

[In My Opinion: Call for Religious Education](#)

Category : [October/November/December 2011](#)

Published by dharmalingam on Sep. 05, 2011

In My Opinion

Call for Religious Education

Secularism in education means teaching about all religions, not being silent on the subject

By Dr. J.S. Rajput

Religiosity has been put on the back burner in India. The adherents of Hinduism are treated as pariahs the moment they talk of ancient India, Indian heritage, culture, the Vedas and India's contribution to global civilization during the last two millennia, if not even earlier. India is in an unusual situation; the majority of the population fear being labeled "communal," that is, against one religion or another. They may be so labeled by those who follow a post-independence interpretation of secularism in which religion is to be avoided. But those leaders of India's original freedom struggle who lived to see this interpretation of secularism have urged us to consider religion, especially in education.

One of the sharpest minds in contemporary history, C. Rajagopalachari, warned in the late 60s: "Mass education, in the sense herein explained, which is to result not only in knowledge and mental preference of the good but in the capacity and readiness to work and suffer for it, cannot, so far as I see, be organized except on a religious base; religious in the broadest sense. To misunderstand the 'secularity' to which people think we are pledged and to treat religion as untouchable is one of the many unfortunate follies our government has fallen into. It is not impossible, or even very difficult, to deal with and include religion in a nationwide effort to make men truly religious, each in the way shown by his or her own religion and add to it a spirit of understanding and respect for other people's religion and way of life."

Raja Ji's contemporary Maulana Abul Kalam Azad expressed similar views in 1948: "Our present difficulties, unlike those of Europe, are not creation of materialistic zealots but of religious fanatics. If we want to overcome them, the solution lies not in rejecting religious instruction in elementary stages but in imparting sound and

healthy religious education under our direct supervision so that misguided credulism may not affect the children in their plastic stage."

Maulana had examined the consequences of divorcing religions from education in the following terms: "What will be the consequence if the government undertakes to impart purely secular education? Naturally, people will try to provide religious education to their children through private sources. How these private sources are working today or are likely to work in future is already known to you. I know something about it and can say that, not only in villages but even in cities, the imparting of religious education is entrusted to teachers who are literate but not educated."

Hinduism accepts Divinity in every creation, every human being included. It cannot be unfair to any person of a different faith. Consequently, secularism is an inbuilt part of Hinduism in the sense that it implores everyone to remain true to his own faith and at the same time support others in being true to theirs. There could hardly be an approach more conducive to creating a cohesive world order that survives on mutual respect and creates conditions for living and working together, the prime requirement of our times.

The judiciary has also realized the role of religions in inculcating moral and ethical values in children and citizens. In a 2002 judgment, the Supreme Court stated, "Children must be made aware of [the] basics of all the religions of the people of India. They should know the commonalities and learn to respect differences wherever these exist." This in no way violates the spirit of secularism as enshrined in India's constitution. The extent of mutuality amongst religions is a measure of the maturity of people and communities. Hinduism continuously reaffirms that learning is a process that continues until life proceeds on the other journey.

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