**GOD AND POLITICS IN SECULAR INDIA**

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God and politics are not strangers to each other in India.

Of course, that might preliminarily appear to be a theologically precarious announcement. Secularity has taught us to abstain from referring to God in history; while theology closed the lid on divine history, at least, with the fixation of the Canon in the 4th century. That didn’t mean that individual testimonies ceased to exist; however, individual testimonies ceased to hold documentable authority for the development of a theology of history. Certainly, that was crucial to the sealing of revelation in history; theology of New Testament is not permitted to extend beyond the original Apostolic doctrine. But, of course, this didn’t rule away the possibility of supernatural experiences though their significance had to be interpreted in light of the revealed Scriptures. The modernism of the Enlightenment in the 18th century encouraged a somewhat deistic view of divine abstinence from human history; a view that seemed to have become strengthened, through diverse interpretations, among a few theologians in the Post-War era, in the Death of God movement. Of course, these exemplified only a few; most continued to believe that God was interested in human affairs and that God has a historical plan for the world. Prayer became a powerful privilege to such who sought divine intervention in personal and national matters.

The Dispensationalists were keen to identify the nation of Israel in the divine historical timeline and interpret all current events in relation to the dispensationalist points of reference. Nations and nationalisms had no individual significance apart from their place in the eschatological timetable. Missionary anthropologists, however, seemed to discover the chronological significance of nations in the ecclesiological plan of God. In some way, it was also anticipated that evangelization would hasten the end of times. But, was God specifically interested in the history of any nation just for its sake? Also, could a Christian nationalism be possible? Do nations possess individual significance like Israel did or was Israel the only significant physical nation – so that theology had to only deal with the physical Israel and the spiritual Israel (church) so far as national historical significance was concerned?

The question needs to be theologically answered and not just sensationally aired. Interestingly, it seems theologians have not given any theological credit to Christian nationalisms, popularly embraced. Liberational movements may raise some themes; but, a full fledged systematization doesn’t look to have been attempted. But, the results do seem to have theological antecedents. Commenting on the phenomenon of American Christian nationalism, Stephen Backhouse notes:

...the worldview is itself an example of a rationalist, modernistic mindset, albeit with adjustments. It is a religious Chosen People ideology, bolted on to a classically liberal interpretation of the progression of history, cemented by a thoroughly Enlightenment vision of modern nations and national identity.

The result is a theology best described as 'Christian nationalism'. The theology is not systematic, but it is pervasive. It does not have a single source or author, but it does appear regularly from multiple voices and at multiple times. It has not been explicated dogmatically, but its core themes recur with remarkable consistency.....[[1]](#footnote-1)

Space doesn’t permit here to attempt a theological dissection of nationalism. Certainly, there is no New Testament basis for any such. Jesus made it clear that His kingdom was not of this world. Does that rule out our political involvement in nations? Of course not; what belongs to Caesar must be given to Caesar – “Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.” (Romans 13:7, ESV). Our eschatological identity doesn’t preclude our historical responsibilities. Thus, we are called to pray for our political administrators (1Tim.2:2) and understand the importance of peace and order for the propagation of the Gospel: the Gospel is still central.

The Reformers of the 16th century considered the alliance between politics and religion as an unholy matrimony. In 1523, Luther published his “On Temporal Authority” in which he argued for the division of the church and the state. To Luther, the weltliches Regiment (‘the kingdom of the world,’ ‘the State’) was distinct from the geistliches Regiment (‘the kingdom of God,’ ‘the church’). The state was connected with God’s continual work of creation and the church with God’s continual work of redemption. God, Luther stated, is the head of both the kingdoms.[[2]](#footnote-2) Paul instructed the Christians of the Roman Empire to submit to the political authority as an authority ordained by God (Rom.13:1-7). But, certainly, the Ordainer was greater than the ordained and so obedience to Him was primary (Acts 4:19). The implication is that political authority (delegated to either Christian or any other) is divine though unecclesiastical. This certainly establishes God’s direct relationship with politics, though separate from religion or the church. The relationship existed prior to the church. God works in politics secularly; pointing towards the secularity of God (i.e. as unrelated to the church), politically speaking. But, God also calls the church to seek Him through prayer to bring political peace for the peaceful propagation of the Gospel. This precludes the idea of Christian nationalism though establishing the significance of a Christian’s role in political history. Interestingly, God as secular (disconnected from organized religion) is open to the nations as the God of the nations. As such, He belongs to them in the place and time that they are.

**Pluralism, Secularity, and Divine Sovereignty with reference to the Indian Context**

Probably, in this sense, we can look at the postmodern pluralist Indian in a more sensible manner. Gandhi’s pluralistic spirituality; and now, (the atheist turn theist) Kejriwal’s pluralistic spirituality admit of sincerity. Kejriwal’s public gratitude to the Supreme Father God (Parampita Parameshwar)[[3]](#footnote-3), Ishwar, Allah, Waheguru is also a declaration of the pluralistic faith in the supremacy of God who transcends religions and relates to the politics of the nation particularly. The secular God’s interests are not limited to just a single religion; but, here to a nation. At the same time, He is the Supreme God, He is Allah, He is Waheguru; thus, He is also trans-national simultaneously. Interestingly, Kejriwal’s refusal of security with a rational apologetic that if God protects a man, nothing can destroy him, but, if it is His will to take him away, no security can save him, speaks of a theology applied to reality. “I don't need any security. I don't need any escort...God is my biggest security,” he is reported to have said.[[4]](#footnote-4) Is Kejriwal tying politics with religion? He doesn’t quote the God of some singular, organized religion. His pluralism may be accused as being politically tainted; but, it is not invalidated by God’s secularity. It also reflects a local, geographical-historical response to the Unknown Supreme Father (cf. Acts 17:24-29).

However, such a view has to be informed by some theology whatsoever, which must not be just pragmatical. There might be many claims to the sources; but, we know the spirit of the age to be humanistic and spiritual. Kejriwal’s request to the Delhites to swear an oath against corruption with him would be meaningless without these categories subsisting in the background of it all.

What seems attractively cogent is the implied refusal to associate with any singular religion. Yet, this God of the secular is not impersonal. He is sovereign. He is both transcendent and immanent, being interested in the affairs of humans. He answers prayers. He respects faith. He fixes destiny, determines the times, and fights against corruption. He is open to all His children, irrespective of race, caste, gender, creed, or class. Is such implicit theology explicit of post-secularity in India? I doubt. Perhaps, in some way or the other, the secularity of God and the secularity of India aren’t confused. The secularity of God is what makes conversations and dialogues possible. The temporal is the platform for the eternal.

From a Christian vantage point, can we seriously pronounce AAP’s victory as a divine miracle, as Kejriwal publicly and humbly confessed? Or should we treat it as accidental, a wave of the times, bearing no theological value? I think we don’t have any justification for treating any political event as accidental. Certainly, the Bible is too clear to be misunderstood:

…the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, gives it to whomever He will, and sets over it the lowest of men. (Dan 4:17 NKJ)

…there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. (Rom 13:1-2 NKJ)

Of course, this would more seriously imply that the authority which resists the ordinance of God will bring more severe judgment on itself; because it answers to God, though it may not recognize it – and this irrespective of religion, in secularity alone. The judges who were tried at the Nuremberg Trials (1945-46) had to concede to the fact that a corrupt system doesn’t justify compliance to corruption. There was a Law above the laws of Hitler; and they were first obliged to the greater. Individuals who stand against the crimes of the nation stand out before God. Secularity doesn’t imply unspirituality, because “in Him we live and move and have our being”. This might seem inclusivist; and, it is; but, here again, God is not spoken of possessively but secularly, as one belonging to the nations.

**An Inclusivist Political Theology?**

The New Testament is clear about the fact that God is interested in nations individually. He is willing to leave the 99 righteous in order to rescue the one in peril. Does this abrogate the place of Israel as a covenant nation in modern times?

In Isaiah 44:28-45:1, God refers to Cyrus, the Persian emperor, as His anointed, His shepherd, who will do His pleasure by building Jerusalem and its temple. Somehow, God’s dealing with the nations seems to be linked to Israel. In modern times, Christians have considered seriously the place of Israel in God’s layout of human history. Dispensationalism and Premillenial eschatology, popularized by J.N. Darby and C.I. Scofield, has deeply influenced present Christian political thought. These inform the theology of history which seeks to interpret local instances in light of God’s covenants and prophetical pronouncements. For instance, perhaps it is not accidental that the “Times of the Gentiles” that began with the Fall of Jerusalem in 6th century BC saw not only the rise of the great empires, but also the liberation of religion under the great worldwide protest and reform movements during the same time [the 6th and 5th centuries saw the rise of Greek philosophy, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Confucianism].

Stephen Spector has pointed out the two biblical texts that have strongly influenced the modern Evangelical attitude towards Israel.[[5]](#footnote-5) The first is God’s promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3 in which He declares that He will bless those who bless Abraham and curse those who curse him. In his 1909 edition of the Scofield Reference Bible, Scofield noted that this promise has been “wonderfully fulfilled in the history of the dispersion. It has invariably fared ill with the people who have persecuted the Jew—well with those who have protected him.”[[6]](#footnote-6) The other text is in Joel 3:1-2 where God declares that He will judge the nations on the Last Day according to how they have treated the nation of Israel. Teachers of prophecy refer to this as the “Judgment of the Nations”.

Interestingly, in India the main political voices that have supported the cause of Israel came from the Hindutva camp. In his letter of 19th December, 1947, Veer Savarkar celebrated the notion of the creation of the nation of Israel. He wrote:

After centuries of sufferings, sacrifices and struggle the Jews will soon recover their national Home in Palestine which has undoubtedly been their Fatherland and Holyland. Well may they compare this event to that glorious day in their history when Moses led them out of The Egyptian bondage and wilderness? and the promised land flowing with milk and honey came well within sight.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Of course, his nationalistic stance and opposition of the Islamic conquest ideology defined his terms. He wasn’t favorable towards the then India’s position with regard to Israel:

It is consequently to be regretted that the delegation which represented our Hindusthani Government in the UNO should have voted against the creation of the Jewish State. The speeches of Shrimati Vijayalaxmi in particular were justly ridiculed when she declaimed melodramatically that the Indian Government refused to stab the unity and integrity of the Palestine State in the back by carving out a seperate Jewish State,—forgetting for the while that the very Indian Government had stabbed the unity and integrity of their own nation only the other day and gloated over it as an event for public jubilations! Pandit Nehru made his case more untenable by stating that the creation of the Jewish State was opposed by his Government to secure the goodwill of the group of the petty Moslem States in Asia….

The international policy of Hindudom at any rate must always aim to break up the power of the Moslem Blocks from Africa to the Malayan Peninsula. The creation of a strong and independent Jewish state must serve to checkmate the aggressive tendencies of Moslem fanaticism in general.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Nehru does have one chapter on Palestine in his Glimpses of World History (1960)[[9]](#footnote-9) in which he admires the Jews as a very remarkable people who stood through the many times of affliction during their diaspora; however, he felt that returning their homeland back to them was at the sacrifice of those who were already dwelling there and this only created the Jews-Arabs conflict.

Savarkar’s nationalism (based on his ideas of Hindu-ness) didn’t seem to be threatened by Jewish nationalism. “The Jewish people bear no political ill-will towards Hindudom,” he had said. His original directive (“Whatever the attitude of the present Congressite Government be the Hindu Sanghatanists at any rate cherish goodwill towards and extend their moral support to the establishment of the independent Jewish State in Palestine on moral as well as political grounds”) seems to have been carefully observed by the Sangh Parivar. Israel-India ties were strengthened during the BJP term.

On the other hand, Hindutva nationalism has opposed Christian evangelization, prompting us to ask if this obfuscates its nationalist favoritism for Israel. We are not called to be judges here. But, of course, unlike the Dispensationalist Christian support for Israel (which may sometimes be vested with selfish interest – to be blessed in return and not be cursed), Hindutva support of Zionism has a different ideological premise. It certainly doesn’t know about Genesis 12 or care anything about it. We have noted Savarkar’s sympathy for the Jews as he considers Palestine to be their own land. Also, he seems to become more sympathetic because the Jews bear no ill-will towards Hindus but the Moslem states are usually anti-semitic.

Certainly, there is a point in Christian political theology that cannot ignore the Israeli question. The people are the chosen ones. But, one must not stop to enquire about the nature of this chosenness. Certainly, God’s choice of Israel is only part of His greater plan for the world. In the ultimate sense, it is not the world towards Israel; it is Israel towards the world. Also, we cannot ignore the Abrahamic promise in Genesis 12. But, we must also not forget the vision of the promise “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”.

The reference to Cyrus as God’s anointed in Isaiah 44 and 45 is, obviously, in relation to God’s plan for His own covenant people Israel. His famous Edict (536BC) that empowered the Jews in exile to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple (Ezra 1) is documented with references to his acknowledgement of YHWH as God (1:2,3). The discovery of Cyrus’ Cylinder in 19th century did spark lot of enthusiasm since the clay document confirmed the historical authenticity of the Biblical record. The prophetic word regarding Cyrus was: “I have raised him up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways; he shall build My city and let My exiles go free, not for price nor reward” (Isa 45:13 NKJ). While it may appear that God’s election of Cyrus was utilitarian (for the sake of His people Israel), we are not without biblical evidence to also say that the election was part of God’s governance of the world-- “the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, gives it to whomever He will” (Dan 4:17). As such, His interest is also in the individual nations. In fact, in the ultimate sense, God is not interested in the nations for the sake of Israel, but God chose Israel because He loves the nations, and wants to bless them. The choice of Israel is one step in affirming God’s belongedness to the nations – His initiation of reconciliation and of making them a people of God. Thus, Cyrus or any other ruler or government might be unaware of the theological horizon, but God’s governance includes them; His sovereignty over the earth is not obstructed by man’s incognizance of His person.

Of course, God’s governance is not through hard-determinism. There are situations where He permits evil rulers to come to power by evil means; there are conditions in which He abandons humans to their selfish and destructive desires; but, then He also seeks for people to stand in the gap to intercede for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven – and, it is He who answers the cries of the innocent by giving them justice. He is interested in the one missing sheep. Obviously, God’s interest in the salvation of Nineveh was not towards Israel, but from Israel to the world (“Salvation is of the Jews” (John 4:22)). The only rationale God provided to Jonah was:

You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left-- and much livestock?" (Jon 4:9-11 NKJ)

God created the nations of the world and His interest in them individually (even to the livestock) is much larger than the nationalistic self-interest of any people. His interest is global and personal.

Indian Christians must avoid any form of nationalism that is religiously oriented. Such nationalism is not theologically warranted. We have already noted God’s involvement in politics in a secular fashion (unecclesiastically). The church is separate from the state. Thus, historically, it is seen that even though a government wasn’t secular, God was secular. He didn’t drag religion into politics, but silently did intervene to administer temporal justice and order in the world (i.e. temporal justice in relation to temporal authority). With regard to the church, it doesn’t seem that God is interested in an organized religion at all. Christianity had nothing to do with an external temple. Each Christian is the temple of God. This is what frees Paul to do his own theology, separate from the Twelve. Their association with Jesus for three and half years, and their direct and public appointment by Jesus didn’t give them theological advantage over Paul.

But from those who seemed to be something-- whatever they were, it makes no difference to me; God shows personal favoritism to no man-- for those who seemed to be something added nothing to me. (Gal 2:6 NKJ)

God is not interested in a political structure within the church, where power lobbying will be an issue. The church is not a political kingdom; nor is it meant to become a political nation. The Bible doesn’t know anything about a Christian nationalism. It speaks nothing of it. We should be careful of notions such as a “Christian nation”. Politics is theologically meant to be secular. In fact, it doesn’t seem unhistorical to maintain that the progressive secularization of the world is “the logical outcome of Biblical religion.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Of course, the eschatological question does remain. We leave it to God to deal with the question. This is not to disregard eschatology; but, to affirm the sovereignty of God over all things. The Christian is called to respect the secular political authority. The Christian is also called to be salt and light in the world. However, a Christian who is in a political office must desist from mixing religion with politics. He should also serve the world as serving Christ and must not compromise his Christian faith in any situation. He must remember that “the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, gives it to whomever He will”.

**God and Politics in the Secular**

So, when Kejriwal is grateful to God, in his pluralistic sense, the acknowledgement certainly seems to be honest. The question about the identity of this God is tackled in his naming all the names of God, in different faiths, that he considers pertinent in the Indian setting. Of course, the inclusivist Christian is well aware of such usage (Parmeshwar and Allah have been used for God in Hindi and Urdu Bible translations). At the moment, the confession seems to be more secular than religious. Certainly, such public confession is not biblically discouraged. In fact, both in the New Testament and the Old Testament, any ruler who got megalomaniac got immediately punished by God (Daniel 4:30-34; Acts 12:21-23). Kejriwal’s public humility, in light of this, is highly commendable.

Also, Kejriwal seemed to echo the secular God, the God present in the secular world of politics, unpossessively of any religion. His faith is both personal and public at the same time and important for his identity as a political activist standing for the purification of Indian politics. Certainly, this is not just the cry of the people, but also the heart of God for them. We must desist from mixing religion (i.e., of the organized kind) with politics here. However, a secular politician is better when he has faith in God. God is not a stranger to politics; in fact, He governs the political world.

The queries with this regard don’t end here; there is much to be reflected. However, it should certainly be a challenge to understand that there is also a way in which God relates to the world even if the world is unaware of Him; perhaps, that shows us the secular face of God.

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8. Savarkar, Historic Statements, 136 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Jawaharlal Nehru, Glimpses of World History (NY: The John Day Company, 1960), 262 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Harvey Cox, The Secular City (New York: Macmillan Pub. Co. Inc., 1975), Cover Page [↑](#footnote-ref-10)