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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Was Aśoka really a secularist *avant-la-lettre*? Ancient Indian pluralism and toleration in historical perspective

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Abstract

Focusing on Rajeev Bhargava's claim that Aśoka was a secularist *avant-la-lettre*, I dispute the common understanding of secularism as the separation of religion and politics, and argue instead that such separation, to the extent that it existed, was characteristic of traditional religious societies. I then offer an alternative history of secularism as the demise of the traditional balance of power between church and state, and the rise of a unitary state which incorporated a civil religion that excluded competing forms of religiosity within its domain. This model of secularism, exemplified by the seventeenth-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, fits Aśoka's Dhamma better than the separationist model does.

Keywords: Aśoka; Rajeev Bhargava; Thomas Hobbes; secularism; toleration

Introduction

This article intervenes in contemporary debates about whether the third-century BCE Mauryan emperor Aśoka, who advocated religious toleration, can be described appropriately as a secularist. The first part reviews these debates as well as the limited evidence concerning Aśoka's policy of toleration. The second part redescribes the history of religious toleration in Europe in order to clarify what we ought to mean by both 'secularism' and 'civil religion', both of which have been applied to Aśoka's Dhamma. The third and final part returns to consider some evidence that tends to show that Aśoka, if he can indeed be described as a secularist at all, was closer to the Hobbesian

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variety, in the sense that he advocated Dhamma as a universal ethic or civil religion within the context of a state establishment of religion.

Aśoka as both lens and projection screen for contemporary debates over secularism

The third-century BCE Mauryan emperor Aśoka (r. 268–232 BCE) has attracted attention since the discovery of his numerous epigraphic remains that are scattered throughout his ancient kingdom as well as at its boundaries. The Mauryan dynasty (322–185 BCE) was the first real imperial formation to span the subcontinent, and it included a diversity of languages and cultures, including religious cultures. Partly for this reason, Aśoka has been an example for a diverse, independent, and united India—in fact, the wheel or *dharmacakra* from his lion pillar at Sarnath served as an inspiration for the modern Indian flag. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India, felt a special connection to him.[1] This was true despite the fact that, while Nehru was committed to a secular Indian state, Aśoka supported the growth and development of Buddhism through a range of policies, described his own conversion to that religion after experiencing regret at his bloody conquest of the Kalinga region, and has gone down in legend as the archetype of a Buddhist ruler.[2] To this day, secular liberal thinkers in India often draw a straight line from Aśoka to Nehru, one that is traced through Akbar.[3]

The connection between Aśoka's religiously pluralist but Buddhist-influenced empire and contemporary India is reinforced by the evident parallel between the two states in terms of their geographic range and unity-in-diversity. It is supported also by the shared endeavour to negotiate and harmonize such pluralism through a robust doctrine of religious toleration. Aśoka's edicts called for members of all religions (*pāṣaṇḍas*) to be welcome throughout his empire, declared that members of different religions should exhibit restraint in speech and not insult other traditions, and articulated a universal ethic of Dhamma that, while it may not be specifically Buddhist,[4] shares with that tradition an emphasis on nonviolence and social welfare.

Aśoka's reputation as a proponent of toleration rests primarily upon a few inscriptions.

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[1] As Ananya Vajpeyi states: 'What Nehru sought, in the Aśokan and Mauryan materials … were not the historical relics of an ancient Buddhist empire, but ways to represent and communicate the kind of nation he was hoping to build as the leader of free India': Ananya Vajpeyi, *The righteous republic: the political foundations of modern India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 40; see also pp. 170, 184–203.

[2] John Strong, *The legend of King Aśoka: a study and translation of the Aśokāvadāna* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 15.

[3] Amartya Sen, *The argumentative Indian* (New York: Picador, 2005), p. 16.

[4] See Romila Thapar, *Early India: from the origins to AD 1300* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 179–80: '*dhamma* was rendered by some scholars as the teaching of the Buddha and by others as a more general concern for ethical behavior. Its translation into Greek as *eusebia* would tend to support the second meaning. There is interestingly no reference to the teachings of the Buddha in the Greek and Aramaic versions.'

Rock Edict 7 states:

> Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi [he of blessed view], desires that all religions should reside everywhere, for all of them desire self-control and purity of heart.[5]

Rock Edict 12 states:

> Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, honors both ascetics and the householders of all religions… But [he] … does not value gifts and honors as much as he values this—that there should be growth in the essentials of all religions. Growth in essentials can be done in different ways, but all of them have as their root restraint in speech [*vacaguti*], that is, not praising one's own religion, or condemning the religion of others without good cause … Whoever praises his own religion, due to excessive devotion, and condemns others with the thought 'Let me glorify my own religion,' only harms his own religion. Therefore contact (between religions) is good.

These policies went beyond mere toleration.[6] They included active support of different religious groups. Much as Akbar would do later with his policy of Sulh-i Kull, as described in Moin's framework article in this special issue, Aśoka promoted a diversity of persuasions and respectful discussion among members of different religions.[7]

An interesting question concerns the meaning of the term *pāṣaṇḍa* (*pāṣaṃḍa*/*praṣaṃḍa*), which is usually translated as 'religion' or 'sect' and refers to different traditions of discipline or asceticism as well as to different worldviews.[8] Romila Thapar notes that *pāṣaṇḍa* in the Aśokan edicts 'referred only to philosophical and religious sects or doctrines', yet subsequently acquired pejorative connotations, similar to the English 'sectarian'.[9] In Greek versions of the inscriptions, this term is rendered as *diatribe*.[10] Another general term for religions is the compound *brāhmaṇa-śramaṇa*, which refers to the distinct groups of Brahmans, or householders, and *Śramaṇas*, or ascetics, including Jains, Ājīvikas, and Buddhists.

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[5] I have used Ven. S. Dhammika (trans.), *The edicts of King Aśoka* (Buddhist Publication Society, 1994). https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/dhammika/wheel386.html, [accessed 13 July 2021].

[6] Rajeev Bhargava, 'The roots of Indian pluralism: a reading of the Aśokan edicts', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 41, 2015, pp. 367–81 at pp. 377–78.

[7] Ibid., p. 373.

[8] Joel Brereton, 'Pāṣaṇḍa: religious communities in the Aśokan inscriptions and early literature', in *Gṛhastha: the householder in ancient Indian religious culture*, (ed.) Patrick Olivelle (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 20–42; Oliver Freiberger, 'Religion und Religionen in der Konstruktion des frühen Buddhismus', in *Religion in Asien?: Studien zur Anwendbarkeit des Religionsbegriffs*, (eds) Peter Schalk et al. (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 2013), pp. 15–41. Gustav Roth, 'Vergleichende Beobachtungen zu Aśokas Felsenedikt XIII', in *Expanding and merging horizons: contributions to South Asian and cross-cultural studies in commemoration of Wilhelm Halbfass*, (ed.) Karin Preisendanz (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences, 2007), pp. 143–66, is also useful on this and other Aśokan terms discussed below.

[9] Romila Thapar, *Cultural pasts: essays in early Indian history* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 459; see also pp. 223–24. Brereton, 'Pāṣaṇḍa', p. 28.

Rock Edict 13 states:

> There is no country, except among the Greeks, where these two groups, Brahmans and ascetics, are not found, and there is no country where people are not devoted to one or another religion.

Aśoka understood religions (*pāṣaṇḍa*) as something found in every society.[11] The term *pāṣaṇḍa* presumably extended also to materialists and sceptics, such as were known to exist in those days in both India and Greece. A related term that is found in Aśoka's edicts is 'Dhamma', which was rendered in Greek versions as *eusebia*, meaning 'piety'.[12] Dhamma was a polyvalent term in Buddhism and Hinduism; it could refer to specific teachings or to a more general concept of righteousness. Aśoka used it to describe the ethics of his empire, as well as the ethics of different religions. The content and meaning of Aśoka's Dhamma is discussed further below.[13]

A number of contemporary scholars have invoked Aśoka as the representative of a tradition of religious toleration that may be uniquely Indian, although, as described by some of its contemporary interpreters, it also bears affinities with our ideals of democratic deliberation. His policies anticipated modern notions of civil discourse between members of different religious groups, such as those affirmed by John Locke[14] or by Section 295A of the Indian Penal Code.[15] The example of a powerful ruler who embraced Buddhism and nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*), and tolerated different sects in a diverse and polyglot empire is indeed appealing and worthy of reflection. This may explain why Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum, and Gary Jacobsohn, among others, have drawn a parallel between Aśoka's empire and contemporary India.[16] Some, such as Sen, even go so far as to label this 'secularism':

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[10] Thapar, *Cultural pasts*, pp. 224, 459.

[11] Brereton, 'Pāṣaṇḍa', p. 38; Freiberger, 'Religion und Religionen', pp. 35–36.

[12] Thapar, *Cultural pasts*, p. 429. See also Nayanjot Lahiri, *Ashoka in ancient India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), who suggests important semantic differences between the two terms.

[13] Freiberger, 'Religion und Religionen', p. 34, argues that this is not the same as the Buddhist Dharma, but denotes a general ethical scheme or moral legal order ('ein bestimmtes allgemein-ethisches Programm, das Gustav Roth als "sittliche Rechtsordnung" bezeichnet hat').

[14] See Teresa Bejan, *Mere civility: disagreement and the limits of toleration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

[15] Indian Penal Code section 295A: 'Deliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings or any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs.—Whoever, with deliberate and malicious intention of outraging the religious feelings of any class of citizens of India, by words, either spoken or written, or by signs or by visible representations or otherwise, insults or attempts to insult the religion or the religious beliefs of that class, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to three years, or with fine, or with both.' https://cis-india.org/internet-governance/resources/section-295a-indian-penal-code, [accessed 13 July 2021].

> It was indeed a Buddhist emperor of India, Ashoka, who, in the third century BCE, not only outlined the need for toleration and the richness of heterodoxy, but also laid down what are perhaps the oldest rules for conducting debates and disputations… The contemporary relevance of the dialogic tradition and of the acceptance of heterodoxy is hard to exaggerate… The long history of heterodoxy has a bearing not only on the development and survival of democracy in India, it has also richly contributed, I would argue, to the emergence of secularism in India, and even to the form that Indian secularism takes, which is not exactly the same as the way secularism is defined in parts of the West.[17]

Sen is not alone in this conclusion, and is joined by such scholars as Romila Thapar.[18] One of the strongest proponents of this idea has been the political philosopher Rajeev Bhargava, who claims Aśoka, with some caveats, as a forerunner of a distinctively Indian style of secularism, one that is tolerant and neutral with respect to the different religions in the nation.[19] Rather than a strict separation between religion and politics, as in the case of American secularism, or an exclusion of religion from the public sphere, as in the case of French secularism or *laïcité*, Bhargava argues that 'the subcontinental or Indian model [of secularism that is] found loosely in the best moments of intercommunal practice in India and in the country's constitution appropriately interpreted' promotes a form of 'principled distance' between the state and the various religions that, however, 'does not erect a wall of separation' between these.[20] India exemplifies a secular state that goes beyond mere toleration of the different religious traditions, while treating each of these equally, a principle that has been referred to as *sarva-dharma-samabhāva*.[21] Of course, this cannot mean that there was an unbroken tradition extending more than two millennia which remained intact throughout the colonial period and that survives to the present day. We must therefore understand this as a claim that, given the underlying conditions of Indian pluralism, Aśoka's Dhamma has continuing value as a model for social organization. The attraction of such an indigenous model for contemporary India, and indeed for many other modern states in which communal violence attributed to religion is a problem, is self-evident. For this reason, not only historians and philologists but also philosophers and political theorists concerned to defend the modern settlement in favour of religious toleration and the religious neutrality of the state have reflected intensively on Aśoka's example.

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[16] Martha Nussbaum, *The clash within: democracy, religious violence, and India's future* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), p. 7: 'We forget that ideas of religious toleration and equal respect were well known in India by the time of Ashoka's empire, in the third century B.C.E., a very long time before they were known in Europe'; see also p. 228. Gary Jeffrey Jacobsohn, *The wheel of law: India's secularism in comparative constitutional context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 8, 13–14.

[17] Sen, *The argumentative Indian*, pp. xii–xiii, 16; see also pp. 19–20, describing Indian secularism as a form of neutrality towards different religions.

[18] For the historical context, see Romila Thapar, 'Dissent and protest in the early Indian tradition', in her *Cultural pasts*, pp. 212–34. Thapar takes a generally balanced view of the degree of toleration as well as controversy and dissent in ancient India; see especially ibid., pp. 975, 1018 (where Aśoka appears), 1020 and 1041. However, she does not refrain from drawing a parallel to contemporary secularism: 'although it differs from our pre-colonial past, such a secularizing is not an attempt at alienating ourselves from our tradition, since the pre-colonial past has, in ample measure, ideas and institutions conducive to the secular. … To speak of secularism as a western concept superimposed on India is historically incorrect, for it is not confined to the question of the relations between religion and the state derived from the experience of the Christian Church.' See also Romila Thapar, 'Ashoka: a retrospective', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 44, no. 45, 2009, pp. 31–37 at pp. 32, 37; Ranbir Singh and Karamvir Singh, 'Secularism in India: challenges and its future', *Indian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 69, no. 3, 2008, pp. 597–607 at p. 603. Jacobsohn, *The wheel of law*, p. 8, accepts Thapar's characterization of Aśoka's Dhamma as a 'secular teaching'. Bruce Rich, *To uphold the world: a call for a new global ethic from ancient India* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), refers to Aśoka's Dhamma as 'a state, secular ethic of nonviolence and reverence for life' (p. xiv) and 'a practical, secular social ethic quite distinct from Buddhist doctrine' (p. 17); see also p. 97. For a caustic takedown of Rich's popularizing and sanguine approach to Aśoka, see Federico Squarcini, 'Selling tolerance by the pound: on ideal types' fragility, Aśoka's edicts and the political theology of toleration in and beyond South Asia', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2019, pp. 477–92.

[19] See especially Bhargava, 'Roots', pp. 367–81; Rajeev Bhargava, 'Forms of secularity before secularism: the political morality of Aśoka and Akbar', in *Worlds of difference*, (eds) Saïd Amir Arjomand and Elisa Reis (London: SAGE, 2013), pp. 94–120; R. Bhargava, 'Beyond toleration: civility

Bhargava's account of the different varieties of secularism is nuanced and sensitive to the political, historical, and cultural contexts in which each of the varieties has organically grown up. He is concerned to refute the contention that secularism may be only a European shoot transplanted to Indian soil, where it remains alien and unproductive. This is why he has turned to native Indian models for toleration, such as Aśoka and the Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605 CE), about whom Azfar Moin writes in this special issue.[22] Given the problems of communal violence between Hindus and Muslims in contemporary India, one can only sympathize with Bhargava's defence of a secular India. Moreover, his argument that East and West have much to learn from each other is unimpeachable in its logic. Indian secularism, like its European and North American analogues, is of interest as a development of potentially broader significance. Indeed, we ought to accept Bhargava's challenge to reinterpret the Indian past, including Aśoka's empire and Dhamma, as a means to rethink secularism and to better understand and address our contemporary predicament. This is precisely what I propose to do here.

The problem is that Aśoka's legacy, like the legacy of European secularism, is ambivalent. It sends mixed messages or, if you prefer, can be read, and used,

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and principled coexistence in Aśokan edicts', in *Boundaries of toleration*, (eds) Alfred Stepan and Charles Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), pp. 173–202. These essays overlap in content.

[20] Rajeev Bhargava, 'States, religious diversity, and the crisis of secularism', *Hedgehog Review*, Fall 2010, pp. 8–22 at pp. 14–15.

[21] Thapar, 'Ashoka: a retrospective', p. 32.

[22] Romila Thapar did the same earlier in R. Thapar, *Aśoka and the decline of the Mauryas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 144.

towards different ends. On the one hand, Aśoka appears as a secularist *avant-la-lettre*, who promoted a doctrine of live-and-let-live that was diametrically opposed to any form of fundamentalism, religious or otherwise. On the other hand, Aśoka appears as an establishmentarian, a patron of the early Buddhist community, who spread the Dhamma with missionary zeal. Whereas the former Aśoka can be invoked in support of the idea of a secular India, the latter Aśoka can serve as the model for an India that would be, in accordance with the orientation of the majority of its citizens (over 80 per cent), a Hindu Rashtra, albeit of a benevolent and tolerant sort.

At first glance, it would appear absurd to label Aśoka a 'secularist'. As Ashis Nandy argues, 'when the modern Indians project the ideology of secularism into the past, to say that Emperor Aśoka was "secular," they ignore that Aśoka was not exactly a secular ruler; he was a practicing Buddhist even in his public life. He based his tolerance on Buddhism, not on secularism.'[23] Jakob de Roover has argued further that secularism in India is a European import that emerged from Christian theological discourses, such as the Two Kingdoms or Two Swords doctrine, which invented the distinction between religion and politics.[24] De Roover's views are discussed further below.

Bhargava rejects the claimed uniqueness of European secularism: 'it is frequently argued that secularism is purely a Christian, western doctrine and therefore, cannot adapt itself easily to the cultural conditions of India … This necessary link between secularism and Christianity is exaggerated, if not mistaken.'[25] His turn to Aśoka is an attempt to elaborate and demonstrate these claims.

To what extent is it appropriate to describe Aśoka as a 'secularist' *avant-la-lettre*? I am interested in exploring this question, and have no pretensions to add anything radically new to our historical understanding of Aśoka. Let me add a further caveat: I do not doubt that there are indigenous Indian precedents, Aśoka being among them, for negotiating pluralism and promoting toleration through models of civil discourse. India did not—and does not—need to be told by the West how to manage its indigenous diversity. I accept that it may be useful also for those of us who hail from other cultures to reflect upon Indian historical models. I agree with the point that Bhargava has made repeatedly—that words may always acquire or be given new meanings and applications in the course of time and that, when describing different cultures and historical periods, and using contemporary language to do so, what matters is not whether the target society possesses a matching word (in this case, an exact lexical equivalent of 'secularism') which, if taken narrowly, may be an 'anachronism' as applied to ancient India—but whether such society recognizes a similar 'conceptual space'.[26]

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[23] Ashis Nandy, 'The politics of secularism and the recovery of religious tolerance', in *Secularism in question*, (ed.) Rajeev Bhargava (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 321–44 at p. 337.

[24] Jakob de Roover, *Europe, India, and the limits of secularism* (New Delhi: Oxford, 2015). See my review: Robert Yelle, '*Europe, India and the limits of secularism*, written by Jakob De Roover', *Journal of Religion in Europe*, vol. 11, 2018, pp. 102–04, which overlaps with some of my comments below.

[25] Rajeev Bhargava, 'Indian secularism: an alternative, trans-cultural ideal', in his *The promise of India's secular democracy* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 63–105 at p. 100.

[26] Bhargava, 'Forms of secularity', p. 95; Bhargava, 'Beyond toleration', p. 174.

Aśoka's Dhamma has been described variously, not only as a form of 'secularism' or 'proto-secularism',[27] but also as a 'civil religion'[28] or 'political theology',[29] as a 'meta-religion',[30] and (by Bhargava) as a '*public* or *political* morality'.[31] It is difficult, at first glance, to reconcile all of these descriptions, although each may be true from its own perspective, just as in the story of the Blind Men and the Elephant, where the man who touched the tail thought it was a snake, the one who grasped the leg thought it was a tree, and so on. The cognitive dissonance here is a bit more direct, however, insofar as some of the most persuasive descriptions—such as the term 'civil religion'—appear *prima facie* as oxymorons that combine terms drawn from realms ordinarily regarded as fundamentally distinct, that is, from the civil or political domain, on the one hand, and from religion, on the other. The strangeness of this compound has been blunted by the currency that the term has acquired in contemporary sociology through the influence of the late Robert Bellah, who described the rituals, myths, and symbols of the modern United States as a 'civil religion'.[32] This familiar usage may actually obscure more than it illuminates, however, given the genealogy of the concept of 'civil religion' in a history of struggle between religion and secularism that goes back to Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau—that is, to the Reformation and Enlightenment, as outlined below. Briefly, within this tradition, civil religion was understood to be precisely something that was *not* separate from politics, but was regarded both as an indispensable reinforcement for the legitimacy of the state and as an ideology in competition with any other religion. In the last century, Carl Schmitt's term 'political theology' mounted a similar challenge to the claimed independence of secular liberalism from religion.[33] According to Schmitt, the modern legal state (*Rechtsstaat*) had repressed recognition of the fact that its own fundamental principles were themselves drawn from a branch of Christian theology. Secular liberalism was therefore unable to ground itself. Both the category of 'civil religion' and Schmitt's concept of 'political theology' converge, to some extent, with the Böckenförde Dilemma, named after the German constitutional judge Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde (1930–2019), who argued that liberal democracies are incapable of commanding loyalty to their first principles, since this would convert them *ipso facto* into authoritarian regimes. He therefore argued the need for something like a universal ethic to serve as the glue for such societies.[34]

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[27] Lahiri, *Ashoka*, pp. 195–96.

[28] Patrick Olivelle, 'Aśoka's inscriptions as text and ideology', in *Reimagining Aśoka: memory and history*, (eds) Patrick Olivelle, Janice Leoshko and Himanshu Prabha Ray (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 157–83 at pp. 173–74. See also Freiberger, 'Religion und Religionen', pp. 34, 37: Aśoka 'entwickelt mit dem religiösen Begriff "Dharma" ein ethisch bestimmte Gesellschaftsideologie, die als Rahmen für alle Religionen dient, und die vielleicht als eine Art Zivilreligion bestimmt werden kann.'

[29] Squarcini, 'Selling tolerance by the pound', p. 486.

[30] James W. Laine, *Meta-religion: religion and power in world history* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), p. 27.

[31] Bhargava, 'Roots', p. 371 (emphases in original).

[32] Robert Bellah, 'Civil religion in America', *Dædalus*, vol. 96, no. 1, Winter 1967, pp. 1–21.

[33] Carl Schmitt, *Political theology: four chapters on the concept of sovereignty*, (trans.) George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

Aśoka appears to have recognized and resolved such problems through his concept of a universal Dhamma that would bind together all the subjects of his domain, no matter which religious praxis they followed. Although hardly a democrat in our sense, Aśoka did confront a version of the problem faced by modern liberal states, namely how to negotiate the condition of cultural and religious pluralism while promoting civic virtues and loyalty to the state. Aśoka's Dhamma would therefore appear to be a useful model for how to address our own contemporary dilemmas, not least of which has been the challenge either to the intellectual coherence of secularism as an idea or to its practical adequacy as a doctrine for guiding the behaviour of citizens.

The lesson of Aśoka is not yet clear. Although this is in large part due to the paucity of data concerning the Buddhist emperor, I suggest that another cause is the ambiguities or even potential contradictions in our categories of interpretation, which include both 'secularism' and 'civil religion'. What I offer here is primarily an effort to clarify such modern concepts in light of what Aśoka has been taken to represent. Specifically, I will dispute the idea that secularism constituted, in the first instance, a separation between religion and politics, if not between church and state. This was only one of the trajectories that accompanied the process of secularization, and it was less important than the consolidation of power under the unitary nation-state, which occurred at the direct expense of the authority of the church. Exemplary of this development was Thomas Hobbes's seventeenth-century critique of what we call 'religion' as nothing other than politics under a different, and misleading, name. From one perspective, Hobbes's reduction of religion signalled the birth of the radical Enlightenment,[35] or of a critical mode of thought that did not depend on any religious presuppositions. This is often what we mean when we use the term 'secularism' as a shorthand for scepticism, irreligion, or unbelief. From a political perspective, however, what matters is that Hobbes collapsed the church into the state, absorbing its 'ghostly authority' back into the body politic.[36] This was the direct reference for Jean-Jacques Rousseau's idea of a 'civil religion' as a unification of religion with politics.[37]

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[34] Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, 'Freiheit ist ansteckend', *die tageszeitung*, 23 September 2009. https://taz.de/!576006/, [accessed 13 July 2021].

[35] For this concept, see Jonathan Israel, *Radical enlightenment: philosophy and the making of modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[36] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter 29, section 15; Chapter 39. All references are from Edwin Curley (ed.), *Leviathan* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994 [1651]).

[37] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The social contract*, Book IV, Chapter 8, 'Civil religion', in *The basic political writings*, (ed.) Donald A. Cress, 2nd edn (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2011), pp. 243–51. Olivelle, 'Aśoka's inscriptions', p. 174, cites both Rousseau and Bellah. However, unlike Hobbes and Rousseau, Olivelle highlights the compatibility, rather than competition and mutual exclusion of religion and 'civil religion': '... a civil religion can rise only in a relatively complex society where multiple religions coexist'. This is hardly Rousseau's concept, and while it may describe, for example, the Roman empire to some extent, this famously (prior to Constantine's conversion) required worship of the Roman emperor and participation in the state cult, in a manner that directly clashed with Christianity.

Both philosophers understood this as a restoration of a unity that had been broken by the emergence of religion as an independent power, an event that had occurred either with the biblical Exodus or with the Gospels and the founding of the Christian Church. While this unification was, in a sense, the birth of secular modernity, it was also, in another sense, a return to the *status quo ante*, to either paganism or an earlier model of sacred kingship.[38]

The idea of a 'civil religion' is actually incompatible with secularism, if we take the latter to mean a separation between religion and politics, as Bhargava does. However, the definition of secularism in terms of separation is in itself problematic, because it is wedded to a theological genealogy with roots in biblical traditions as De Roover, among others, has argued, and cannot therefore be taken as a universal apodictic category relevant for all places, times, and cultures. The following section of this article sketches this genealogy, while showing how it coordinated with what I identify as the more basic and characteristic tendency of secularism, namely the centralization or unification of political power. Following this mainly European Christian history, I will turn back to Aśoka and offer a modest rereading of his Dhamma as a civil religion for a novel imperial formation. While one reason for the parallel between Aśoka and contemporary secularism is the shared condition of pluralism, another is the analogous effort to consolidate power under the control of the state, an effort that arguably requires precisely some form of civil religion to serve as the 'glue' that binds together the various members of the body politic. This glue may be necessary, especially in cases where, as today, the state has marginalized religious institutions as independent sources of authority. My conclusion will be that it does indeed make sense to describe Aśoka as a secularist, in Hobbesian terms, but that a proper understanding of what that means is scarcely compatible with our intuitive understanding of secularism as a separation of religion from politics.

The implications of our inability to stabilize the definition of secularism as separate from religion are profound. The present meditation on such categories shows that it is hardly enough to apply such terms as 'civil religion' to function as descriptions of Aśoka's Dhamma and leave it at that. Instead, it is necessary to be as rigorous with respect to the categories that we deploy as with respect to the data to which we apply them. This recognition is itself the threshold or boundary condition for the possibility of a true dialogue between cultures, which has never been a more urgent task than it is at this moment. It is certainly the case that ideas, both good and bad, can migrate across cultures. Neither cultures nor the meanings of words are static. It is also true that the meaning of a word such as 'secularism' is often malleable, being partly subject to the whims of the ruling authority. However, when a word is made to bear so much weight in the context of contemporary political pressures, the truth can begin to crack under the strain.

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[38] See Robert A. Yelle, 'Hobbes the Egyptian: the return to pharaoh, or the ancient roots of secular politics', in *Sacred kingship in world history*, (eds) Alan Strathern and A. Azfar Moin (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming 2022).

Separation isn't secular, and secularism isn't separation

The idea that secularism or freedom of religion requires a separation between church and state is a commonplace, found, for example. in Thomas Jefferson's famous call for a 'wall of separation'.[39] Bhargava follows such older definitions: 'Broadly speaking, secularism, anywhere in the world, means a separation of organized religion from organized political power inspired by a specific set of values. Just as without separation there is no secularism, just so a value-less separation does not add up to secularism.'[40] However, he proceeds to argue that an absolute separation is not necessary for all forms of secularism, since Indian secularism merely enforces a relative separation or 'principled distance' of the state from religion, whereas the strict separation of the functions of the church and state in the West has also coexisted with religious establishment, or the state's support of and preference for a particular church.

The idea of secularism as separation depends on a certain faith or confidence that we can, in fact, know and distinguish what 'religion' is as opposed to politics. This confidence may appear reasonably well-founded when religion is identified with the institutionalized forms of a church. However, in the case of Hinduism in India, there is no equivalent to the Roman Catholic Church or papacy.[41] Historical and anthropological studies have shown that what counts as 'religion' in the case of India has also changed over time, in accordance with broader conceptual changes as well as the strategic interests of individual actors. For several decades now, scholars of religion have called into question precisely our ability to define what 'religion' is, which has also served to destabilize our understanding of what 'secularism' represents. Although many political scientists, even those as perspicuous and theoretically sophisticated as Bhargava,[42] still tend to use the word 'religion' as if this denoted some clearly defined object, the thrust of the past 40 years in religious studies contradicts this usage.[43] In the context of her study of toleration in colonial India, C. S. Adcock sums up the consequences of such debates:

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[39] Thomas Jefferson, *Letter to the Danbury Baptists* (1802). https://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9806/danpre.html, [accessed 13 July 2021].

[40] See Rajeev Bhargava, 'What is secularism for?', in *Secularism in question*, (ed.) Bhargava, pp. 486–542, which generally adopts the separationist definition while adapting this to different conditions, including those in India. See also R. Bhargava, 'Liberal, secular democracy and explanations of Hindu nationalism', *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2002, pp. 72–96; Bhargava, 'States, religious diversity, and the crisis of secularism'; R. Bhargava, 'The distinctiveness of Indian secularism', in *The future of secularism*, (ed.) T. N. Srinivasan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 20–53; Bhargava, 'Indian secularism', p. 79: 'The core idea of secularism … is this: separation of religion and state for the sake of religious liberty and equality of free citizenship.' See also ibid., pp. 80, 100. In keeping with this separationist understanding, Bhargava (ibid., pp. 74–75) distinguishes 'secular states' from both theocracies and states with established religions. However, he also (p. 71) describes Aśoka as a possible case of the 'multiple establishment of religions', implying that Aśoka cannot have been a secularist. See also Bhargava, 'Forms of secularity', p. 110, which describes Aśoka in establishmentarian terms.

[41] This point was made already by Donald Eugene Smith, 'India as a secular state', in *Secularism and its critics*, (ed.) Rajeev Bhargava (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 177–223 at p. 201.

[42] Or José Casanova, who similarly stabilizes the definition of secularism as the 'differentiation' of religion from politics. J. Casanova, *Public religions in the modern world* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 18–21, 36–39.

> Critical reflections in the study of religion and the writing of history have taught us that the category *religion* is neither natural nor universal, but derives from a modern, European history. It no longer makes sense, therefore, to speak of a shared global trajectory toward secularism that consists in the gradual separation of the *political* from the *religious*. Instead, religion is a category of secular politics. And because the same category of religion that organizes scholarship is also implicated in the institutions and practices of political modernity, it makes an unreliable analytical tool. Yet historical treatments of Indian secularism continue to treat the designation of specific practices in terms of *religion* as fixed.[44]

Similarly, Hussein Ali Agrama argues that, rather than a determinate category, secularism is the 'problem space' in which the boundary between the religious and the secular is continually being redrawn.[45]

Part of this problematic, at least in colonial India, was inherited from Christianity. An example is the conversion of *dharmaśāstra* into 'Hindu law' during the colonial period. Historians such as Henry Maine used to argue that Hindu law, as represented by the *Laws of Manu*, was originally religious, being concerned, like the Hebrew Bible, with ritual matters.[46] Such characterizations of *dharmaśāstra* followed earlier Christian parallels between Hindus and Jews, and reflected the idea that religious or ritual laws are not 'proper' laws, in that they are not rational, modern, and secular.[47] This distinction between '(secular) law' and 'religion', which was no more indigenous to

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[43] For various versions of this argument, see, for example, Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing religion: the politics of religious studies and the discourse on sui generis religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Talal Asad, *Genealogies of religion: discipline and reasons of power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western construction of religion: myth, knowledge, and ideology*, (trans.) William Sayers (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Timothy Fitzgerald, *The ideology of religious studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The invention of world religions: or, how European universalism was preserved in the language of pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[44] C. S. Adcock, *The limits of tolerance: Indian secularism and the politics of religious freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 15; see also p. 37. See further Squarcini, 'Selling tolerance by the pound', p. 482: 'when exposed to specialized and critical academic literature, most of the prejudices and dichotomies regarding the separation between 'politics and religion'… will appear clearly untenable as well as logically obsolete'.

[45] Hussein Ali Agrama, 'Sovereign power and secular indeterminacy: is Egypt a secular or a religious state?', in *After secular law*, (eds) Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Robert A. Yelle and Mateo Taussig-Rubbo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), pp. 181–99 at p. 185.

[46] Henry Maine, 'The sacred laws of the Hindus', in his *Dissertations on early law and custom* (London: John Murray, 1883), pp. 1–25 at p. 5.

[47] Robert A. Yelle, 'The Hindu Moses: Christian polemics against Jewish ritual and the secularization of Hindu law under colonialism', *History of Religions*, vol. 49, 2009, pp. 141–71, republished as Chapter 5 of R. A. Yelle, *The language of disenchantment: Protestant literalism and colonial discourse in British India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Hinduism than it was to Judaism, was applied by the British to marginalize those aspects of *dharmaśāstra* that were regarded as 'religious', such as rituals for celebrating the annual festival of the goddess Durga, for the expiation of sins, for determining astrologically auspicious moments, and so on. Only a small remainder was incorporated into colonial law. The family law reserved for Hindus, now codified in independent India, represents this residue. This illustrates the privatization of 'religion' under secularism. The rhetoric that encouraged and accompanied this radical truncation of *dharmaśāstra*, now called 'Hindu law', depended upon the imposition of a non-native understanding of the separation between 'law' and 'religion', as well as on the idea that such a separation, initially introduced by the Gospel, should be mediated by an ostensibly secular colonial modernity.

If secularization meant separation, then we must acknowledge the deeply Christian roots of this process. Jakob De Roover argues similarly that secularism, conceived as founded on a positive and normative distinction between the religious and political domains, is indebted to earlier Christian theological paradigms. He contends further that, due to its parochial nature and cultural presuppositions, secularism as applied in India represents a European transplant that has failed to take root in its new environment. Drawing on the theories of his teacher S. N. Balagangadhara, who argues that 'religion' is a Christian concept with no empirical referent in traditional Indian society, De Roover reaches a parallel conclusion: namely, that 'secularism' is not a universal category and should not be deployed uncritically outside of the post-Christian European context.[48] De Roover's argument is not entirely original. Others, such as T. N. Madan and Ashis Nandy, have argued previously for the Christian roots of secularism and the lack of fitness of this doctrine in the Indian context.[49] De Roover's description of the colonial transformation of *dharmaśāstra* into 'Hindu law' through a process of codification also treads a well-worn path. More problematic still is his (undemonstrated) contention that secularism is to blame for contemporary fundamentalism and communalism in India.

De Roover's strongest argument is that the idea of secularism as the distinction between religion and politics goes back to Christian antecedents, such as the differences between the 'Two Kingdoms' of pope and emperor.[50] While Madan, as well as Ze'ev Falk 40 years ago,[51] had already pointed to this precedent, De Roover develops this claim further by focusing on John Locke's secularization of such theological ideas.[52] If the separation between the Two Kingdoms can be traced back to medieval Christianity, or even to the New Testament idea of 'rendering unto Caesar',[53] then separation cannot be 'secular' in the sense of non-religious. As De Roover argues, there exists a direct connection between the idea of Martin Luther and other reformers that religion under the Gospel is free and spiritual, and the later, ostensibly secular, idea of religious freedom or toleration. These ideas were based heavily on Christian supersessionism and on the claim that Judaism and Catholicism were ritualistic, legalistic, and persecuting religions.[54]

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[48] De Roover, *Europe, India, and the limits of secularism*, pp. 5, 14–15, 33–34, 42.

[49] See the quote from Nandy above and T. N. Madan, 'Secularism in its place', in *Secularism and its critics*, (ed.) Bhargava, pp. 297–320.

[50] De Roover, *Europe, India, and the limits of secularism*, pp. 87, 94.

[51] Ze'ev Falk, *Law and religion: the Jewish experience* (Jerusalem: Mesharim, 1981), p. 13.

[52] De Roover, *Europe, India, and the limits of secularism*, pp. 139–45, 149–51.

[53] Ibid., p. 87.

Others, including myself,[55] have provided similar accounts of the Christian genealogy of religious freedom. Already before the end of the nineteenth century, the Scottish theologian James Stuart Candlish and the German legal historian Georg Jellinek identified the seventeenth-century New England preacher Roger Williams's argument for religious toleration as theological in inspiration.[56] Jellinek's genealogical approach in turn influenced Max Weber's excavation of the Protestant ethic.[57] Recent scholarship has contested but not, to my mind, displaced such genealogies.[58] De Roover's account is another example.

While agreeing with De Roover on many points regarding the theological genealogy of the separationist idea of secularism, I find there are two points that require further clarification. First, the idea of the Two Kingdoms per se is not characteristic of secularism, but was rather a structural component of Christianity that was subsequently transformed and recoded in ostensibly non-religious terms. I believe that De Roover would agree on this point, although we may differ somewhat on the details of precisely how this happened. In any case, the point bears elaboration, because it highlights how separation can by no means be used to distinguish something called 'secularism' from whatever came before it. Second, and relatedly, secularism, properly understood, was only superficially characterized by a form of separation. The more fundamental tendency was the unification of all power and authority under the Leviathan of the state. In relation to this, the idea of the separation of church and state appears as a true survival from a Christian past, a vestigial limb, like a vermiform appendix, that no longer serves any organic function in the body politic.

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[54] Ibid., p. 216.

[55] Robert A. Yelle, 'Moses' veil: secularization as Christian myth', in *After secular law*, (eds) Sullivan, Yelle and Taussig-Rubbo, pp. 23–42; Yelle, 'The Hindu Moses'; R. Yelle, 'Imagining the Hebrew republic: Christian genealogies of religious freedom', in *Politics of religious freedom*, (eds) Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Saba Mahmood and Peter Danchin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 17–28.

[56] James Stuart Candlish, *The kingdom of god, biblically and historically considered* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1884), p. 417; Georg Jellinek, *Die Erklärung der Menschen- und Bürgerrechte* (Berlin, 1895). De Roover, *Europe, India, and the limits of secularism*, mentions Williams at pp. 132–33.

[57] On Weber's connection with Jellinek, see Johannes Winckelmann, 'Die Herkunft von Max Webers *Entzauberungs*-Konzeption', *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, vol. 32, 1980, p. 13; Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, 'The German theological sources and Protestant church politics', in *Weber's Protestant ethic: origins, evidence, contexts*, (eds) Hartmut Lehmann and Guenther Roth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 32; Martin Riesebrodt, 'Dimensions of *The Protestant ethic*', in *The Protestant ethic turns 100: essays on the centenary of the Weber thesis*, (eds) William H. Swatos, Jr. and Lutz Kaelber (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2005), pp. 38–39.

[58] See Nicholas P. Miller, *The religious roots of the First Amendment: dissenting Protestants and the separation of church and state* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

The mere separation between religion and politics, in the sense of an independent institutionalization of these two categories and a social imaginary that reflects awareness of their existence, is in the first instance a characteristic, not of secular but of many pre-modern societies. Indeed, ancient and precolonial India had various forms of this distinction, such as the division between Kṣatriya and Brahman, *laukika* and *dharmika*, Mir and Pir.[59] The distinction itself in the Christian context is a theological one, having been codified by Pope Gelasius I in 494 CE in his letter 'There are Two' (*Duo sunt*), where he claimed a 'sacred authority' (*auctoritas sacrata*) that was parallel and superior to the emperor's 'royal power' (*regalis potestas*).[60] Gelasius also termed this the distinction between the royalty (*regnum*) and the priesthood (*sacerdotium*). This distinction was arguably grounded in Holy Scripture, with Jesus's injunction to 'render unto Caesar'[61] and his disclaimer that 'my kingdom is not of this world',[62] which was embodied in the legal institution of the Roman Catholic Church. Following Gelasius, this duality of authority came to be known as the 'Two Kingdoms' or 'Two Swords'. So much of this background has rooted itself in European minds and languages that we assume the naturalness of the distinction between Church and State, which are often capitalized in English to signal their fictive personhood or metaphysical substantiality. Such a separation can hardly apply in the same way to cultures where this institutional division has not occurred. This already highlights the erroneousness of the claim that the 'separation of religion and politics', without further qualification, is a distinctive feature of secular societies. This is one reason why I am sceptical of the attempt to define secularism in such terms, and in an earlier publication criticized 'differentiation theories' of the secular as applied to ancient India.[63] The idea of such a separation achieved its greatest social salience in Europe during the Middle Ages, when it grounded the Roman Catholic Church's claim to an independent authority. Obviously, something more than separation is needed in order for secularism to obtain. Secularism represented a radical transformation in the traditional doctrine of separation within Latin Christendom. During and after the Reformation, a starker insistence on the division of labour between religion and politics contributed to what we commonly think of as freedom of religion. The roots of this development lay deep in Protestant theology.

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[59] Further cross-cultural examples are provided also in Rodney Needham, 'Dual sovereignty', in his *Reconnaissances* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), pp. 63–105. Timothy Lubin has kindly shared with me an unpublished article in which he notes the conceptual differentiation and relative practical autonomy of religious actors and institutions in ancient India: 'Religious exemptions and religious pluralism in early Indian endowments', lecture presented at the Department of Indology, Kyoto University, 23 June 2018.

[60] Gelasius I, *Duo sunt*, (trans.) John S. Ott. http://www.web.pdx.edu/~ott/Gelasius/, [accessed 13 July 2021]. See De Roover, *Europe, India, and the limits of secularism*, p. 87.

[61] Mark 12:17; Matthew 22:21; cf. Romans 13 (KJV).

[62] John 18:36.

[63] Robert A. Yelle, 'Spiritual economies beyond the sacred/secular paradigm: or, what did religious freedom mean in ancient India?', in *Varieties of religious establishment*, (eds) Winnifred Fallers Sullivan and Lori G. Beaman (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 15–32 at pp. 17–21.

As De Roover noted, John Locke followed reformers such as Luther in defining true Christian religion as a matter of inner belief or conscience rather than outer ritual practice. Locke's argument, in his *Letter on Toleration* (1689), that 'there is no such thing under the Gospel as a Christian commonwealth' depended on his definition of religion as an 'inward persuasion', a definition that was echoed by English Deists and other freethinkers, who wanted to liberate religion—or at least the part that consists of conscience, doctrine, or belief—from governmental control. The Deist Thomas Morgan echoed Locke when he argued in the 1730s that, while there could be (and still is in England) an 'established Church' as a merely political institution, the idea of an 'established Religion' was an oxymoron.[64] This position was not peculiarly English; Immanuel Kant borrowed such Deist ideas when arguing that Judaism was a political system, rather than a religion, because it was concerned with external performances or rituals.[65] A few years after Locke published his *Letter on Toleration*, the theologian Humphrey Prideaux condemned Islam, Judaism, and Roman Catholicism as 'impostures', by which he meant illicit combinations of religion with politics.[66] Religions that used violent and coercive means to attain political power were the opposite of the true religion of the Gospel, which was represented ideally by English Protestantism. Prideaux was trying to defend orthodox Christianity against the Deists, but Morgan later extended Prideaux's label of 'imposture' to Moses and the Conquest of Canaan, further undermining biblical tradition. More obviously than Locke's, Prideaux's argument for toleration was theologically based, supersessionist, and contrastive, meaning that it established a hierarchy of true and false religions. He repeatedly used the word 'secular' to demarcate those political interests and techniques of governance that must be kept separate from true religion. Prideaux was hardly an obscure figure: his *Life of Mahomet* (1697) went through many editions, was translated into all major European languages, and continued to be cited (and plagiarized) for more than a century. Despite this, his role in disseminating new thinking about freedom of religion has received little attention from scholars of secularism.

This idea of a strict separation between religion and politics depended upon a peculiarly Protestant, or at least post-Reformation Christian, understanding of what 'religion' is. This is not to say that this understanding had exclusively theological motivations. There were important political and social reasons that conditioned the rise to dominance of this understanding, such as the desire to avoid bloodshed. As religion became apolitical, the state became religiously neutral, meaning that claims of religious truth were deemed no longer acceptable as grounds for dissenting from an existing order. The state should no longer be a site for salvation: for messianic hopes, perhaps, but also for apocalyptic or total war. During the English Civil War, radical sectarians claimed new revelations as the basis for dissenting from the existing social order. Defending that order against attack, Thomas Hobbes embraced the orthodox Protestant position that prophecies had ceased.[67] Just after the war, in 1665, the theologian John Spencer forcefully articulated the view that prophecies, together with miracles and oracles, had ended in Apostolic times, if not already with Christ's passion. Declaring our religion now to be 'sedate, cool, and silent', Spencer anticipated what Max Weber later called 'disenchantment'. This was a political as well as a religious phenomenon, just as what it opposed, namely the volatile combination of religion with politics labelled in English 'enthusiasm' and in German *Schwärmerei*.[68]

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[64] On Morgan and Prideaux, see Robert A. Yelle, '"By fire and sword": early English critiques of Islam and Judaism as "impostures" or political and "unfree" religions', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 53, 2020, pp. 91–108.

[65] Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the limits of reason alone*, (trans) Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson, 2nd edn (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1960 [1793]), p. 116.

[66] This is similar to John Milton's opinion that Catholicism and paganism were not religions but political entities: see De Roover, *Europe, India, and the limits of secularism*, p. 134.

However, the rise of a specifically modern understanding of the separation of religion from politics was really secondary to the primary thrust of secularization, which unified all power under the newly monolithic nation-state. The division of labour between pope and emperor was characteristic of the Middle Ages, not of what came after. Of course, there is no space here to recount in any detail the long history of the struggle between the papacy and the Holy Roman Emperor, or the kings of France, and so on. Earlier historians, from Otto von Gierke and John Neville Figgis to Ernst Kantorowicz, have shown how this struggle culminated in absolutist claims, first of one and then the other side, until finally the state emerged victorious.[69] It would not be appropriate to describe this as a victory of secular over religious authority, because both sides claimed to consolidate these two powers under either the church or the state. There is a direct line from Boniface VIII's *Unam sanctam* (1302), which already presents such claims; to Luther's *Address to the German Nobles* (1520), which dissolved the wall between clergy and laity so as to grant equal authority to all as members of one, universal church;[70] to Henry VIII's Act of Supremacy (1534), through which the English king asserted his authority over the English Church. The Thirty Years' War ended with the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) which, like the earlier Peace of Augsburg (1555), articulated the rule of *cuius regio, eius religio*: 'Whoever rules the realm gets to decide the reigning religion'. Gradually allowances were made for the toleration of religious minorities, but these were adopted as exceptions to the rule of a state church.

In the immediate aftermath of both Westphalia and the beheading of Charles I in 1649, which highlighted the dangers of religious dissent as fomenting the English Civil War, Hobbes published his *Leviathan* (1651), which advocated, from its frontispiece onwards, for the unification of both civil and ecclesiastical powers under the sovereign. Hobbes's universalism was a direct corollary of the insistence that sovereignty must be unitary. In medieval Europe, the idea that sovereignty is singular and total was expressed by the analogy of divine right, or the notion that the king (or queen) was God's agent on earth. Monarchy and monotheism were logical corollaries in this political theology. Rather than a separation of powers, Hobbes insisted on the unitary nature of sovereignty, as a means of avoiding competition among political and legal regimes. Where Gelasius had claimed '*Duo sunt*', Hobbes insisted, '*Unum est*': 'There can be only One'. This is the import of the famous frontispiece of *Leviathan*, where the temporal powers on the left and their spiritual analogues on the right are shown as indissolubly united in the singular person of the earthly sovereign, who holds both the sceptre of religion and the sword of state.

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[67] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter 32, section 9.

[68] See, most recently, Robert A. Yelle, '"An age of miracles": disenchantment as a secularized theological narrative', in *Narratives of disenchantment and secularization: critiquing Max Weber's idea of modernity*, (eds) Robert A. Yelle and Lorenz Trein (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. 129–48.

[69] Otto von Gierke, *Political theories of the middle age*, (trans.) Frederic W. Maitland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1900); John Neville Figgis, *The divine right of kings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1896); Ernst Kantorowicz, 'Mysteries of state: an absolutist concept and its late medieval origins', *Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 45, 1952, pp. 233–77.

[70] Martin Luther, 'To the Christian nobility of the German nation concerning the reform of the Christian estate', in *Selected writings of Martin Luther. Vol. 1, 1517–1520*, (ed.) Theodore G. Tappert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), pp. 259–353 at pp. 263–66.

Hobbes insisted that there must be an establishment of religion in order to avoid conflict. His position is often identified with Erastianism, a doctrine that affirms that the state should control the church. Even accomplished scholars often miss his more radical claim, namely that religion is merely politics under another name. Charles Taylor, for example, describes Hobbes's doctrine in terms of the privatization of religion:

> What Hobbes does is to make the demands of Christian faith, as confessionally defined, irrelevant to the public sphere. … In the private realm, the believer can and must do what conscience demands, but he commits no sin in respecting publicly established forms and ceremonies. Defining these is the sovereign's God-given right. … Religion, where it really counts in people's lives and commitments, essentially will exist only in the private sphere. That is the logic of Hobbes's arguments.[71]

Taylor's reading of Hobbes is not mistaken, but incomplete. Hobbes was more radical than this. He argued in clear terms that Christianity itself is a form of politics. Following William Tyndale's translation of the Greek word *ekklesia* as 'congregation', Hobbes defined a 'church' as 'a company of men professing Christian religion, united in the person of one sovereign … [and] the same thing with a civil commonwealth consisting of Christian men … Temporal and spiritual government are but two words brought into the world to make men see double and mistake their lawful sovereign.'[72] Rather than simply affirming that religion should be governed by the state, Hobbes was arguing that, properly understood, a church or other 'religious' community is actually a political body. According to the logic of sovereignty, all members of the commonwealth must be united into a single body politic—that of the Leviathan—and not fragmented into different polities that may compete for power.

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[71] Charles Taylor, 'Modes of secularism', in *Secularism in question*, (ed.) Bhargava, pp. 31–53 at pp. 34–35.

[72] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter 39, section 5.

Hobbes systematically reduced religious categories to political ones. The English Church was a 'ghostly authority' that competed with that of the sovereign;[73] the papacy, the 'ghost of the deceased Roman empire' sitting on the ruins of that empire and still speaking its dead language;[74] and priests were 'fairies' or agents of the 'Kingdom of Darkness'.[75] Not content to attack the Catholic Church, Hobbes drew upon an existing exegetical tradition according to which the biblical Leviathan was the Egyptian pharaoh.[76] The blasphemous implication of Hobbes's demand that we submit to Leviathan/pharaoh was that the Exodus that inaugurated Mosaic monotheism was an illegitimate political revolution. Not content to refute more than a thousand years of Gelasius's Two Kingdoms idea, Hobbes wanted to restore the original unity of religion with politics, before the latter was disrupted by the Hebrews in a slave revolt.

In his description of 'civil religion', Jean-Jacques Rousseau largely adopted Hobbes's account, adding that earlier all religions were tribal and political affairs, attributing the separation of religion from politics to the Gospel and Jesus rather than Moses (who governed a theocracy, after all), and arguing that something like religion is a necessary component of a healthy state.[77] Rousseau advocated reuniting the 'two heads of the eagle', meaning religion and politics. The French Revolution that came after was radically anticlerical, to the extent of instituting a new religion modelled on pagan lines, right down to changing the calendar. The experience of rupture with the Christian past and the search for something like a civil religion has deeply marked French thought ever since, including that of Émile Durkheim, who viewed the phenomenon of religion as coextensive with that of the church, in the form that this now takes, namely that of the state.[78] This partly explains the more thoroughgoing exclusion of other religions from the political sphere that characterizes French *laïcité*.

Hobbes's universalism is as much a part of secular modernity as is the idea of separation or religious toleration. The contradiction between these two positions—unity of government and diversity of religions—was largely solved by making religion apolitical. This was the thrust of Locke's argument for separation, an argument that, while made in philosophical terms, also had deep underpinnings in Christian theology. Indeed, Locke's definition, in his first *Letter on Toleration* (1689), of 'commonwealth' and 'church' as distinct entities with clearly separate functions represented a response to Hobbes's argument that there could be no logical and principled distinction between these two entities. Locke's rear-guard defence of the older Christian division of labour was a rhetorical success, although it required a further privatization of religion and marginalization of its institutional authority. Despite the greater logical coherence of Hobbes's argument, few modern polities have attempted to take the final step in the direction that he pointed out, and these have been mainly totalitarian states. Communist governments have on occasion tried to eradicate religion, or failing that, to exert complete control. Witness current developments in China, among which is the appointment of Christian ministers and a state-supervised translation of the Bible. Hobbes presumably would have approved, since he explicitly granted the sovereign control over the interpretation of scripture.[79] Indeed, to put it within the comparative framework of this special issue, Hobbes's vision of all forms of religions being subordinate to the sacred body of a sovereign divinely ordained to judge among them was congruent with that of Akbar and his Mongol ancestor Chinggis Khan.

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[73] Ibid., Chapter 29, section 15.

[74] Ibid., Chapter 47, sections 21–22.

[75] Ibid., Chapter 47, sections 21 et seq.

[76] Yelle, 'Hobbes the Egyptian'.

[77] Rousseau, 'Civil religion'.

[78] Émile Durkheim, *The elementary forms of the religious life*, (trans.) Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), pp. 41–43 (centrality of church to religion), 215–16, 430 (civil religion during the French Revolution).

From this history we have inherited, alongside the notion of separation, the idea that secularism requires a universal legal system that applies, by default, to all citizens, regardless of their confession (or lack thereof). This is a function of the hegemonic nature of the modern state and of the cultural dominance of the idea that religion must remain apolitical and extra-legal. Any derogation from this principle is open to suspicion and must be tightly circumscribed. Of course, we have examples of such derogations: the German state collects tax on behalf of the established churches, while the Indian state enforces the personal laws of Hindus, Muslims, and other confessions, despite the controversies over such exceptions.

Charles Taylor captured this aspect of secularism when he defined it as involving 'the shift from hierarchical, mediated-access societies to horizontal, direct-access societies' in which our 'fundamental way of belonging to the state is not dependent on or mediated by … other belongings' or 'through intermediary organizations', but is instead a 'direct relationship'.[80] In the second half of the nineteenth century, Otto von Gierke already described this aspect of secular modernity, in which the sovereign individual stands alone before the sovereign and absolute state.[81] Yet to say this is to admit that the state now functions as if the church did not exist. This was Hobbes's final conclusion, and it was conditioned by his commitment to Nominalism, which itself had dissolved all such forms of mediation, viewed as unacceptable limitations on the sovereignty of God or that of his agent on earth.

Rather than as a separation between politics and religion, or as the religious neutrality of the state, secularism would be better understood as a regime that delimits the possibility of pluralism, meaning the opportunity for friction among competing authorities. Whereas something like the separation between religion and politics is scarcely unique to the contemporary world, it is the increasingly monolithic nature of the modern nation-state that distinguishes secularism from whatever preceded it. This is why, in my view, both Bhargava and De Roover have misdiagnosed the central tendency of secularism, which is not the separation but rather the unification of religion with politics, that Hobbes and Rousseau depicted as a return to the original idea of politics as a totality that encompasses what we call religion.

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[79] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter 33, section 24.

[80] Taylor, 'Modes of secularism', p. 39.

[81] Von Gierke, *Political theories*, pp. 87–100.

Aśoka as secularist, redux

Following this historical sketch of secularization in Europe, I want to turn back to Aśoka now. Does this modified understanding of what secularism entailed help us at all to understand the Mauryan emperor's Dhamma? His inscriptions clearly identify Aśoka as personally a devout Buddhist,[82] having converted supposedly after, and as a result of, witnessing the violence associated with his conquest of Kalinga.[83] He also enforced the excommunication of schismatics from the Sangha or individual sanghas.[84] According to legend, Aśoka presided over the Third Buddhist Council at Pataliputra and the canonization of Buddhist teachings and expulsion of schismatics that occurred there. Aśoka was therefore what we would call an 'establishmentarian', a believer in the need for unity within the Buddhist tradition and, at least to some degree, between that tradition and the state.[85] Further proof for this is that he promoted or enforced certain precepts aligned with Buddhist positions in interreligious or doctrinal disputes. For example, he prohibited the sacrifice of animals[86] and expressed disdain for rituals in general,[87] while generally promoting what Bhargava, following Gananath Obeyesekere, has aptly termed an 'ethicization' of religion.[88] An example is Pillar Edict 2: 'Dhamma is good, but what constitutes Dhamma? (It includes) little evil, much good, kindness, generosity, truthfulness and purity.' This expresses a sentiment familiar also from the *Sigalovada Sutta* of the Pali Canon, where the Buddha reinterprets the Vedic sacrifice in terms of duties to other people within the community.[89] In other words, Aśoka followed the Buddhist rejection of sacrifice and its associated violence. This meant taking a stand in an interreligious dispute.

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[82] See Romila Thapar, 'Aśoka and Buddhism as reflected in the Aśokan edicts', in her *Cultural pasts*, pp. 422–38.

[83] Rock Edict 13.

[84] Minor Pillar Edicts 1 and 2. For a discussion, see Lahiri, *Ashoka*, pp. 255–59, who argues that the edicts concerning the expulsion of schismatics make the legend that Aśoka convened the Third Buddhist Council 'seem historical'.

[85] See Bhargava, 'Forms of secularity', p. 110; and Bhargava, 'Indian secularism', p. 71. Jacobsohn, *The wheel of law*, p. 287, states that 'the great symbol of India's secularism—Aśoka's Wheel … [meant] that the spiritual and temporal domains were indissolubly bound together'. Jacobsohn does not explain how we might reconcile this with the more common concept of secularism as the separation precisely of these two domains.

[86] Rock Edict 1. Timothy Lubin has pointed out to me that Aśoka did not prescribe any punishment for violating this prohibition. However, the same is true of the Ten Commandments, which are commands or prohibitions without enumerated sanctions.

[87] Rock Edict 9. See Timothy Lubin, 'Aśoka's disparagement of domestic ritual and its validation by the Brahmins', *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 41, 2013, pp. 29–41.

[88] Bhargava, 'Roots', p. 370 (quoting Gananath Obeyesekere). At times, Bhargava appears himself to embrace anti-ritualism, coming suspiciously close to a normative Protestant idea of religion. See ibid., p. 368: 'some commentators recognized that Aśokan edicts are written in times of intense sectarian strife. For instance, D. R. Bhandarkar says that people in Aśoka's times had lost sight of the essentials of their faith and begun to focus excessively on rituals and theology. In these matters, there was unending acrimonious wrangling'; see also p. 369: 'expensive and elaborate rituals … unnecessary, wasteful and distracting'; p. 372: '[The times] necessitated that a collective ethic substitute correct ritual by good deed for the sake of others.' In Bhargava, 'Forms of secularity', p. 101, he states: 'as these rituals became more complex and expensive, they appeared to enhance the intrinsic worth of the ritual, as if a magical quality inhered in the sacrifice itself …'. It is not always clear to what extent Bhargava is describing his own or Aśoka's opinion.

In enforcing and promoting the Dhamma, Aśoka also sent ambassadors (*Dhamma Mahamatras*[90]) both throughout and beyond his realm, contributing to the stability of his empire and the longer-term expansion of Buddhism as a transnational religion. Rock Edict 5 is relevant in this regard:

> In the past there were no Dhamma Mahamatras but such officers were appointed by me thirteen years after my coronation. Now they work among all religions for the establishment of Dhamma … They work among the Greeks, the Kambojas, the Gandharas, the Rastrikas, the Pitinikas and other peoples on the western borders. They work among soldiers, chiefs, Brahmans, householders, the poor, the aged and those devoted to Dhamma … They work here, in outlying towns, in the women's quarters belonging to my brothers and sisters, and among my other relatives. They are occupied everywhere. These Dhamma Mahamatras are occupied in my domain among people devoted to Dhamma to determine who is devoted to Dhamma, who is established in Dhamma, and who is generous.

The Dhamma emissaries worked among different 'religions' (*pāṣaṇḍa*), as well as among different nations or peoples, such as Greeks, both within and beyond, or at the margins of, the Mauryan empire.[91] Whereas the *pāṣaṇḍas* were variable, tribal, or local, Dhamma was understood to be universal.[92] Bhargava argues further that '*Dhamma* is akin to empirically identifiable political morality', while it also 'constitutes the all-important common ground, the essentials, of all *pāṣaṇḍas*'.[93] Dhamma represented a universal ethic of righteousness, which had to be propagated among all of the various parts of Aśoka's kingdom, and even abroad. Aśoka's Dhamma represented, as

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[89] See Rock Edict 9: 'Women in particular perform many vulgar and worthless ceremonies. These types of ceremonies can be performed, by all means, but they bear little fruit. What does bear great fruit, however, is the ceremony of the Dhamma. This involves proper behavior towards servants and employees, respect for teachers, restraint towards living beings, and generosity towards ascetics and Brahmans.' The parallel to the Sigalovada Sutta, Digha Nikaya 31, is also noted by S. Dhammika.

[90] Vincent Smith called them 'Censors of the Law of Piety': V. Smith, *Aśoka: the Buddhist emperor of India* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), p. 74.

[91] This edict suggests a parallel between the peoples and the *pāṣaṇḍas*. Thapar, *Cultural pasts*, p. 224, notes Brihaddharma's use of the binomial 'pāṣaṇḍas and yavanas', that is, 'sectarians and Greeks'. Compare the usages of *goyim* and *ethnikoi*, in the Hebrew Bible and Greek New Testament, respectively, to refer to other peoples and their religions.

[92] Bhargava, 'Forms of secularity', p. 87, suggests that Aśoka's Dhamma anticipated something like the general concept of 'religion' which emerged later in European Christianity.

[93] Ibid., p. 106.

Bhargava has said, 'a *public* or *political* morality',[94] one that was regarded as necessary to preserve the integrity of the empire. Aśoka's Dhamma-emissaries go 'everywhere … to determine who is devoted to Dhamma'. We need to recall that the edicts were propaganda and designed to put the best possible 'spin' on the reality of Aśoka's rule, a rule that Buddhist legend says was violent and cruel. Scholars have noted a contrast and convergence between the edicts and the *Realpolitik* or Machiavellian philosophy expounded in Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra*, a text purportedly authored during the Mauryan dynasty but of undetermined age and discovered only in the last century.[95] This text describes how the king maintains control through a state security apparatus that includes covert agents who test the probity and loyalty of officials and subjects, and who may appear in the guise of monks, mendicants, and members of *pāṣaṇḍas*.[96] Nehru stated that 'in some ways this Mauryan state reminds one of modern dictatorships'.[97] This parallel suggests that we must, of course, reflect critically upon Aśoka's presentation of the benevolence of his kingdom and of his Dhamma.

Aśoka's Dhamma was not identical with, but was inspired by, the Buddhist Dhamma. It represented something like an ecumenical version of the latter, converted into the basis of a civil ethos for a plural society. We can accept many of the parallels that have been claimed to exist between Aśoka and contemporary Indian secularism. However, Aśoka appears much closer to Hobbes's monist model of secularism than he does to the separationist model. Although sectarian opinions are tolerated, they are subordinated to the universal ethic of Dhamma, which, as a result of its centrality to the civil constitution, transcends the category of mere 'religion'. Aśoka's Dhamma is both religion and politics at the same time, a universal ethic for a diverse empire, or what Patrick Olivelle called a 'civil religion'.

Bhargava identified Aśoka as one of the 'roots' of Indian pluralism, if not of secularism. He further contended that 'Contemporary polities, including India, can draw lessons from … [such] normative models of pluralism.'[98] He carefully distinguished the Aśokan model from 'secularism' in the narrower, modern sense, while contending that 'it is not so absurd to claim that forms of secularity existed in ancient and early modern India'.[99] I would like to add my qualified agreement: Aśoka anticipated the dilemmas of contemporary secularism and attempted to resolve those dilemmas precisely by embracing not a separationist, but a universalist or Hobbesian model of secularism, even to the extent of instituting something like a (possibly benevolent) police state, which enforced adherence to Dhamma.

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[94] Bhargava, 'Roots', p. 371.

[95] Hermann Kulke notes and tries to resolve the seeming contradiction between the *Arthaśāstra*'s Machiavellian approach and Aśoka's more benevolent-seeming inscriptions. H. Kulke, 'From Aśoka to Jayavarman VII: some reflections on the relationship between Buddhism and the state in India and Southeast Asia', in *Buddhism across Asia: networks of material, intellectual and cultural exchange. Vol. 1*, (ed.) Tansen Sen (New Delhi: Manohar, 2014), pp. 327–46.

[96] L. N. Rangarajan (trans.), *The Arthashastra* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1992), pp. 499–507. See also Mark McClish and Patrick Olivelle (eds), *The Arthaśāstra: selections from the classic Indian work on statecraft* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2012), p. 101.

[97] Jawaharlal Nehru, *The discovery of India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 116; quoted in Vajpeyi, *Righteous republic*, p. 201.

[98] Bhargava, 'Roots', p. 379.

[99] Bhargava, 'Forms of secularity', pp. 95–96.

Aśoka's Dhamma emissaries fulfil the role of the plague doctors who have been identified in the frontispiece of Hobbes's *Leviathan*, roaming the streets of the city.[100] As the translator of Thucydides, Hobbes was well aware of the linkage between plagues and insurrections, such as the plague that struck Athens during the first year of the Peloponnesian War:[101] both represent states of emergency or breakdowns in civil order. Like Hobbes's plague doctors, Aśoka's *Dhamma mahamatras* are specialists who spy out diseases in the body politic, and attempt to cure these before the infection can become widespread and potentially fatal. Religion is in the service of the state, which is why Aśoka's spies (if he shared Kauṭilya's methods) may have been disguised as monks and nuns; unless of course they *were* actually monks and nuns, members of the sangha grateful for the emperor's patronage and eager to reciprocate.[102]

Even the First Rock Edict may be read against the grain to reveal a different message:

> Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, has caused this Dhamma edict to be written. Here (in my domain) no living beings are to be slaughtered or offered in sacrifice. Nor should festivals be held, for Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, sees much to object to in such festivals, although there are some festivals that Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, does approve of.

Aśoka's embrace of *ahiṃsā* and prohibition of sacrifices were presumably heartfelt. However, they also had the value of maintaining public order. In much of the ancient world, sacrifices were public occasions, with political dimensions.[103] Aśoka's ban on sacrifices and many assemblies or festivals (*samājas*) would have minimized such potentially volatile gatherings.[104] We should recall that the Exodus revolt against the Egyptian pharaoh began with the demand that the Hebrews be granted a holiday for the purpose of offering a sacrifice (Exod 3:18). In the context of ancient Near Eastern culture, this was already a sign of rebellion, because in those days sacrifice was the seal of a covenant of service to a king, in this case to a god-king other than the pharaoh.

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[100] See, for example, Giorgio Agamben, 'Stasis', in his *The omnibus homo sacer* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), pp. 247–92 at p. 279, discussing Francesca Falk's and Horst Bredekamp's interpretations of this detail.

[101] See Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian war*, (trans.) Richard Crawley (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1910), Book 2, Chapter 7 (section 2.53).

[102] See Kulke, 'From Aśoka to Jayavarman VII', p. 332, citing a personal communication from Tilman Frasch.

[103] Of course, I am not talking about the household sacrifices that expanded in importance over time in Hinduism.

[104] Lubin, 'Aśoka's disparagement', p. 35; Herman Tieken, 'The dissemination of Aśoka's rock and pillar edicts', *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens*, vol. 46, 2002, pp. 5–42 at p. 11.

The convergence between political and religious authority reinforces the parallel that has been drawn between Aśoka and Constantine, as promoters of Buddhism and Christianity respectively, despite other differences between them.[105] Like Constantine, who presided over the Council at Nicaea in 325 CE, Aśoka is said to have presided over the Third Buddhist Council at his capital of Pataliputra. Again, there is an obvious parallel to the inter-confessional religious debates Akbar organized and presided over in the 'Ibadat Khana. The right of secular rulers to convene a Church council was, by the way, one of the points defended by Luther during the Protestant Reformation.[106] The Church's claim of an exclusive prerogative in this regard was another of the 'walls' that Luther tore down en route to secularism. Again, this was hardly separation—quite the opposite.

Both Buddhism and Christianity emerged out of the so-called 'Axial Age', which Bhargava has noted as the context for Aśoka's Dhamma as a universal ethic.[107] A number of scholars have identified this historical moment as the inauguration of a separation of religion from politics.[108] If we consider Buddhism and Christianity only as revolutionary religious movements, then there is some cogence to this description. However, this was also the moment of the appearance of large imperial formations, which transcended the boundaries of traditional tribes and small kingdoms and city-states.[109] Such imperial formations, as in the case of Aśoka and Constantine, may require the adoption of a universalizing religion as a 'glue' to counterbalance the centrifugal force that would otherwise disperse such larger bodies politic. The irony, then, is that such 'religious' protest movements seem to have been co-opted swiftly by expanding empires to reinforce political power. From this perspective, the Axial Age led to the unification of politics and religion, as well as of peoples, rather than to their separation. There is an analogy, albeit imperfect, with what happened with the rise of the modern nation-state, which witnessed a return to the unity of politics and religion in the form of Hobbes's Leviathan.

We know very little of Buddhism before Aśoka, whose edicts represent the oldest preserved writings on the subcontinent. The earliest complete biography of the Buddha, Aśvaghoṣa's *Buddhacarita* (Acts of the Buddha), was composed in Sanskrit several centuries after Aśoka's empire fell, and around a half a millennium after the Buddha presumably lived. The gap between legend and history is at least as great as that which exists in the case of Jesus. The

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[105] Joseph M. Bryant, 'Ashoka and Constantine: on mega-actors and the politics of empires and religions', in *States and nations, power and civility: Hallsian perspectives*, (ed.) Francesco Duina (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), pp. 262–302, notes the parallel but tries to account for the differing degrees of success each emperor had in promoting his chosen religion.

[106] Luther, 'To the Christian nobility', pp. 272–73.

[107] Bhargava, 'Beyond toleration', pp. 178–85.

[108] Robert Bellah, 'What is axial about the axial age?', *Archives européennes de sociologie*, vol. 46, 2005, pp. 70–72, 83. Jan Assmann has made similar arguments for the Exodus.

[109] Olivelle, 'Aśoka's inscriptions', p. 170. See also David Graeber, *Debt: the first 5000 years* (New York: Melville House, 2011).

Buddhacarita tells the story of how the Buddha was born in the palace of his father, King Śuddhodana. It was predicted that he would grow up to be either the Buddha or a Cakravartin, a great wheel-turning emperor. Like Jesus, the Buddha was supposed to be a king of sorts. Given the sequence of historical events, it is quite possible that this image of the Buddha was derived from the memory of the first Buddhist emperor, Aśoka, who turned the Wheel of Dhamma for the subcontinent, and beyond.[110] What does this convergence between the two figures of king and renunciant tell us about the inseparability of religious authority and political power? And what does this inseparability say about secularism itself?

Conclusions

I would like to bring these reflections on ancient history back around to our present moment. But first it will be useful to recapitulate where we are in the argument. Some counterintuitive conclusions have been reached. The first is that we may need to abandon speaking of secularism as a 'separation' between religion and politics, not only because there appears to be no principled way to define either of these categories, but also because, in practice, what we call 'secularism' has often constituted the opposite of separation: namely, a consistent effort to extend a universalist ethic throughout society for the purpose of achieving general acceptance of certain ideals as well as with the goal of maintaining social cohesion. Although it is true in simple historical terms that the separationist model was articulated originally in terms of categories borrowed from Christian theology and the Roman Catholic Church, the particular form of separation that has been bequeathed to modernity as a legacy of the wars of religion is one in which very little space and power has been retained by organized religion. A rereading of this history suggests that the main tendency of secularism is monolithic or universalist. As such, the theological genealogy may be less relevant than the inexorable logic of politics, which is expressed in the demand for an absolute sovereignty from which competing norms, including 'religious' ones, have been evacuated. This logical step was taken already by Thomas Hobbes in the middle of the seventeenth century. He argued that religion is always inherently political and that, conversely, any body politic also constitutes something like a church.

Despite the Christian idiom in which these ideas were expressed in earlier periods of European history, they arguably point to broader human and social realities that also apply, *mutatis mutandis*, in the Indian context. Where Bhargava and others have looked to Aśoka as a model for a distinctly Indian secularism, a brief rereading of the limited data pertaining to this period suggests instead that the Mauryan emperor may illustrate something that is *not* distinctive to such diverse imperial formations, but shared between East and West, as well as past and present: namely, the need for a state ethic, if not a state religion. ‘Secularism’ is simply our name for this universal ethic, which Aśoka termed Dhamma and Akbar termed Sulh-i Kull (Total Peace). Like Dhamma and Sulh-i Kull, our secularism is supposed to transcend the particular religions precisely through its universality. The only question is how much pluralism shall be allowed—how much individual and communal derogation from those otherwise universal norms which, precisely in order to fulfil their own function, must extend and progress ever further through society, like Aśoka’s Dhamma emissaries.

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[110] Upinder Singh, *Political violence in ancient India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), p. 55, states that Aśoka 'plucked dhamma or dharma out of religious discourse and made it a central political issue'. At this stage of our knowledge, however, I suggest it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify dharma as originally either religious or political.

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