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BOOK REVIEW

John, Aruthuckal Varughese. 2025. Indian Secularism and Religious Freedom: Mapping the Cross-Pressures.

Oxford University Press. eBook, https://doi.org/10.1093/9780198935155.001.0001.
(INR 995 Book, eBook from $ 71.99 USD/ INR 1,200)

Reviewed by Rev Dr Prasad D.R J. Phillips [1]

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In this Oxford University Press publication, contemporary Indian Christian philosopher A.V. John applies his expertise in existential philosophy and Kierkegaard studies, along with two decades as a theological educator in India, to examine Indian secularism. This complex concept has significantly reshaped India's religious and socio-political thought and practice since Independence. As John notes in the Introduction, 'This book neither examines secularism as an ideology nor tests secularisation theory's prediction that religious belief will inevitably die out. Instead, it attempts to assess honestly secularism's effects in India, focusing on cultural shifts and tensions caused by introducing its ideological foundations—individual autonomy and personal authenticity—into an ancient society.'

This book comprises six chapters, in addition to an introduction and a conclusion. Most chapters originated as conference papers or previously published works by the author. Yet, he has made a serious attempt to integrate them cohesively into the central argument of Indian secularism and religious freedom.

The principle thesis posits that secularism is a 'prodigal child' of Christianity now fostered, raised, and reshaped within the Indian context. The first chapter interrogates: "Is there an Indian secularism?" It argues that, if secularism is privileged

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by the Indian Constitution, it seems to situate itself within Indian cultural and religious traditions. This chapter first unpacks the ontology of secularism, tracing its Christian roots through Charles Taylor's scholarship and briefly tracing secularism in Indian history. It references emperors Ashoka and Akbar, who, despite wielding significant power, emphasised liberty and tolerance in their respective eras.

Building on this, the second chapter, "Secularism and its cross-pressures", further examines the tension between community duties and individual rights. This chapter analyses how Western and Eastern understandings of secularism differ in their emphasis on individual autonomy (rights) versus communitarian obligation (duties/dharma), creating cross-pressures for Indian Christians and minorities caught between Indian realities and global secular paradigms. Nevertheless, this chapter fails to note that, alongside fundamental rights (1950), the 42nd Amendment (1976) added fundamental duties as obligations to the nation and fellow citizens. To Indianise secularism, the perception is that the Western notion of secularism is seen as diminishing or polluting sacredness; positioning constitutional fundamental rights above traditional Indian religious principles and practices is often presented by nationalists. This tension is intensified by secularist and religious fundamentalist groups, who interpret religious freedom in very different ways.

The third chapter, "Anthropological Assumptions, Human Rights, and the Freedom of Religion Bills", analyses debates generated by these bills and compares them with the anthropological assumptions of secularism and Hinduism. The chapter seems to advocate that the proponents of secularism emphasise freedom and individual choice, while critics, particularly those concerned with conversion from Hinduism, view these developments as coercive and socially disruptive. In short, the argument is that freedom given to individuals to choose their religion disrupts the social and religious harmony of a Hindu nation, and thus makes any religious conversion problematic.

Chapter four, "Portraits of Religious Conversions", examines conversion and analyses various forms of interreligious strife. These conflicts are attributed to cross-pressures arising from India's unique condition of secularity, as interpreted by the Hindu majority in opposition to Christians and the concept of secularism. Resistance to conversion is rooted in concerns among orthodox Hindus regarding cultural betrayal and the disruption of a sacred social order.

The fifth chapter is "Religious freedom, Truth-Predicates and the Ghent School". According to the Ghent School, religious freedom in the Indian Constitution rests on individual equality, whereas the Hindu perspective emphasises the equality of religious beliefs. John challenges this interpretation, arguing that it is a misconception.

Drawing on the Sivapurana (Shivaism), John argues that Hinduism has a framework of truth-predicates underpinning its religious beliefs, contrary to the Ghent School's assertion. Consequently, for him, religious freedom in India allows individuals to choose their beliefs and practices from among diverse Hindu traditions, with Christianity as an additional, non-coercive option.

In chapter six, the argument looks at a way forward for addressing these cross-pressures, especially for Dalit communities and many other converts to Christianity, who see their life in Christianity as a break from the past, erasing culturally and religiously oppressed memories as a subversive assertiveness. Other Christian converts, meanwhile, have chosen a hybridised or contextualised Christianity that is distinctly Indian and part of the diverse and complex Indian religious and cultural landscape.

Interestingly, John situates religious conversion in India within the framework of the Indian Constitution, which supports diversity and a pluralistic religious environment rather than enforcing a uniform code; however, he does not address this issue in this book. The current government's efforts to implement a unified civil code through constitutional amendments risk marginalising minority groups and diminishing diversity. While John analyses the topic from both constitutional (Ambedkar) and fundamentalist Hindu perspectives, this review notes the absence of an in-depth Gandhian or even Nehruvian perspective on secularism alongside Ambedkar and the founders of modern India, who prioritised religious equality, democracy and coexistence. Indian secularism does not separate state and religion but is protected by a constitutional framework that recognises all religions as equal and upholds freedom of conscience and choice without discrimination. So, the big question remains unanswered: "Is India secular or Hindu?"

A short note on style and format: this book occasionally suffers from repetitive arguments and phrasing in some chapters, which can reduce clarity and may require multiple readings.

In conclusion, this book is a welcome contribution to scholarship on Indian secularism. Its availability in India will make it accessible for personal collections. The text is a valuable resource for those interested in the unique characteristics of Indian secularism, particularly in a context where religious faith is perceived to be declining. However, this book reminds us that, as much as religion has scope, it can be used by society to move to extremes – fanatical or fundamentalist.

I recommend this book for students, universities, and theological institutions, and for their libraries, because of its comprehensive arguments, extensive bibliography, and in-depth analysis relevant to both political and religious studies on secularism.

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