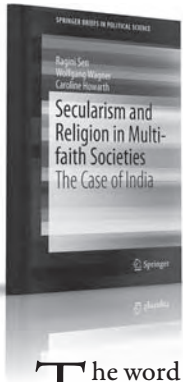


being regular at some simple practices that could give peace to oneself and others.

This book is a welcome read for anyone interested in calming the mind and see oneself as part of an infinite expanse of love, beyond the body and the mind.

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Secularism and Religion in Multi-faith Societies: The Case of India

Ragini Sen, Wolfgang Wagner, and Caroline Howarth

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The word ‘secularism’ generally means ‘no religion’ but in the Indian context, it has acquired the strange meaning of the state having to do nothing with religion. Hence, in India the government is supposed to be silent on religious matters. This is impossible as religion is an integral part of the lives of the citizens of any nation, more so in India. This has led to the Indian government taking sides on religious issues, the side taken depending upon the ideology of the political party in power. It is unfortunate that India—a country teeming with numerous faith-traditions—should have such a state policy. The best way out is to have the same stance towards all religions or faith-traditions.

This book is the result of a survey conducted across different segments of Indian populace to understand the influence of religion on the country and how sometimes the political ideas and the ground realities are at loggerheads. The authors juxtapose their findings in India with the studies in the West: ‘Our research shows that religion is often a central issue in political identity formation, but this is generally not recognized in social debates in the West, which sometimes underestimates the force of religious belief and the connections between religious beliefs and political views’ (1).

After giving various definitions of the word ‘secularism’ and trying to drive home the point that secularism was not something new done

only in India, the authors suddenly attack the ‘saffron wave (the color saffron is associated with the hawkish Hindu political parties)’ (4). This is not only a jerk to the reader, to say the least, but betrays the ignorance of the authors that the colour ‘saffron’ is symbolic of renunciation and monastic orders in many faith-traditions of the Sanatana Dharma. That some political parties use it does not rob the colour of its ancient glory. Beginning here, the entire book, written with ‘an urgent need to examine the political psychology of secularism’ (1), seems to put the entire responsibility of religious conflict on Hinduism and Islam. The authors concentrate only on ‘Hindu-Muslim conflict’ and are apparently oblivious to the fact that conflict exists amongst many faith-traditions and is not confined to Hindus and Muslims.

When the reader loses hope of finding anything positive, one finds a ray of hope by the positive streak of ‘Results and Interpretation’ of the survey. Various solutions such as enculturation, change in mindset, and the involvement of civil society are proposed to achieve a harmonious multi-religious society. The authors name Abul Kalam Azad, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, and Bhim Rao Ambedkar as role models of secularism. While Abul Kalam Azad is surely a role model of secularism, of the other two, one failed to understand the needs of the faith-community he was born into, and the other converted to Buddhism because he hated Hinduism. Both are examples of how one can misread a religion than the role models of secularism. True secularism would be when one practises one’s religion and does not prevent or facilitate others to practise their faith. Religious acceptance or pluralism cannot be taught by people who do not belong to any faith-tradition. It is surprising that the authors have failed to mention Swami Vivekananda, who was the harbinger of inter-religious dialogue and who believed that there should be as many religions as there are people in this world.

Despite its shortcomings, this book is a small but timely step towards a scientific analysis of religious conflict and the exploration of its solutions, and shows the path for much broader and deeper studies.

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