

## The Making of Indian Secularism: Empire, Law and Christianity

**Review Number:** 1128

**Publish date:** Thursday, 1 September, 2011

**Author:** Nandini Chatterjee

**ISBN:** 9780230220058

**Date of Publication:** 2011

**Price:** £65.00

**Pages:** 320pp.

**Publisher:** Palgrave Macmillan

**Place of Publication:** New York, NY

**Reviewer:** Chandra Mallampalli

Since the 1980s, secularism in India has been a topic of heated contestation. Advocates for a Hindu nation deride what they call 'pseudo-secularism', claiming that it privileges Muslim and Christian minorities against the interests of India's Hindu majority. Religious minorities, however, consistently appeal to India's secular constitution to secure their rights. But how exactly is secularism defined in a region as religiously diverse as India? Scholars often point to India's distinctive interpretation of secularism. Instead of connoting the removal of religion from public life or the 'strict wall of separation' of religion and state, Indian secularism, they say, ensures the state's equal support for or equidistance from all religions.

This distinction, widely noted as it is, does little to explain the history that produced Indian secularism. This volume seeks to provide such a history. Nandini Chatterjee brings a new set of players into the story, namely, Christians. She contends that Christians in India, as small in number as they are, 'played a disproportionately significant role in shaping Indian secularism, under the specific conditions created by British imperial rule ...' (p. 2). Focusing chiefly on the role of Protestant missionaries and their converts, the book crosses a vast terrain in which Christians made their mark on the meaning of Indian secularism. This includes the realms of education, personal laws, endowments and politics.

These venues clearly generated debates about the state's role in religious matters. In some instances, Christians advocated state withdrawal from religious affairs (for instance, from the state's management of Hindu charitable endowments, pp. 59–61), while in others they advocated greater involvement (as with religious education). But were such episodes an essential aspect of an 'Indian history of secularism' (p. 5)? Following important trends in Indian historiography, Chatterjee attempts to trace local routes to secularism without imbibing into the idea that secularism is derived from Europe's history. But this is a tall order, considering the book's heavy focus on Protestant Christianity. In the author's view, what exactly constitutes a *local* history of secularism in India, and how does she build the case that Protestantism profoundly shaped it?

There is, of course, a history of secularism in India that predates British rule. Patterns of state building that involved eclectic, cross-confessional alliances were a central aspect of Indo-Islamic state building and bear elements of the secularism championed by the modern Indian state. Chatterjee touches on Mughal practices in her treatment of Christian personal laws (pp. 85–8). The book's opening discussion of secularism,

however, could have done a better job of referencing pre-colonial practices that may also be termed 'secular'.

An important contribution of the book concerns policies surrounding mission colleges in India, in particular, the prestigious St. Stephen's College in New Delhi. In recent years, St. Stephen's has been in the news because of attempts by its current principal, Valson Thampu, to re-assert the college's Christian roots. As a Minority Educational Institution (MEI), St. Stephen's can claim a degree of regulatory authority over its own affairs and its admission policies; but as an institution that receives state funds, it cannot impart religious instruction to its students and is entitled to reserve up to half of its admissions for Christian students.

Chatterjee first describes the origins of the college in the Anglican Cambridge Brotherhood and how the college later emerged as 'the leading public school of India' (p. 113), albeit, one having little to do with Christian instruction and having relatively few Christian students. Her book locates the story of St. Stephen's within a longer history of educational controversy in British India tracing back to the early 19th century. At issue were the relationship between mission colleges and the colonial state, and whether these colleges should be able to impart religious instruction to non-Christian students seeking a secular education. The first chapter of the book describes these controversies in some detail. It pays special attention to educational entrepreneurs, their religious agendas, and how, under the sway of utilitarianism, the colonial state employed their services to promote the public good.

The trajectory of St. Stephen's from its original Christian vision to a college with elite status, but having little to do with Christianity is not unique to India. George Marsden has explored a similar path taken by America's Ivy League schools in *The Soul of the American University*.<sup>(1)</sup> This book describes a steady decline of religious influence among universities that once called themselves 'Christian'. Chatterjee does bring a comparative dimension to her study, but it is focused, understandably, on concurrent educational policies of Britain and India.

The chapter on St. Stephen's College (chapter four) and the scaffolding provided by her earlier treatment of educational controversies (chapter one) could have provided a tangible and innovative launching point for an exploration of Christians and secularism in India. In fact, had the author merely offered an institutional history of St. Stephen's, she would have made a most timely and original contribution to the field. The author, however, was far more ambitious than this. Her book covers a wide range of topics, some of which have been treated extensively in previous work. Instead of bringing her main argument into sharper focus, the breadth of the study has had the effect of diluting its core ideas and diminishing the book's coherence.

It is no easy task for an historian to present a new argument based on sources as heavily consulted as those from which Chatterjee draws. To avoid redundancy, an author must draw new insights from already consulted material or make fresh claims about old topics. She may judiciously distinguish her work from previous contributions with reasoned arguments. Another path, though, is to dismiss the work of others with a sentence or two or simply relegate them to endnotes without engaging them in any depth. Regrettably, Chatterjee's book tilts toward the latter. Chatterjee, for instance, states 'it is *my argument* in [italics added] that to understand British response to Indian religions, it is important to remain aware of the evolving relationship between the Church of England with the British nation-state, a process, we might say, that created 'Anglicans' as a religious community comparable to Methodists, Baptists, Catholics and so on' (p. 16). She adopts this comparative lens for her discussion of both education and personal law.

It was Gauri Viswanathan, however, who had long before Chatterjee stressed the importance of reading modern Indian and British histories together, especially when discussing religious minorities and secular nationhood. Employing Edward Said's notion of a 'cross-current' and adopting his suggestion that we read histories 'contrapuntally', Viswanathan explored laws in England that endowed religious minorities with citizenship and educational policies in India that helped incorporate Indian subjects into the imperial regime. Both, according to Viswanathan, belonged to the single, colonizing project of secular nationhood.<sup>(2)</sup> In light of the striking parity to her own aims, one might expect Chatterjee to have engaged with Viswanathan more

extensively, but instead she dismisses Viswanathan's work in a sentence (p. 76).

In her discussion of personal laws, Chatterjee highlights the tension between a universal law (anchored in beliefs about natural law) and religious laws. She ties the story of Christians in India to a quest for the universal, which ultimately retreated into claims of a particular community. 'The historical role of the Indian Christians', she writes, 'was not just to expose the hollowness of the unsubstantiated universal but also to incite a quest for making it more substantive' (p. 94). The novelty of Chatterjee's contributions to this discussion lies in her careful treatment of 18th-century developments and the transition from Mughal to East India Company legal frameworks. Her chapter begins by discussing how European belief in a universal law grew increasingly unstable as commercial empires confronted peoples of other races and creeds in the colonies. Should colonial regimes allow 'natives' to observe their own customs and laws? If so, how would information be gathered to discern the content of those laws? Race and religion interacted in ways that vexed colonial officials, especially when members of a race did not adhere to their presumed religion or law.

The question of which law to apply to 'native Christians' was particularly troublesome. Because of their radically diverse practices and because their doctrine taught no personal law, formulating laws of marriage or inheritance was no simple task. Whereas colonial officials had been envisioning laws for marriage, divorce and inheritance for decades, they did not consolidate Christian personal laws until after the Rebellion of 1857 and the establishment of the High Courts in 1862 (whereby Company and Crown courts were integrated).

In my own work, I have explained the establishment of a Christian body of personal laws in terms of the colonial state's quest for legal uniformity and stability. An official knowledge about conversion and about an Indian Christian community sought to address the legal ambiguity of India's Christian population (unlike Hindus and Muslims, they had no personal law). This official knowledge was tied not only to laws of marriage, inheritance, etc., but also to understandings derived from case law.<sup>(3)</sup> Ultimately, Christian laws of marriage, divorce and inheritance came to be modeled after English law on account of the belief that Christianity was a European religion. I did not conclude, as Chatterjee claims, that the creation of Christian personal laws was 'arbitrary' (76).

Indian Christians in the Madras Presidency often objected to the heavy-handed enforcement of laws of inheritance (1865) and marriage (1872). The 'fiction' invented by the British was that of a monolithic Christian community in India that was intrinsically tied to European civilization. While colonial courts applied Hindu laws more flexibly because of the plurality of castes, they applied Christian laws more rigidly, with rare concessions to local custom. The British allowed certain Muslim communities (e.g., Khojas, Memons, and Bohras) to continue to practice the Hindu law of inheritance, often to the detriment of women in those communities. Contrary to what Chatterjee suggests (p. 76), they could have made similar concessions to certain groups of Christians who continued to observe local inheritance practices.

Chatterjee indicates that from the 18th century, Christians of colonial India claimed distinct inheritance laws as their religious right. It is somewhat odd that this observation would become an occasion for Chatterjee to distinguish her work from mine (p. 77). My work begins in 1863 as stated on the front cover. What can be gathered from both studies is that there were some Christians who wanted personal laws of their own and others who did not like the ones that were eventually applied to them. What we both seem to agree on is that most Christians were in legal limbo until the latter part of the 19th century (p. 94). Whereas Chatterjee, in the interest of a local history, may wish to portray these laws as a response to demands from below, I stress the top-down aspect of marriage and inheritance laws and objections to their enforcement.

In the last section of her book, Chatterjee develops the concept of Christian citizenship. This section discusses theological and political ideas that framed Christian relations to the colonial state and to the nationalist movement. It features the roles of leaders such as K. T. Paul, S. K. Datta, A.T. Pannirselvam, and a cluster of theologians who comprised what was known as the 'Rethinking Group'. Chatterjee should be credited for taking theological ideas seriously in explaining the political posture of Christians. Had this

been a study of Indian Muslims, it would be fitting to explore how Muslims were interpreting *millat* (local community), *quam* (nation), and *mazhab* (faith) in the context of Indian nationalism. It only makes sense that Christian notions of the church, political authority, and salvation would be explored in chapters seven and eight.

This material draws heavily from reports of the Indian Statutory Commission, the All India Conference of Indian Christians (AICC), the Indian Roundtable Conferences (1930–2), and Christian newspapers. These comprise a heavily picked over archive resulting in no small number of theses stacked on the shelves of Union Theological College in Bangalore and articles published in the *Indian Church History Review*. Chatterjee has done well to redirect this material to secular audiences (that word again). Still, the material has been amply discussed elsewhere and dilutes the book's core themes.

In sum, *The Making of Indian Secularism* makes some important contributions to the study of secularism and that of embattled mission schools such as St. Stephen's. The book needed a better job of editing to correct typos and the occasional awkward or paragraph length sentence (pp. 8, 14, 218). The book, moreover, moves back and forth between the theme of Indian secularism and multiple venues of Christian engagement and reflection, some seeming more relevant than others to the book's main premise. The relationship of fulfillment theology, for instance, to the shaping of Indian secularism is less than evident. Chatterjee does well to point out that Christians did plead for a universal principle of governance under which they could thrive as a community. The connections to secularism in each chapter, however, needed to be drawn out more clearly and explicitly. The author, after all, claims that Christians *shaped* Indian secularism, and did not merely appeal to or reflect it. Greater focus on a single venue of Christian intervention, such as the mission college, would have served readers better than the comprehensive undertaking of this book. Still, enough flashes of insight emerge from the chapters to enrich ongoing debates.

## Notes

1. George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York, NY, 1994).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity and Belief* (Princeton, NJ, 1998).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Chandra Mallampalli, *Christians and Public Life in Colonial India: Contending with Marginality* (London, 2004).[Back to \(3\)](#)

---

**Source URL:** <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1128>

## Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/7768>