people (the upper and middle classes) are nationalistic whereas others are not. In India, the tribal people are looked with suspicion and their national loyalty is being questioned. The homogenization process, therefore, aims at ensuring their Hindu national identity. Similarly, the vast segment of the dalits and their call for equality has been spurned. There is, in the thought of religious nationalists one supreme value – the nation – on whose altar everything including the claim for equality should be sacrificed.

Against this background we realize the paramount importance of placing the attribute of “*inclusive*” for the humanistic nationalism. But if we look at the Indian Constitution, we will find how it provides for equality by ensuring that the marginal identities and groups are brought under the purview of equality by providing for reservations. The pursuit of a nationalism along the spirit of equity would bring about greater cohesion and unity in the country. On the other hand, the absence of concern for social equity in religious nationalism makes it a partisan programme of domination.

We need to guard ourselves against a fallacious argument in favour of “equality” which goes to strengthen the hold of the upper and middle classes over the marginal and excluded people

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<sup>16</sup> Neera Chandhoke, *Beyond Secularism. The Rights of Religious Minorities*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 89-90.

and minority groups. The argument goes like this: in a secular state all groups should be treated equally. The moment this is not observed, the state would be going against the principle of secularism. It is this kind of "secularism" which is demanded by religious nationalists. On the basis of this reasoning, the religious nationalists oppose the principle of reservation meant to overcome the existing structural inequities and the provisions to protect the legitimate interests of the minority. No wonder then that the Mandal Commission report calling for redressing the social inequity precipitated a serious crisis in Indian politics.

### **A Project of Freedom**

To call for a nationalism inspired by the practice of substantive equality and the spirit of inclusivism is a call to turn nationalism into truly a project of freedom. Freedom is integral. A nation cannot be half-free as much as someone cannot be half-pregnant! Either all the people of a nation are free or a nation is not a free nation at all. If therefore, a section of the people are excluded from freedom and equality, what is being pursued in the name of nationalism is bondage for the whole nation. Nationalism becomes truly humanistic when it moves from exclusion to mutuality; from bondage of many to inter-dependence of all.

The inclusivism we are talking about is not only cultural. Today it is important that the inclusion understood also in economic terms. Religious nationalism, contrary to general impression, is very much at home with globalisation of economy. This is already an indication of the elitist character of this nationalism. Inclusion, therefore, would mean that the economic agenda be such that it includes the poor and the marginalized. The combine of religious nationalism with globalisation becomes doubly oppressive for the poor and the excluded groups. Humanistic nationalism as a project of freedom, therefore, would have also as its scope the development of an economy serving the marginal groups and identities.

### **Encounter of Cultures and Religions**

In humanistic nationalism, the religions and cultures do not become constituencies to be managed to arrive at cohesion and harmony in the society. The secular nationalism, while, acknowledging the plural culture and religious traditions,

nevertheless is concerned about "managing" them so that they do not come into conflict. The humanistic nationalism instead would take a very positive view of plurality and consider the diversity of cultures and religions as a richness from which the whole nation benefits. In contrast to the homogenizing spirit of religious nationalism, and the individualistic spirit of secular nationalism, humanistic nationalism will be centred on the practice of pluralism and acceptance of difference.

The future of humanistic nationalism cannot be made to depend upon a formal recognition of secularism as endorsed by the Constitution. At a time when the Constitution itself is being challenged by religious nationalists, it would be unwise to rely exclusively on secularism. The principle of social equality which is so very necessary for the well-being of all segments in a nation needs to be undergirded by new forces. In this connection I see the importance of *new social movements*.<sup>17</sup> Dalit, tribal, feminist, and ecological movements highlight the situation of social inequality and economic exclusion. They take up issues which affect marginal and excluded groups. And precisely for this reason, they try to work in the direction of a substantive equality, and therefore bring a more integral, inclusive and humanistic approach to nationalisms.

#### 4. Christianity and Humanistic Nationalism

What kind of response Christianity could give in the context of nationalism? Our concern here is not simply a historical one, namely to trace how Christianity has interacted with the surge of nationalism in the West and in other parts of the world. We are concerned here more directly about situations in which Christianity is numerically a minority as in the case of our country. The problem cannot be reduced to simply what contributions Christianity has made, for example, to nationalist movement

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Felix Wilfred, "Religion Face to Face with Globalisation", in Felix Wilfred – Jon Sobrino (eds.), *Globalisation and its Victims, Concilium*, 2001/5.

leading to Independence.<sup>18</sup> This is an interesting area of research. The question of relationship of Christianity to nationalism need not be restricted to this issue alone. There is the question of nationalism also as an ideology.

The contemporary question we need to address is how could Christianity interact with the social, political and cultural processes of our society, and precisely in this particular configuration of context contribute to a more humanistic and integral understanding of nationalism. For this purpose we need to begin by broadening our perspectives.

### **Particularity and Universality**

First of all, Christianity in its very core has a message of deep humanism. Therefore, to a movement like humanistic nationalism, Christianity can make a significant contribution. Secondly, Christianity is not simply projection of some vague ideal; it has in its very origin and development a strong concrete historical dimension. In other words, *particularity* is part of Christian self-understanding. That is why, nationalism implying particularity of language, region, culture, history could very well be understood within the Christian frame of thought.

But Christianity stands also for *universal openness* which embraces the whole of human family. Authentically lived Christianity is deeply rooted in the soil (nationalism) and at the same time transcends it precisely by its openness to others – cultures, religions, histories, etc. In this sense too Christianity cannot but be attuned to the spirit of humanistic nationalism which combines the particular and the universal. On the other hand, Christianity could never subscribe to a nationalism which becomes a narcissistic ideology.

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<sup>18</sup> There are some researches and studies on this, specially from the Protestant side. For example, see Arthur Jeyakumar, *Christians and the National Movement*, Calcutta: Punthi Pushtak, 1999; Elizabeth Susan Alexander, *The Attitude of British Missionaries towards Nationalism in India*, Delhi: Konark Publishers, 1994 (M.Phil. dissertation presented to the University of Madras).

### **Support to Secular Ideals**

Christianity can and ought to support a secular approach to nationalism. Though it is a religion, authentic Christianity has more to do with secular ideals than the vision of a theocratic polity or religious nationalism. In fact, historically there has been a very interesting discussion on the inter-connection between Christianity and the secular. Some authors like Arend Theodor van Leuwen support the position that the secular – at least in the West – is a contribution of Christianity.<sup>19</sup> Be that as it may, what is important is that clear elements of secularity are to be found in the Christian Scriptures and tradition. Let me adduce here simply two such elements: In the Biblical tradition, the institution of Kingship was never divinised. That is to say, the secular reality was considered in secular terms and not sacralised in such a way as to become itself as source of legitimation. Secondly, the whole doctrine of creation was oriented to the autonomy of temporal realities. The order of the world has its own inner dynamics and its trajectory which needs to be respected. They are not to be undermined and brought under the tutelage of a religious universe. The interpretation of the secular in terms of equality of all and not privileging of any is to be also found in Scriptures. For example, we have some passages speaking of the equality before the law and the court – independent of the fact whether one belongs to one's own community or an "alien" not belonging to that particular community. "There will be one law for you, member of the community and the alien residents alike, a law binding your descendents for ever..." (Num 15:15-16; see also Lev 24:22).

### **Promotion of Secularism**

Christianity could contribute to humanistic nationalism by promoting the spirit of pluralism. The religious nationalism in its spirit is homogenizing. Humanistic and inclusive nationalism is

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<sup>19</sup> Arend Theodor van Leuwen, *Christianity in World History: The Meaning of the Faiths of East and West*, New York 1964.

one which respects and takes seriously the diversity and plurality in the nation. Recognition of pluralism and acting on the at basis would bring peoples, cultures and religions into greater understanding. Authentic Christianity vibrates with diversity. The fact that the very conception of the divine mystery is something where plurality is to be found (the mystery of the Trinity) offers an important motivation and force to Christian engagement for the promotion of plurality at every realm of national life. Further, the Pentecost which depicts the situation of the unity of heart and mind among a plurality of peoples and cultures is a potent symbol for commitment to the unity of the nation in its rich diversity of regions, peoples, cultures and religions. An important means to realize this goal is to participate actively in the civil society. It offers the space for people to interact with each other, not only as individuals but as groups and as different identities. A healthy civil society marked by pluralism will ensure also authentic and humanistic nationalism. Christians by actively participating in civil society could also help to create an environment for the cultivation of the spirit of secularism, democracy and social equity.

### **Christianity and Struggle for Democracy**

Like the contribution to the secular, the Christians response to nationalism should be in terms of activation of the struggle for democracy. I say this because, the reaction to the provocations by religious nationalists in the last couple of years, unfortunately concentrated simply on *Christianity as a religious community* in confrontation with the Hindutva. We can understand the difficulties on the ground when provocations take place.<sup>20</sup> However, we need to widen the perspective, being aware of the fact that apologetic kinds of reactions only add fodder to religious nationalism which is out to look for "enemies" to combat and to thrive by conflicts. From a larger perspective, an appropriate response would be to *ensure democracy* and its benefits for all the people, specially for the downtrodden. For, a nation can grow and flourish only through democratic path which allows room for all

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<sup>20</sup> Felix Wilfred, *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2000.

the people and cultures freedom, power and participation.<sup>21</sup> These are issues common to the whole nation which Christians could take up at various levels and areas of public life.

### **Representing the Un-represented**

For a fuller and integral life of the nation, all the groups and identities subsumed under it must be represented properly. It is for this reason the assertion of the subalterns – the tribals, dalits and others become an important contribution to nationalism. Therefore, support to the cause of these subaltern groups may not be interpreted as anti-national. The espousal of the cause of the subaltern groups and identities is in the direction of a more complete and integral understanding of nation. The support to their cause could be specially in the area of culture. It could be in the area of, for example, constructing an alternative historiography which will not be characterised by exclusion. These are some of the avenues in which committed Christians could respond and thus contribute to a truly humanistic nationalism.

In the context of religious nationalism, Christian response needs to make its contribution to secularism and democracy in a more concrete and contextualised manner. We saw how the secular in a multi-religious and multi-cultural context needs an interpretation and praxis that would go beyond a mere equidistance of the state from all groups. The formal equality of all needs to be based on a *substantive equality* which provides for the weaker groups in the nation. This again, is something very much part of the Christian message. In fact, the entire Bible speaks insistently on the need of the whole community to take care of the underprivileged ones in a special way. In contemporary theology, this Biblical insight is expressed by the call to an "option for the poor". When the "option for the poor" is politically and constitutionally expressed by the policy of reservation to the

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Manoranjan Mohanty, "Theorising Democracy" (Endowment Lecture delivered at the Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, April, 17, 2001).

disadvantaged groups, it means attention to the culture and traditions of the smaller groups and identities. Here, Christians will find an echo of what they believe to be a deeply Christian message. Hence, by supporting the policy of reservation, what is being done is to strengthen the nation in its weaker spots. A nation can be healthy only when all its parts are sane.

### **Spirit of Collaboration**

What ways and strategies Christianity could adopt for its collaboration to integral nationalism? If the institutional or official Christianity were to intervene in the political field, it would be offending the secular principle, and could be a cause of gross misunderstanding in the society. What the institutional Church could do is to encourage committed Christians to involve themselves for a more holistic and integral nationalism. The most effective contribution to humanistic nationalism could come not so much from the institution, but from committed Christians in the broader society upholding in all areas of life in the nation certain universalistic ideals and goals. These Christians would serve as a force of inspiration to transform the polity into more humanistic and inclusive one. Lest all this should remain at the idealistic level, there needs to be also concrete praxis and strategies to be adopted. In this regard, we may recall here what we said earlier about the importance of new social movements and their place in the development of humanistic nationalism. It appears to me that one important form of Christian commitment to humanistic nationalism is to *collaborate with* these movements which highlight the situation of the marginalized and the excluded. The strengthening of these movements is to strengthen the democratic and secular process as well as the practice of substantive equality.

All this calls for also a critical rethinking on the Christians engagement for the poor and the downtrodden. As it is, much of the Christian social involvement fails to make a general impact on the political and cultural processes because it is not done *with others*. As a result, the laudable commitment in favour of the downtrodden becomes object of suspicion. Questions are raised whether this is a commitment with a bait. Allowing the participation of others in the planning and execution of its social, medical and educational enterprises, will bring greater integration

of the Christian community with the issues of the nation and the public life.

### **Dialectics of Integration and Prophecy**

Finally, the Christian approach to nationalism is open to two different paths. One could interpret nationalism with rootedness (or so called inculturation) and integration as the chief points of reference. However, this rootedness needs to be at the same time in a dialectical relationship with the critical or the prophetic. An uncritical conformism neither helps the cause of nationalism, nor is an expression of Christian spirit. May be an illustration from China will help us in this question. In China, the question of Christianity and nationalism has become a very crucial issue. There is the so-called Underground Church and there is also the Patriotic Church.<sup>22</sup> The Patriotic Church which goes along with the flow of national history faced the problems of prophetism. It could be so conformist to the national agenda that it could forget that a humanistic nationalism calls for also critique and prophetic voices. On the other hand, the Underground Church lacks rootedness in the soil, and tends to be a reactionary force. We would wish that the Underground Church were a prophetic force, for example, when there were gross violations of human rights symbolized in the events of Tiananman square. But this did not happen. The case of China leads us to reflect how in minority situations Christianity needs to constantly move ahead with a dialectics of integration and prophecy which itself is a contribution to humanistic nationalism.

### **Conclusion**

Religious nationalism is spreading fast in several parts of the world. In each context there are specific reasons for the ascendancy of this kind of nationalism. It has brought about serious conflicts and violence: it is a permanent threat to harmony and peace.

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<sup>22</sup> John B. Zhang Shijiang, *Towards a Wider Reconciliation. A Cultural-Theological Reflection on the Division within the Church in China*, Manila: East Asian Pastoral Institute, 1997.

Above all it is a threat to the survival of the poor and the marginalized, their identity and dignity. The new avatar of Nationalism creates serious polarization in terms of insider/outsider, we/they. Furthermore, it has dangerous homogenising tendency that does not allow for difference and pluralism. In the process, it co-opts or suppresses violently other identities. By essentializing culture and manipulating history, it turns itself into a domineering ideology. It functions by exploiting religious symbols, rites and myths.

On the other hand, secular nationalism is supposed to transcend the sphere of religion and religious identities. It is centered on a separation of religion and politics in its strict interpretation, and equi-distance of the state from religion in its more liberal version. It relies on the basic equality of all citizens. The crucial equation is whether the secular nationalism could be a response to religious nationalism and can stem its tide.

While secular nationalism has its own points of strength, it seems to be inadequate to face up to the challenge thrown by religious nationalism. Specially, there is a lot of doubts about its capacity to defend the cause of the poor and the oppressed. There is, in the first place, a general opinion that "secular" is a Western concept which is ill at ease in our context. The conception of neutrality implied in the understanding of secular is formal in nature. We need a *substantive conception of equality* which would take into account the incontestable fact of plurality of groups and identities, specially the vulnerable groups. Granting that this is possible within the frame of secular nationalism, we cannot, however, ignore the fact that the "secular" has become a highly debated question when it comes to interpretation. As a result, strangely though, the religious nationalists themselves could claim to be true secularists and brand others as "pseudo-secularists". Finally, the secular nationalism does not allow enough room for the universalistic ideals of religion to operate in the stream of the society, because of the public/private distinction. Added to it is the fact that the secular approach to religions is often one of "drain inspector's report" (Gandhi). I mean to say that the secular approach is preoccupied with the negativities of religion so much that it is not able to tap the humanistic message religions have to offer.

We need to move in the direction of a humanistic nationalism which would be inclusive and will uphold the cause of the poor and the marginalized. This type of nationalism will benefit from the contribution secular nationalism has to offer. In addition to that, it will create the space for the religious insights to play their humanizing role in the society. Humanistic nationalism suggests the particularity of nation and fuses it with the universalistic and humanistic vision. This is very important for the encounter of peoples and cultures. Within the nation itself, humanistic nationalism will see to it that no group of people is neglected or left out. It will be particularly attentive to the marginalized and vulnerable groups by settling in operation social equity.

Christianity can contribute to strengthen humanistic nationalism. On the one hand, it is attuned to the spirit of secularism by recognising the autonomy of temporal realities which would not allow any unwarranted religious interference. By supporting the cause of the marginal and subaltern groups like the dalits and tribals, Christianity could actually contribute to an inclusive nationalism. For this to happen, Christianity should make its contribution to the vulnerable groups *with others* and not in isolation. Further, the Christian support to humanistic nationalism should be characterised by dialectic between rootedness and prophecy. This will avoid on the one hand, the impression of alienness to the nation, and uncritical conformism on the other. Finally, one of the avenues open for Christian involvement is the collaboration with new social movements which go in the direction of secularity and social equity. These movements try to bring ethics in action and transcend the narrow boundaries of caste and creed. Finally, Christian support to humanistic nationalism would be in the form of fostering pluralism which is very crucial today for harmonious and just inter-relationships among the groups, and identities subsumed under the nation.

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