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sacredsecular: contemplative cultural critique

Lata Mani, Routledge, New Delhi and London, 2009, 223pp., ISBN: 978-0-415-48448-0 (Pbk), £14.95

Discussions on religion by spiritual practitioners often put many secular readers on edge: either they are dismissed as facile new ageism or suspiciously viewed as peddling soft saffron Hindutva agendas. Lata Mani's *SacredSecular* intervenes into this discursive terrain by eloquently and bravely offering spiritual thought and practice as a resource for renewing our severed connections to the world. She insists on conjoining sacred with secular perspectives in an attempt to counter the shrill polemics that polarize religion and secularity in the world today. *SacredSecular* brings a contemplative mindfulness to bear upon the aspirations of a progressive secular vision and insists upon the non-duality of matter and spirit, self and society. In this luminous new book, Mani grapples with the conundrums of our modern world by offering a 'sacredsecular' contemplative critique to bear upon religious and market fundamentalisms.

The book comprises twenty-four essays on a wide variety of topics ranging from neoliberal globalization and Hindu fundamentalism to everyday objects such as fading flowers and trash to explore the consequences of buying into divisive and binaristic conceptions where embodiment is pitted against fantasy, matter is pitted against mind. The essay form is particularly well suited to convey her thoughts. The essay, derived from the Middle French word, 'essai', which is itself derived from the late Latin *exagium* (act of weighing) connotes 'trial, attempt, essay' and therefore offers the perfect form through which to assay a dialogue between sacred and secular modes of thought. The tone here is not one of objective distance, didactic authority or academic expertise but one that is intimate, searching, poetic, philosophical.

SacredSecular follows on Mani's two previous books: *Contentious Traditions*, her landmark critique of tradition and modernity in nineteenth century colonial India, which offered a touchstone for many subsequent feminist analyses of colonial and national discourses. Her next book, *Interleaves*, elucidates how illness can renew one's severed connection to the body: the ruptures brought about by physical illness enable a rich elaboration of what it means to be human, in all its terror, vulnerability, openness. Here, she brings the wisdom of her spiritual insights to augment her incisive scholarly analysis and develops the importance of a dynamic self-reflexivity, poised between inwardness and relationality, and insists on the crucial role of introspection in the work of redressing social injustice.

SacredSecular builds on this observation of the importance of bringing together secular relationality and spiritual reflexivity. The *SacredSecular* approach enables us to understand the emotional, social ravages that result from habitually perceiving as separate that which belongs together. When we, thus, pull things apart in a strictly instrumentalist fashion, we begin to exalt youth and beauty (illustrated through examples of our approaches to trash, cut flowers), and scorn that which has outlived its utilitarian value.

Mani persuasively argues that in order to appreciate the interconnected, non-dual nature of the world we must also rethink our received interpretive frameworks. She observes that the language and concepts of sociocultural analysis are manifestly secular. While the sacred is often an object of analysis, it is seldom taken seriously as a mode of analysis. Post-structuralist theory, while dismantling many of the shibboleths of Enlightenment thought, does not trouble the binarism that relegates the sacred to the realm of superstition and upholds the secular as progressive. This presumption of the sacred as inevitably superstitious and regressive, and the arrogation to the secular of all that is 'progressive' is a benchmark of otherwise incisive critiques of culture and society. Mani argues that the failure to take the sacred seriously, as more than as a bounded object of study, but rather as a conceptual framework has been the obstinate blind spot of post-structuralist theory and interdisciplinary social theory.

Mani develops her contemplative cultural critique in *SacredSecular* by reclaiming spirituality from the corruption of institutionalized religion. To bring insights from both spiritual and secular knowledge systems to bear on current phenomena requires that one move between two epistemes, two knowledge systems. Indeed, we must bring to it a '*sacredsecular*' framework of analysis. Thus, sacred and secular must be viewed as inherently intertwined epistemes – the necessity for introspection is essential to the secular project of striving for social justice. Likewise, spiritual practitioners must engage with the suffering in the world rather than make the self the sole object of improvement.

SacredSecular demonstrates how a contemplative cultural critique illuminates the inherent embeddedness of human and non-human life worlds. Mani reveals the emotional and spiritual crises that follow as a consequence of severing these essentially connected forms of life and being. By insisting upon non-duality, we are able to perceive and respond to the world in its complex embeddedness.

SacredSecular is at once moving, insightful, incisive, profound and demonstrates, with compassion and wisdom, how to cultivate an ethics of everyday life that acknowledges and celebrates the interconnectedness of all life.

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