Research Review

The Resurgence of Religion: Worldmaking in the Era of Desecularization

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Introduction

One hundred and thirty years ago in September 1893, Narendra Dutt — known by his monastic name Swami Vivekananda — visited Chicago, Illinois, to attend the World's Parliament of Religions. In front of distinguished delegates and hundreds of audience members from around the world, Vivekananda discussed aspects of Hinduism, Indian religions, and reflections on religion as a feature of politics. One of his lectures, "Why We Disagree," distilled his approach to religion by relating the story of a frog who believed that the well he lived in constituted the entire world. Extending this narrative, Vivekananda urged attendees to learn from other religions.[1] Later, Vivekananda spent more time in the United States, lecturing in New York and California on aspects of yoga, Indian religion, and spirituality. He formed the Ramakrishna Mission (named after his guru Ramakrishna Paramahansa), a global, nonpartisan organization of monastics focused on interpretations of Hindu scriptures and service to those in need.[2]

[Swami Vivekananda] Source: Wikimedia Commons

In the 1890s, Indian travelers in the United States, like Vivekananda, extolled the mission of spreading Indian spirituality, philosophy, and forms of religious experience to the world. *India* at that time referred to colonial India, with borders and contours quite different from

the independent nation-state of India, formed in 1947. During his lifetime, European and US empires dominated a colonial world order, which allowed the British Empire to colonize India for eighty-nine years. That system was dismantled and reassembled into nation-states in the mid-twentieth century via political decolonization. However, the era of decolonization gave rise to aggressive national postures, militarization, nuclearization, and an emphasis on majorities within the respective nations.



Source: Official White House Photo by Adam Schultz

In our postcolonial era, 130 years after Vivekananda visited Chicago, another world historical figure named Narendra Modi visited the United States to meet with President Joseph Biden, not as a monastic in robes but with official security detail as the Indian prime minister.[3] In the late nineteenth century, India appeared in the guise of Vivekananda to offer philosophical ruminations for a niche audience; now, it resembles muscular nationalism linked to the brutally majoritarian politics of religious nationalism.[4] This broader shift informs not only India's changing roles in the world but also the significant global shifts in the relationship between religion and the nation-state, especially given that nation-states such as the Philippines, Hungary, Brazil, and Turkey, among others, have stridently embraced majoritarian religious identity in recent years.

> ***What accounts for the movement away from secularism as a political principle undergirding the modern nation-state? Scholars who study nationalism have been posing this question for the past decade following the rise of majoritarian politics in several populous democracies.[5]***

> ***While most social scientific scholarship in the early twentieth century focused on the ethics and viability of secularism in postcolonial democracies, recent works have prioritized understanding desecularization or the turn away from older secularist principles. The pivot toward desecularization features the consolidation of national legitimation and global recognition through the empowerment of religious majorities. In the twenty-first century, desecularization seems to be everywhere, from postcolonial states in Asia and Latin America to Western liberal states in Europe and North America.***

One region demonstrating this shift is South Asia, which houses a quarter of the world's population and nation-states that broadcast religious majoritarianism *and* manifest complex relationships to secularism. Thinking from the perspective of South Asia's thick textures and theoretical centrality may provide the foundation for new questions for the field.[6] After analyzing recent comparative works from various parts of the world, this reflection focuses on approaches to religious nationalism in India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Specifically, I investigate conjunctures in the life cycle of desecularization, such as appropriations of Indigeneity in Hindu India, the geopolitical context of myths about Buddhism in contemporary Sri Lanka, and the secular persecution of minority Ahmadis in Pakistan. I conclude by noting how the study of religious nationalism has, thus far, overlooked a critical component: religious minorities. Focusing on the latter rather than majoritarian religion alone enables a more variegated and complex view of secularism and religious nationalism

in our contemporary world.

Frames of Reference: Religion, State, and Comparison

As opposed to the single case studies common in the era of secularization theory, current research digs into the resurgence of religion through detailed comparisons grounded in perspectives outside of the West.[7]–[8] This comparative turn reveals commonalities in the study of desecularization, as states worldwide reverse older aspirations for secular principles into a new nationalism based on the religious majority. By emphasizing the role of the centralized nation-state, recent scholarship points to frustrations with older forms of secularism, regarded as illegitimate or inappropriate, as well as the precarious nature of religious minorities.

One work that best captures the theoretical insights derived from comparative analysis is Jocelyne Cesari's *We God's People: Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism in the World of Nati*.[9]

> ***Emphasizing the three Bs, belief, belonging, and behavior, Cesari argues that the nation-state regulates the "immanent" sphere of this-worldly politics and religious authorities who manage the "transcendent" realm of otherworldly life.[10] Her book offers a historical sociology of India, Turkey, Syria, China, and Russia, marshaling various sources from a multilingual research team.[11] Cesari declares that the rise of the modern state parallels the loss of autonomy experienced by religious groups in regulating their communities.***

Likewise, Sumantra Bose's *Secular States, Religious Politics: India, Turkey, and the Future of Secularism* examines histories, paradoxes, and styles in present-day India and Turkey.[12] Bose shows how Turkey follows a French *laicist* model and India draws upon its own indigenously rooted secularism. An incomplete secularist project (e.g., the aspirational yet unimplemented Uniform Civil Code in India) and a violently imposed secularism (also found in Iran and Egypt) explain the rise of majoritarian religious nationalism in both states. As both states desecularize, Bose underlines how India's secularism was homegrown, built out of a multilayered anticolonial movement. In contrast, Turkey's secularism emerged fully from a top-down imposition, associated in the minds of ordinary people as a project of state violence against religion.

Another recent work positioning India and Turkey together is Karen Barkey, Sudipta Kaviraj, and Vatsal Naresh's edited volume *Negotiating Democracy and Religious Pluralism: India, Pakistan, and Turkey*.[13] Across three subsections on historical perspectives, genealogies of state and religion, and violence and domination, the assembled scholars deploy a range of methods to understand nationalism, democracy, and religion across the three nations. An issue of debate across much of the Global South is the prior existence of religious pluralism that predates – and potentially forms alternatives to – contemporary majoritarian politics. Notably, the editors clarify the difference between pluralism and plurality. Whereas *plurality* refers to a diversity of faiths, *pluralism* refers to engagement with this diversity in substantive ways. Ultimately, the editors argue that both India and Turkey interfere in the basic rights of minorities while boasting histories of pluralist approaches to religion and difference. Though typically not seen in pluralistic frameworks, this comparative turn reveals the presence of pluralism in India and Turkey, alongside the overwhelming importance of majoritarian sentiment in contemporary nation-states.

Worldmaking, Indigeneity, and Secularism Revisited: South Asia and Desecularization



The demon god Ravana. Source: Wikimedia Commons

Common to various sites of religious majoritarianism is the rise of new forms of worldmaking or the construction of certain worlds out of a variety of conceptual resources. A common reference point is philosopher Nelson Goodman's *Ways of Worldmaking,* which explores how social actors construct their own worlds via creative uses of available cultural, religious, and language resources.[14] Most relevant to religious nationalism is the worldmaking done in the name of anticolonial nationalism, as studied by political theorist Adom Getachew in her *Worldmaking after Empire*, which highlights "the project of overcoming international hierarchy and constituting a post-imperial world."[15] In the current era of religious majoritarianism, many nation-states emphasize new forms of worldmaking by reframing national identity with history and Indigeneity.

Hindu nationalists in India have deployed the rhetoric of "Indigeneity" in recent years. The SSRC's *Immanent Frame* devoted a forum to "Hindutva and the Shared Scripts of the Global Right."[16] This forum asserts the presence of "Hindutva" and thinks comparatively about Hindutva-esque movements elsewhere through snapshot-level reflections on the use of social media, conspiracy theory, the perceived fragility of majority groups, and the contested nature of sacred space.[17] Recent research in this area seeks to understand religion and the space of the nation by attending to the lifeworlds and perspectives of those in the religious majority.

Arkotong Longkumer's *The Greater India Experiment: Hindutva and the Northeast*

highlights the lived realities of the Sangh Parivar, using ethnography, archival research, and text criticism.[18]–[19] Departing from the usual focus on "belonging," he instead studies "becoming" or how Hindu nationalists construct a world that fits into the elastic and expansive definition of Hindutva. Longkumer reveals how current interpretations of V.D. Savarkar's *Essentials of Hindutva* veer far from the stock definition of Hindu religious identity.[20] Instead, Hindu nationalists in the northeast emphasize place and nature, dependent on arboreal imagery, not explicitly folded into religion. These activists construct a world based on some of Savarkar's original ideas but crafted to address Indigeneity, Indigenous religion, and the local landscape in the northeast. This particular worldmaking is only visible through close ethnographic attention to the workings of the religious imagination distant from state power. Longkumer's analysis of the "Greater India Experiment" through Hindu nationalist activity demonstrates that interplays between religion and nation predate modernity and appear unpredictably across the career of the nation-state.

The island nation of Sri Lanka offers comparable histories, though often framed through the politics of Sinhala majorities and Tamil minorities. Not often seen in terms of religion, the extended history of conflict and nation-building in contemporary Sri Lanka has guided scholars to consider more closely the role of Buddhism in the making and remaking of Sri Lankan nationalism. Bandura Dileepa Witharana's *Negotiating Power and Constructing the Nation: Engineering in Sri Lanka* explores the figure of Ravana as a central aspect of Sri Lankan nationalism that pushes against any linkage to India or Hinduism.[21]–[22] He studies various engineering projects in Sri Lankan history, noting how they all depict engineering as a facet of local, Indigenous Buddhist heritage in some form.

Witharana explains how one myth centers Ravana as an Indigenous king of the Yakkas, who

imbibed Buddhism before the arrival of Arahant Mahinda from India in the third century BCE. Novels, interactive websites, YouTube videos, art exhibitions, and films on Ravana create "Ravanisation."[23] In this imaginary, Ravana's ten heads represent expertise in ten disciplines, including aviation, iron and nuclear power, and energy engineering. Sri Lanka's relationship with the Ravana myth displays various features of the religious majoritarianism of our time, including political positioning within a world of nearby nation-states like India, distinguishing Sri Lanka from India in every single way.

Another form of worldmaking is found in Pakistan, which shares with Sri Lanka a tense and complicated relationship with India. It also shares a history of religious majoritarianism in various guises since its birth as a nation-state in 1947. Sadia Saeed's *Politics of Desecularization: Law and the Minority Question in Pakistan* offers a historical sociology tracing the marginalization of the Ahmadi community, a minority group that has been at odds with majoritarian Indian-Muslim context since the early twentieth century.[24] Saeed counters the Orientalizing impulse that would attribute persecution of minorities to a rigid variant of Islam. Instead, the secular court system has gradually disempowered and persecuted Ahmadis through the exigencies of state-making rather than religious dogma and prejudice. This process reveals a type of desecularization, a "creative and generative process that is aimed at worldmaking."[25] This desecularization, alongside the worldmaking of the Greater India experiment and the Ravanization of Sri Lanka, is an important element of the postcolonial linkages between religion and nation in the present day.

Looking to the Future: The Religious Minority

The "desecularizing" process visible in India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan has been underway since the romance and aspirations of early postcolonial life have withered away. As Cesari mentions at the onset of her study, religion in the era of nationhood is the foundation of

identity "*for the majority group as well as for the minorities*."[26] Building on this insight, Saeed has explored how debates about the minority change over time, pointing toward a variety of "Ahmadi questions" for nation-states throughout the world. Exploring Ahmadi questions wherever they arise comprises the next major journey for scholars in this field. Whether for Alevis in Turkey, Copts in Egypt, or the many religious minorities worldwide, practices, politics, and worldmaking impulses point to how the desecularized nation-state understands religion itself.

Religious minorities have certainly appeared as significant entities within earlier studies of religion, nationalism, and secularism. In critical secular studies, many have focused on the contradictions and sources of violence within particular secular regimes around the world.[27] In particular, Saba Mahmood has studied Coptic Orthodox Christians and Bahá'í religious minorities in Egypt as a lens into the various contradictions and paradoxes thrown into sharp relief by a secular nation-state. Following her trenchant reflections on secular governance, secular legal concepts, and secularism more broadly, the next arena for research compelled by our religiously majoritarian world is the plight of religious minorities in an era of desecularization.

The religious spaces of minorities in states like Bangladesh compel such investigation. Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation-state following the 1971 civil war between East and West Pakistan. Many in the West cite this nation-state for its creation of microcredit, its role in the contemporary garment industry, and its various vulnerabilities to environmental crises. However, the role of religion and secularism, with particular reference to its minority populations, remains understudied relative to the minority reports conducted in other comparable sites across the world.

In my earlier work, I investigated the relationship between religion, language, and Islam in the years just before the creation of Pakistan, a key precursor to the creation of Bangladesh.[28] Such work lays a foundation for thinking about the new category of the minority, created in the embers of empires, reified in the early years of postcolonial states like Pakistan, but now occupying new places in contemporary states such as Pakistan and Bangladesh.[29] Of the various religious minorities in Bangladesh, such as Christians, Buddhists, and various tribal groups, Hindus occupy a significant place in the ongoing transformations of religion and secularism in the era of aggressive religious nationalism.

The presence of Hindus poses questions about the definition and boundaries of religion, as well as signaling the place of religious minorities in the global nation-state system. One route toward understanding the nexus between religion and nation in our time features a close look at the community known as Matuas, formed in the 1860s as a social reform movement of lower castes and outcastes. Initially focused on rejecting caste distinctions, it blossomed into a new social formation claiming complete externality to Hindu traditions by the early twentieth century. Now featuring over twelve million followers and recognized sites of historical importance in India and Bangladesh, Matuas showcase how minorities live through our current era of desecularization. As studied by scholars of the Matua community, some argue that Matuas break categorically from caste Hindu traditions, whereas some assert insertion into Hindu society. Furthermore, the nature of their belonging shifts according to the changes in geopolitical posturing by India, Pakistan (for the twenty-four years of East Pakistan), and Bangladesh.[30] The Orakandi Matua temple complex, visited by Modi in 2021, may be claimed by the new dispensation of India as “Hindu.” It also belongs to the Matua people, for whom the designation Hindu is not at all stable or agreed upon by all adherents of the faith.[31]

As Isaiah Berlin noted nearly fifty years ago, Western scholars of the nation just began to realize that postcolonial nationalisms signaled "the inflamed desire of the insufficiently regarded to count for something among the cultures of the world."[32] Now, scholars of religious nationalism realize that a complete account of these desires must consider the histories and politics of religious minorities in-depth, on their own terms. The paths taken and lived experiences of religious minorities shine a light on the geopolitical realities of national posturing and how majoritarian projects appropriate Indigeneity and symbols across the spectrum of culture and history. Focusing on the religious minority allows scholars not only to probe and expand the categories of *religious* and *secular* but also to grasp the process of desecularization in concrete terms.

Our current world is not the world of Vivekananda, but nor is it only the world of Modi. Religion and nation need not be understood only from the vantage point of the powerful and majoritarian. Instead, the religion of minorities may point the way toward building a world outside the religiously defined nation.

Footnotes

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[1] Delivered on September 15, 1893, at Parliament, this speech is included in Vivekananda, *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 4–6.

[2] See https://www.ramakrishna.org/history.html.

[3] Citing the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, the United States denied Prime Minister Modi entry in 2005, based on his complicity in the anti-Muslim riots of 2002. At that time, Modi served as chief minister of Gujarat. He subsequently visited the United

States in 2014 at the invitation of then President Barack Obama.

[4] The phrase “muscular nationalist” is frequently used to describe Modi as an authoritarian figure. For a study of muscular nationalism before the rise of Modi, see Banerjee, *Muscular Nationalism*.

[5] Scholars across the Global South have long critiqued a presumption that the modern nation-state revolves around secular principles based in the West. An important critical engagement with this condition vis-à-vis the history and politics of Egypt regarding religious minorities is found in Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*, especially the introduction and chapter 1.

[6] See Bhargava, *Secularism and Its Critics*; Scott, *Spiritual Despots*; Fuchs and Dalmia, *Religious Interactions*; Hatcher, *Hinduism before Reform* for considerations of modern Indian religion as a foundation for broader theoretical reflection on religion and secularism.

[7] Simply put, “secularization theory” refers to an older, discredited notion that religion declines in the face of modernization, industrialization, and technocratic advancements in social life. See Casanova, “The Secular and Secularisms,” as well as his landmark *Public Religions* for discussions of secularization theory and its limits, as well as the subject of public religions as a topic of study.

[8] See Bilgrami, *Beyond the Secular West*; Rouhana and Shalhoub-Kevorkian, *When Politics Are Sacralized*; and Künkler, Madeley, and Shankar, *A Secular Age*.

[9] Cesari, Jocelyne. *We God’s People*.

[10] The heuristic distinction between “immanent” and “transcendent” religions usually

occurs in studies of ancient, premodern cultures. Religions of immanence emphasize an enchanted cosmos, such as Greek, Roman, and Indic cultures before the "Axial Age," from approximately 500 BCE through 500 CE. Religions of transcendence, such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Confucianism, focused not on rites or rituals but on ethics, contemplation, and truth as a way to salvation. Cesari centers the modern state as *the* major factor determining the management of religion. See Strathern and Moin, *Sacred Kingship*, and Gorski, "Return of the King."

[11] The book triggered a Berkley Forum inclusive of responses from scholars across numerous perspectives and geographies. See Georgetown University, "Berkley Forum."

[12] Bose, S*ecular States*.

[13] Barkey, Kaviraj, and Naresh, *Negotiating Democracy*.

[14] Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, 7–16.

[15] Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*, 23.

[16] Gandhi, "Hindutva and the Shared Scripts."

[17] On Indian majoritarian nationalism in our present day, see also the recent work of Jaffrelot, *Modi's India*, and Hansen and Roy, *Saffron Republic*.

[18] Longkumer, *Greater India Experiment.*

[19] The Sangh Parivar is an umbrella term for all those who affiliate with Hindu nationalist organizations, from the Bharata Janata Party to the religious organization Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Council of Hindus), to the student group, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi

Parishad (All India Students' Council).

[20] Though outside the scope of this review essay, recent work on Savarkar has emphasized his own approaches to history and violence. See Chaturvedi, *Hindutva and Violence*.

[21] See another recent work on this topic, Henry, *Ravana's Kingdom*.

[22] Witharana, *Negotiating Power*.

[23] Witharana cites De Koning, "Revitalising Ravana" on the topic of "Ravanisation."

[24] Saeed, *Politics of Desecularization*.

[25] Saeed, *Politics of Desecularization*, 228.

[26] Cesari, *We God's People*, 18.

[27] See Asad, *Formations of the Secular*; Agrama, *Questioning Secularism*; Mahmood, *Religious Difference*; and Stephens, *Governing Islam*.

[28] Bose, *Recasting the Region*.

[29] Daniyal, "Bangladesh's Most Important Hindu Temple."

[30] See Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Culture and Hegemony*; and Sipra Mukherjee, "In Opposition and Allegiance."

[31] *Times of India*, "I Always Wanted to Visit."

[32] Berlin, "The Bent Twig."

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