Kabir and the Secular State.

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In present-day India, I think it is fair to say that most academic historians and social scientists would prefer that the Indian state remains a secular state with a secular constitution. The main exceptions to this academic support for a secular state are found among those who follow the Hindu nationalist ideology associated principally with the Bharatiya Janata Party. Academics and other intellectuals who write in favor of the secular state frequently cite the fifteenth to sixteenth century religious poet Kabir as a supporter of the religious tolerance appropriate for a secular state and society. This essay will look at the views of several such scholars and consider the extent to which their appeal to the example of Kabir’s religious tolerance is justified by Kabir’s own compositions.

To talk about “secular states” and “secularism” requires some sort of initial explanation of how one wants to construe these terms since both terms are used in a considerable variety of ways. Here, following Juergens Habermas and others, I will refer to secularism primarily as a project (often described as part of the wider project of modernity) or as a norm that aims at a certain sort of relation between the state and the religious institutions that fall within the state’s territory (Habermas 1997). Although there are obviously different varieties of this project or norm, all varieties, I think, have in common a recommendation that the state and religious institutions become more separate and less intertwined than they usually were (or still are) in non-secular or less-secular states. In practice, this means that the secularism project recommends that religious institutions give
up some of their more public functions and retreat into a more individual sphere. It also
recommends that the state in turn give up at least some of its efforts to control religious
institutions, enforce a single religion on the populace, or even favor one religion over
another.

Secularism in this sense is not necessarily tied to irreligious attitudes such as
atheism or agnosticism, or even deism, but it does recommend, and even logically requires,
that the state allow religious pluralism in its territory, a religious pluralism that includes a
toleration of atheism, agnosticism, and a variety of major religions, and not just of different
sects of the majority religion. In other words, a European state that tolerates the existence
of both Protestant sects and Roman Catholicism but not Islam cannot really be counted as
secular. Similarly, if India were to impose various political and religious restrictions on
Christians and Muslims, as some Hindu nationalists demand, India could no longer be
counted as a secular state.

A secularism project based on a more or less amicable separation between the State
and religious institutions is easily conflated, or confused, with other processes that are often
lumped together under the overly vague and misleading term “secularization.” In a very
general way we can distinguish creedal secularization, a process of declining belief in gods
and other supernatural sources of moral and salvational authority; ritual secularization, a
decline in manifestations of religious practices such as church or temple attendance,
participation in religious rituals, etc.; and scientific secularization, a withdrawal of religious
institutions from attempts to influence or modify the directions and findings of scientific
research. The extent to which these varieties of secularization are progressing (or
retreating) in recent times has been the subject of much debate and also has revealed
considerable variation by country, by cultural region, by religious sects and currents, and by otherwise-defined segments of different national populations. However all this may be, these sorts of secularization are only of indirect relevance to the question of the existence of a secularism project in the sense of an increasing separation of functions between the state and religious institutions.

Although many scholars have argued otherwise, I do not think that the secularism project outside of Europe can be looked on *principally* as a colonial imposition. I do, however, mostly agree with the modified version of this colonial-imposition point of view recently proposed by Abdullahi An-Na‘im. He argues that “although established under colonial auspices, the European model of the state for all Islamic societies has radically transformed political, economic, and social relations throughout various regions” (2008:19). An-Na‘im does agree that, in the case of South Asia, British colonialism had the negative impact of placing too much emphasis on the religious identities and that this played a major role in the partition of the colony into Pakistan and India and on the imposition, in India, of parallel Muslim and non-Muslim systems of personal law. An-Na‘im considers both these consequences of colonialism to be unfortunate (*ibid.*: 140-58). Nonetheless, he also argues that “the philosophical and jurisprudential foundations of early Islamic social and political institutions evolved through active debate with Jewish, Christian, Greek, Indian, Persian, and Roman traditions during the seventh through ninth centuries.” An-Na‘im regards this process as something that “continued through the encounter with European colonialism from the sixteenth century up to the present” (*ibid.*: 270). In other words, although colonialism introduced distortions in the evolution of the formation of states with Muslim majorities, the process of formation of these states as
something other than simply Muslim states both precedes and post-dates colonialism and is, in any case, irreversible. Something quite similar can, I think, be said about non-Muslim states like India as well.

One interesting exception to the rule that most Indian academics outside the influence of a Hindu nationalist ideology support the creation of a secular state is the sociologist T. N. Madan. In a well-known essay directed against the secular state in South Asia, Madan claims, ironically, that secularization “is a gift of Christianity to mankind” and states that “secularism in South Asia as a generally shared credo of life is impossible, as a basis for state action impracticable, and as a blueprint for the foreseeable future impotent” (1998: 307, 298). I cannot agree with much of what Madan says in this essay. The most obvious failing is, I think, that he confuses, in rather tendentious fashion, secularism as a legal and constitutional basis of the state with secularization as a cultural process tied to a secular ideology in the sense of an anti-religious, or at least non-religious, spirit. Even Madan, however, has to agree that religious tolerance is a good thing, although his claim that “tolerance is indeed a value enshrined in all the great religions of mankind” (ibid.: 302) is to my mind highly dubious. It was, after all, precisely the lack of religious tolerance in the traditional Christian societies of early modern Europe and America (chiefly France, England and the British North America) that made the creation of the modern secular state virtually a necessity in the first place.

The secular state is often considered to be a key element of the often invoked concept of “modernity”. As Talal Asad argues, the secularism project is undoubtedly an important characteristic of the modern project and hence of “modernity” (Asad 2003: 12-16). This is true of modernity defined as the whole set of dominant features of the modern
world as they actually exist and of modernity defined as a set of normative characteristics to this modern world aspires with greater or lesser success.

As an example of the former, more descriptive view of modernity, one can cite Saurabh Dube’s claims about the “modernity” of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan before it was toppled by American and European troops. According to Dube, ideas about the “medieval” character of the religious intolerance displayed by the Taliban regime are inevitably false. The Taliban in fact must be considered to be as modern as the rest of us. This is the case not “simply because of the fact that they used modern arms and contemporary means of communication,” but rather because they “were immersed, like any of us, in the processes of history and of modernity, trapped in the world flow of commercial goods and consumption” (2007: 255-56).

As an example of more normative concept of modernity, one can cite Juergens Habermas claim that an ideal essence of the project of modernity can be found in three of its normative characteristics: “The project of modernity as it was formulated by the philosophers of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century consists in the relentless development of the objectivating sciences, of the universalistic foundations of morality and law, and of autonomous art, all in accord with their own immanent logic” (1997: 45). In other words, modernity is founded on science and technology; the creation of states that grant equal legal rights to their entire population, now considered citizens; and the idea of art for art’s sake (not just as a medium for religious, social or political messages). Habermas admits that we have lost much of our optimism about these norms in the twentieth century, but insists that “we should learn from the aberrations which have
accompanied the project of modernity … rather than abandoning modernity and its project” (ibid.: 51).

In my own opinion, neither strategy for defining or identifying the overall nature of modernity can help us much understand the development of the modern secular state. The descriptive strategy for analyzing modernity ends up making everything in the modern world “modern,” a virtual tautology in which nothing in the modern world can be said to not be modern. The normative strategy, on the other hand, is plagued by the arbitrary nature of its identifications of what are the essential characteristics (or norms) of modernity. Most advocates of either strategy, however, would probably agree that the secular state is something typical of modernity, perhaps even one of modernity’s most important features.

Rather than arguing about what is modern and what is not modern or about how to define what is and what is not a secular state, those who wish to support the creation of contemporary states that maintain at least minimally secular policies can often find strong support for their position in premodern historical precedents. But these precedents must be well chosen. In the case of India, the secularism-like projects of the third-century B.C. emperor Asoka and of the sixteenth-century A.D. emperor Akbar are well-known examples that have often been invoked by modernizing Indian nationalist intellectuals such as Romila Thapar and Amartya Sen.

As an example of such views, consider the following comment by Sen about Akbar (2005: 274):

Taking note of the denominational diversity of Indians (including Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jains, Sikhs, Parsees, Jews and others), he laid the foundations
of the secularism and religious neutrality of the state which he insisted must ensure that ‘no man should be interfered with on account of religion, and anyone is to be allowed to go over to a religion that pleases him’. Akbar’s thesis that ‘the pursuit of reason’ rather than ‘reliance on tradition’ is the way to address difficult social problems is a view that has become all the more important for the world today.

The appeal to the religious tolerance of Asoka and Akbar as important premodern and precolonial precedents for the policies of religious tolerance and legal equality common (virtually by definition) to modern secular states seems to me to be quite appropriate and useful, even if the claims sometimes sound a little anachronistic. When we come to the use of Kabir as an ideal precedent for the same sort of religious neutrality and tolerance, however, there are some serious problems.

As noted, the religious poet Kabir has often been identified as a precursor of the modern ideas about religious harmony between Hindus and Muslims, as a figure whose views can be used to support the secularism project. Specifically I want to examine the plausibility of arguments of those such as Amartya Sen who claims that Kabir, like Asoka and Akbar, promoted proto-modern, secular-like views about the proper relations between Hindus and Muslims and between the State and religious institutions. My own view is that despite the undoubtedly well-intentioned motives of Sen and others who support this claim, Kabir’s own statements cannot be convincingly said to support harmony among religions on the practical level of relations among religious institutions, except perhaps as an indirect byproduct of Kabir’s strong opinions about the ultimate irrelevance and uselessness of such institutions.
Perhaps single most important idea that nationalist intellectuals in India have invoked in order to support the idea of the secular state and to oppose the idea of separate Hindu and Muslim nations has been the claim that the dominant cultural traditions of India have long been composite, a more or less harmonious blend of Hindu and Muslim, or Indian and Persian, cultures. An adequate discussion of this composite Hindu-Muslim/Indo-Persian culture would, of course require more space than is available. Here I can only note that there is, in fact, little doubt that such a composite culture did develop in Mughal India and has been a key element of Indian culture up until today. What can be questioned, however, is the extent to which this composite culture has been dominant in India and to what extent it coexisted with more closed and mutually hostile Hindu and Muslim cultural formations and other formations largely critical of both. It is in this last category, I think, that Kabir is best placed. This set of questions today represents a dangerous third rail of Indian historiography and differing views about these questions tend to divide historians into mutually hostile camps. Given the political implications, this is not surprising, but it is unfortunate nonetheless.

The first modern nationalist intellectuals to extol this composite Hindu-Muslim/Indo-Persian culture and the role played by Kabir and other bhakti saints in it wrote during the second, third and fourth decades of the twentieth century. Among these early proponents of the positive role of Kabir in founding this composite culture were and Kshiti Mohan Sen, in his *Medieval Mysticism of India* (1929); Dr. Tara Chand, in his *The Influence of Islam on Hindu Culture* (1936); Dr. P. D. Barthwal (in his *Nirguna School of Hindi Poetry* (1936); and Jawaharlal Nehru, in his *The Discovery of India* (1946). Also
relevant in this context is the early collection of translations into English of some of Kabir’s songs into English by Rabindranath Tagore, first published in 1915.

Barthwal’s 1936 text can serve as a good example of the role of bhakti (and Sufi) poets in fostering the composite culture idea. After introducing the conflicts introduced by the presence of Islam in medieval India, Barthwal comments (1978: 8):

Fortunately, there were men in both the races, who viewed this state of things with grave concern. They realized that the Moslems had come to stay and that the Hindus could not be made extinct by either Conversion or slaughter. That the Hindus and Moslems should remain like good and peaceful neighbours, was clearly the need of the moment and these men of broad vision realized it as clearly. The renunciates of both the races, who were above all race-prejudice and looked beyond the immediate gains and losses, pains and pleasures and sorrows and joys, felt it the most.

About Kabir himself, Barthwal says the following (ibid.: 15):

The new point of view found its full expression in Kabir, who, though born of Moslem parents, had spent much of his time in the company of the Hindu Sadhus and had learnt his lessons in Vedanta at the feet of Ramananda and those in Sufism in the association of Saikh Taqi. In him [Kabir] both Vedanta and Sufism joined hands to proclaim that God is one and imageless, that he is not to be found in rituals and forms which are but veils of falsehood hiding Him from us, but is to be realized as one with us being enshrined in our own hearts, and forming the substance in all
that exists. And Bitterness of the preliminary controversies apart, there was nothing in the new thought, against which the sense of a Hindu or that of a Moslem could reasonably revolt.

The principal problem with all attempts to describe Kabir as a person who fostered a relatively harmonious Hindu-Muslim or Indo-Persianate culture is that Kabir frequently and quite incisively criticizes both Muslim and Hindu beliefs and practices. One can argue—as I have done elsewhere—that Kabir is looking towards a mystical experience in which distinctions of religious allegiance are completely irrelevant, but this does not change the fact that Kabir clearly rejects much of both Islam and Hindu religion. In the circumstances, to make him into a proponent of a Hindu-Muslim composite culture and religion is simply not plausible.

Amartya Sen’s grandfather, Kshitimohan Sen, in his *Medieval Mysticism of India* (1929), was in general quite cautious about making openly political comments about the religious figures discussed in this book. Nonetheless he does note that “Kabir never accepted the meaningless formalism either of the Hindu or of the Mahomedan society. With an uncommon power he dealt his blows against the false practices of his times” (1974: 95).

The full exposition of the idea of a composite Hindu-Muslim/Indo-Persian culture is found, perhaps for the first time, in Jawaharlal Nehru’s *The Discovery of India* (1946). In this book he refers to the attempt made in the medieval Muslim state of Jaunpur “to bring about a synthesis between the religious faiths of the Hindus and Moslems” and then continues (1960: 145):
All over India this new ferment was working and new ideas were troubling people’s minds. As of old, India was subconsciously reacting to the new situation [i.e., the creation of states governed by Muslim sultans], trying to absorb the foreign element and herself changing somewhat in the process. Out of this ferment arose new types of reformers who deliberately preached this synthesis and often condemned or ignored the case system. There was the Hindu Ramanand in the south [more correctly, in the north], in the fifteenth century, and his still more famous disciple Kabir, a Moslem weaver of Benares.

At some point, Kabir acquired the epithet of “the Apostle of Hindu-Muslim unity”. I should be able to identify who first coined this phrase but have to confess that I am still not sure. I suspect it may well have been one of the early twentieth-century British missionary scholars such as J. N. Farquhar. In any case, the phrase was more recently incorporated into the title of a not particularly good book about Kabir, *Kabir: The Apostle of Hindu-Muslim Unity*, written by Muhammad Hedayetullah and published in 1977. In his preface, Hedayetullah says this about Kabir (1977: xiii-xiv):

He was not only a true product of the interaction of Hindu-Muslim ideas, but also a sincere ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity. By preaching a new spirituality, he not only disregarded the formal religions of Hinduism and Islam, which he considered merely man-made, he also struggled to unite the two communities by a new piety which would not discriminate between them either religiously or socially....
Denouncing all religious formalisms, he preached a new religious universalism in an attempt to resolve the tensions that had prevailed between the two communities for so many centuries.

When we get to more recent times, this idea of the composite Indo-Persian culture and Kabir’s role in fostering some sort of Hindu-Muslim synthesis becomes a commonplace for virtually all Indian intellectuals with the notable exception of Hindu nationalists. I will cite just one prominent example. Amartya Sen, in his much read essay anthology, *The Argumentative Indian*, mentions Kabir repeatedly. Here is one of his comments (2005: 19):

A similar commitment to accepting—and exalting—diversity can be seen in many other writing, from the prose and poetry of Amir Khusrau, a Muslim scholar and poet in the fourteenth century, to the rich culture of non-sectarian religious poetry which flourished from around that time, drawing on both Hindu (particularly Bhakti) and Muslim (particularly Sufi) traditions. Indeed, interreligious tolerance is a persistent them in the poetry of Kabir, Dadu, Ravi-das, Sena and others....

What is wrong with this claim that Kabir promoted either “Hindu-Muslim unity” (Hedayetullah) or, somewhat more modestly, at least “interreligious tolerance” (Amartya Sen)? When we get to the specific case of Kabir, what the proponents of his role as an “Apostle of Hindu-Muslim unity” or a proponent of “interreligious tolerance” forget or willingly overlook one quite obvious fact. This is that Kabir attacks, with notable ferocity,
most of the religious practices of both Hindus and Muslims. The claim often made is that these attacks are simply attacks against the formalisms and essentially useless rituals of these religions in the name of some broader and more tolerant vision of what a proper religious life should be. Kabir’s religion, it is said, is more internal, interior, individualistic, and universalistic. This argument undoubtedly does have some plausibility, but in my opinion it fails to adequately recognize the acute hostility evident in Kabir’s criticisms of both religions. Take the following song, found in one of the earlier (and hence more authentic) collections of Kabir’s compositions, a song that attacks the Muslims for slaughtering and eating cows (Kabir-granthavali, ram. 5.4.):

We have searched the Turk’s religion (turakii dharam).
These teachers throw many thunderbolts.
Recklessly they display boundless pride.
While explaining their own aims, they kill cows.
How can they kill the mother
Whose milk they drink like that of a wet-nurse?
The young and the old drink milk pudding,
But these fools eat the cow’s body.

*These morons know nothing. They wander about in ignorance.*

*Without looking into one’s heart, how can one reach paradise?*
Kabir’s attacks against Hindu practices, particularly those associated with caste customs, are almost as aggressive. Here is part of another song from an early collection (Kabir-granthavali, ram. 5. 5.):

The pandits have gone astray studying and pondering the Vedas,
Lost in many secrets they do not find their own selves.
Absorbed in their daily prayers, sacrificial libations,
And the six ritual acts, they stay in their ashrams.
They have imparted the Gayatri mantra throughout the four ages,
But go and ask if any have attained salvation.
Ram is found immanent in everyone, but they purify themselves.
Tell me, who is lower than these?

With such songs can Kabir really be said to be promoting a composite Hindu-Muslim culture or interreligious tolerance?

Moreover, according to Kabir, it is not only the ritual actions of Hindus and Muslims that are worthless, their religious books, the Vedas and the Koran, are equally worthless. Here is a song that appears both in the Kabir-bijak and in the Kabir-granthavali (Kabir-bijak, ram. 39 [Callewaert 1991]; Kabir-granthavali, ram. ashtapadi 3 [Kabir 1969]):

He who taught the Muslim creed (kalamam) in the Kali age
Was unable to seek out the power of the creation.
According to karma, the actor performs his actions.

The Vedas and Muslim books are all worthless.

According to karma, one became an avatar in the world.

According to karma, one fixed the Muslim prayers.

According to karma, circumcision or the sacred thread.

Neither the Hindu nor the Turk knows the secret.

Water and air were joined together,

All this turmoil was created.

When surati is absorbed in the Void,

On what basis can our caste be told?

What Kabir clearly says in these songs is not that both religions lead to the same
goal, but rather that true religious experience totally transcends, and ultimately negates, the
doctrines and practices of any specific historical religion. This idea is, in fact, probably the
most frequent and dominant idea found in all early collections of Kabir’s compositions. In
Kabir, God or the Absolute or the Supreme Spirit is finally identified with the religious
subject’s mental experience of a unique, non-temporal and non-sensorial consciousness.

How can we take this experience as equivalent to a plea for religious harmony and
tolerance? To my mind the logical conclusion is rather that Kabir had little or no use for
everyday religious institutions and everyday religious customs and allegiances whatsoever.

To say otherwise is to distort history in favor of some contemporary historical project. The
secular state is to my mind clearly a worthy ideal, but Kabir’s contributions to this ideal are
dubious at best, however much we may otherwise love his poetry and his ideas.
Works Cited


