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IV. Discussion

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Comparing the results of our two case studies, it has to be noted in the first instance that contexts differ immensely. On the one hand, we have the rather minor issue of secular activists from BHA and NSS campaigning to be included into a religious programme hosted by a British broadcaster, while on the other hand, we have the Nepali media debate on the very nature of the Nepali state a few years after the transformation of this state into a secular republic. It should thus come as no surprise that the Nepali debate does not include statements related to secular belief groups and that the British debate is not directly related to the question of the secularity of the British state. However, remarkably, some lines of argument related to particular notions of secular can be found in both cases, whereas some are curiously omitted in one or the other context.

First, the notion of secularity as impartiality in religious affairs can be found both in the British and in the Nepali case. In Nepal this understanding is tied to the literal meaning of *dharmanirapekṣa* and championed by religious minorities, who strive for equal treatment and recognition before the law. This is related to the evocation of the term *dharmanirapekṣa* in the context of a re-imagination of Nepal as a multi-religious rather than a Hindu society. In the British example, both the multireligiosity and the impartiality of *Thought for the Day* in relation to religious traditions is taken as a given – since there are not only Christians, but Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus etc. involved in the programme. Rather, BHA and NSS question the impartiality of the BBC when it comes to religious vs. secular belief systems, accusing them of giving unfair advantage to the former. In other words, whereas in Nepal the state is demanded to become secular in the sense of impartial towards religion, in Britain the BBC is demanded to extend impartiality towards secular beliefs themselves.

A second interesting point of comparison is related to the notion that secular denotes some kind of oppositional stance towards religion. The Nepali term *dharmanirapekṣa*, as has been pointed out in our second case study, does not share this meaning at all and addressing someone as atheist can even be taken as affront. It is thus of great importance in order for the concept of *dharmanirapekṣa* to be accepted that such a denotation is largely absent from the term. Remarkably, in the British case, BHA and NSS, while not denying that they have atheist members, take great pains pointing out that their position does not require an atheist worldview and cannot be reduced to that. This indicates that in Britain, too, atheism continues to have a bad reputation. And yet, whereas in Nepal, *dharmanirapekṣa* is sometimes understood as anti-Nepali or anti-Hindu, an understanding of secular as anti-British or anti-Christian is widely absent from the British debate. If anything, secularism is regarded in Britain as directed against religion as such, whereas in Nepal, it is, in some cases, understood as directed against a particular religion (Hinduism) and as being sponsored by another religion (Christianity or Islam).

Both media discourses, for all their differences, thus clearly mirror the fundamental binary division of the academic discourse, i.e. the understanding of secular as either denoting religious impartiality or anti-religiosity, which has been at the core of the debate since Holyoake's days. As has been pointed out in the introduction, the understanding of secular as impartiality, as championed by Charles Taylor and others, has of late been criticized for failing to see that the idea of religious impartiality is inseparable from a specifically Western understanding of religion and has grown out of a specifically Christian tradition. The secular sphere, as Talal Asad and others have argued, is not impartial, but rather precisely that: secular. In other words, while it is true that religions in a secular state do not have to subordinate themselves to other religions anymore, it is also true that they have to subordinate themselves to the secular state and the idea of secularity, the "immanent frame" in Taylor's words, itself.

This criticism of secular as a Western concept masquerading as a universal principle is particularly strong in the Nepali context. As our second case study has demonstrated, in Nepal, religion is not primarily taken as a private affair, but as part of the common public, of the national identity and of the many evolving ethnic identities. This has a lot to do with an understanding of religion that differs fundamentally from Western conceptions. The Sanskrit term *dharma*, which forms part of the newly invented term *dharmanirapeksa*, is actually not properly translated as “religion”, since in the pre-modern South Asian context, *dharma* denotes the cosmic law and world order, both transcendent and immanent, as described and fixed in the huge *dharmaśāstra* literature. This understanding of *dharma* as an eternal principle does not allow a distinction into secular and religious, profane or sacred, because it penetrates everything. In other words, the very distinction between religion and secular (or religion and anything else for that matter) appears suspicious in the Nepali context, whereas in the West, it is taken for granted. As our first case study has demonstrated, the idea that secularity is the standard mindset of British society, while the religious mindset is exceptional, has regularly been stressed by the BBC. Sometimes, they go so far as to declare all non-religious programming “secular”, thereby quite explicitly equalling secularity with an overall normalcy. Paradoxically, thus, anti-secular forces in Nepal like the Hindutva movement and secularist groups in Britain like BHA and NSS have one thing in common: They both argue (with Asad) for the distinctiveness and non-neutrality of the secular position, as opposed to the (Taylorian) idea of secular as universal, impartial and indifferent principle.