

# “A lot of the thinking about secularism that I’ve done has grown out of intensive discussions about the Indian situation” – Charles Taylor

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In December, the Canadian philosopher Professor **Charles Taylor** gave a lecture at LSE entitled *Democracy, Diversity, Religion*. During his visit, Sonali Campion spoke to him about how his engagement with CSDS in Delhi over the last 20 years has informed his research, and what western democracies can learn from India’s brand of “open secularism”.



## You spent a year in India recently, what was it that took you there?

I’m working with some friends at the [Centre for the Study of Developing Societies](#) (CSDS). I first got to know them in 1981 when they invited me to give a series of lectures and I was very struck because they were looking for the right kind of social science language to discuss the Indian situation. I’ve always thought that the standard American political science jargon barely fits our situation, but because it was culture-aligned it certainly didn’t fit India. So I was very impressed with Rajni Kothari and other founding figures who were trying to do this. I remained in contact with them and came back quite often.

Then one of my former students who is very interested in this issue of secularism became a director. A lot of the thinking about secularism that I’ve done and other people have done was partly keeping in mind the Indian case and so there became this very fruitful cross-discussion.

## How have you found your engagement with India has influenced your thought?

You learn so much. For instance you learn that there are different enemies of “open secularism”, the kind of secularism that is seen as “responsible diversity”. Something we don’t really see in the West is a party like the BJP, where some of its major thinkers have been people without any piety at all. People like Savarkar were atheists mobilising religion for political ends, which produces this mobilisation of popular piety in a very sinister fashion. This is quite different from certain kinds of Islamic anti-secularism, motivated by fundamentalist but nevertheless deeply held beliefs.

The other thing is that the formula for what has become “Indian secularism” was sort of negotiated between Gandhi and Nehru. Here you have a deeply devout and religious figure following his interpretation of Hinduism on one hand, and this Cambridge-educated non-believer on the other. But they worked out this brand of secularism which was concerned with dealing fairly and openly with diversity, and not stigmatising or trying to suppress the expression of different religions. Rajeev Bhargava at CSDS recognised that formula, and studied its basic principles. I borrowed from that and modified it when I was co-running the [Commission on Reasonable Accommodation](#) in Quebec, and it informed my thinking on *laïcité* [the absence of religious involvement in government affairs]. Finally, myself and my research assistant in the Commission, we expanded our work into a book *Laïcité et Liberté de Conscience, or Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*, which has been translated into multiple languages which we launched to expand discussion.

So a key origin of all this is intensive discussions with people in the Indian situation. If you’re really open to cross these boundaries, you get formulations you wouldn’t otherwise.



*Credit: LSE/Nigel Stead*

**India has by and large managed its pluralism – religious and otherwise – using with this unique secular formula. Is it necessary for a democracy to be secular to succeed?**

If it's diverse in its population, yes. In principle you can imagine totally homogenous society or one with very minor differences that no one makes a big fuss about which wouldn't have to be secular and it could still be a successful democracy. But in cases of great diversity, which India has been for 2000 years or more, certainly. Western societies are becoming more diverse, in a large part because of migration but also because identities among native populations that were not previously recognised are coming to the fore. Feminism is an example, right? Or different sexual or gender identities. Those are alterations that would have to happen even if no one immigrated, it's tied with the modern age in the West. But then of course that is increased in spades by the fact that we have huge immigration in recent years. 50 years ago, sure we had Catholics, Protestants and Jews but nothing else, and now we have everything you can imagine, so for all these reasons our democracies – Canada, the UK, US, Europe – have to deal with a relatively new and very striking diversity.

**So is there a specific lesson Western democracies should be taking from India in the interpretation of secularism?**

Yes, because as a republic India was born with this tremendous diversity, and they were born with a big wound around that, because of the partition. They could have said Pakistan is for the Muslim, India is for the Hindus, but Gandhi and Nehru and all the people around them said no, we regret that Pakistan feels they have to go, but we want to be true to the broad independence movement, so we want to have a society for everybody. So the Constitution refused to stigmatise Muslims, or indeed anyone else.

**And on the flip side are there lessons from Pakistan about secularism?**

The whole thing is tragic because before partition both India and Pakistan thought they would have diverse societies. But the evolution has been towards a pious Muslim polity, partly triggered by the secession of Bangladesh, so these religious organisations tried to make Islam and Sharia much more central to the Pakistan identity. What follows from that is persecution of Christians, persecution of Shia Muslims and other minorities. Democracies find it very hard to cope when the ideology makes huge masses of the population second-class citizens. It's a slide, a different sense of what it is to have an Islamic State. What Iqbal and Jinnah envisioned was very different to the Pakistan that has emerged.

**You mentioned Gandhi and the fact that he was both deeply religious and yet supportive of secularism –**

## can you be both religious and secular?

If secular means that you're in favour of a regime that respects these differences, where the state does not lean towards any particular denomination, and, most important of all, you respect and uphold freedom of conscience. If that is what secular means then I am both a believer and I am secular. If secular means the "wrong" model of *laïcité*, where you are trying to control diversity and put it in its place, then that's a problem. We have these two models you see, that is what is highlighted in the book, we call them "open secularism" and "closed secularism".

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

### About the Authors

**Charles Taylor** is a Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at McGill University. His recent works include: *Modern Social Imaginaries*, *A Secular Age*, and *Laïcité et Liberté de Conscience* (with Jocelyn Maclure).



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