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A Comparative Study to Talal Assad and Charles Taylor's Approaches to Secularization

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Abstract:

To critique the traditional thesis of secularization, which prioritizes secularism over religion, I shall refer to both Charles Taylor and Talal Assad's significant contributions to secularization studies. Taylor's proposition examines the historical narrative of secularity and provides an in-depth philosophical understanding of secularization theory. He justifies the re-emergence of religion by the fact that religion does not disappear but rather it adapts itself to the secular age. However, Assad adopts an anthropological approach that seeks to disclose the contradictions of secular modernity and liberal democratic states. Assad is more interested in the formation of the secular as an epistemic category than secularization as a historical process or secularism as a political doctrine. His main concern is to problematize the concept of the secular through a genealogical method that seeks to consider different sensibilities and practices like the myth, the sacred and pain in the formation of the secular. These striking examples provide helpful materials in the construction of the secular from other non-secular or religious practices. They also prove that there has been always a relationship between religion and the secular. Therefore, I argue that the concept of the secular cannot be analyzed in isolation from the religious, nor can it be universally identified as a totality. My intention here is to underscore the idea that any rigid division between religion and the secular or any attempt to put them in sequential, linear or dichotomous positions will only impoverish both. I argue also that the more secularism identifies itself with reason and supposedly Eurocentric universal attributes the more religion reinforces its 'essence' against secularism. Religion's reactive response to secularism is simply the outcome of secularism's alliance with reason and science.

Keywords: Religion, secularism, secularization, atheism

1. Introduction

The last quarter of the twentieth century was characterized by a revival of religious and political Islamic movements. This modern religiosity has increased even in what are usually considered secular societies. This fact puts into question the linear development of history whose conventional narrative moves from religion to secularism, and it challenges the alleged supremacy of the secular over the religious that these narratives imply. Scholars have exhausted the dichotomies of religion versus secularism as they tried to prioritize one over the other. While secularism, according to many of these narratives, is allied to reason, religion is relegated to the irrational sphere. Such a philosophical dichotomy can be traced back to the Enlightenment when reason was an effective tool in debunking religion, representing it as a superstitious practice that should be banished from the public sphere where reason should prevail. More importantly, a great deal of literature attributed the secular age in modern society to the advance of science and technology and underestimated the influence of religion in that process.

Proof about the resurgence of religion in the political and public sphere in the contemporary world can be found on the front page of every newspaper. Religious symbols and groups affect the entire political spectrum from the extreme right to the extreme left, from defenders of liberties, human rights to adherents of authoritarian regimes, from the United States to South Sudan, the world's newest country. Throughout the rise of the secular, secularization has paradoxically provided an essence to religion. The forces of the secular have mistakenly believed that reason will drive religion out from the public sphere, where they claim reason must reign. However, what happened was the opposite. Religion consolidates its essence especially in non-secular states through the resurgence of Islamic movements. It is very important to highlight the fact that there is a fine line between a *belief* in the essence of religion as one unified Islamic entity and the *real existence* of such unity (Tezcan, 2019). It is true that religion has ideologically essentialized itself through history; however, this does not mean that it has a *de facto* existing essence.

The historical demystification of the human understanding of the world, the gradual decrease of religion in the public sphere and the privatization of religious beliefs characterize our modern secular age. However, the assumed linear progression of religion's decline has been challenged by a resurgence of religion and belief in both western and non-western societies, especially in the latter where religion is entangled with questions of the authority of knowledge and culture. This proves that the secularization thesis of religion's inexorable decline cannot remain unquestioned. We must explain the continuous development of religion in modern life. What are the theoretical frameworks that explain the

resurgence of religion? How do these theories reshape the secularization thesis? and how do the formations of the secular reshape religion?

My emphasis on the present condition of religion and its importance in the secular age does not deny the current secularity, nor does it favour the pre-modern condition of theology as many scholars claim (Collier, 45). Instead, it is an extended version of secularity that seeks to critique and deconstruct the scientific supremacy of history and knowledge while taking into account spirituality and religion. It is also a condition where the line that used to divide religion and the secular begins to link the two.

2. Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are to analyze and evaluate the contributions of both Charles Taylor and Talal Assad regarding the relationship between religion and the secular. Moreover, I intend to put into question the classical secularization thesis that has prioritized the secular over the religious. Three research questions will be discussed in this thesis:

- How do attitudes, practices and behaviors come together to form the secular and the religious historically and genealogically?
- How do these practices reset the supposed borders between the so-called 'two polarities'?
- How do Assad and Taylor's theses approach and reshape secularization through their theoretical frameworks?

The first two research questions underscore Assad's thesis that universal definitions and barriers between the secular and the religious are not essentialist definitions but rather subject to historical displacements. The ultimate goal behind this research is to demonstrate that religion and the secular are not necessarily rivals or consequential unities but rather 'Siamese Twin'. (Assad, 1993, p.134)

3. Review of Literature

For Assad, the secularization and counter-secularization thesis in modern anthropology has not succeeded in explaining the historical evolution and formation of religion and the secular (2003). Assad challenges the *essentialist* definitions that govern both the secular and religious. His scholastic attempts mainly address the interdependence between the two and how any definition of religion or the secular will lead to an essentialist postulate. By rejecting the binary opposition of religion and the secular and embracing a dynamic condition of both concepts, Assad displaces them in the sphere of '*anact*' that is subject to socio-political and historical upheavals.

In his book *Genealogies of Religion* (1993), Assad criticizes the universal definition of religion and demonstrates that Clifford Geertz's essentialist definition of religion cannot be attainable (2017). Geertz's definition of religion as '*a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful...moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence*' (90) becomes subject to criticism from Assad. Assad's anti-essentialist view in his criticism of Geertz is meant to ally religion with the practice that is necessarily related to a particular place and time. However, Assad's anti-essentialist stance differs from the one elaborated by Wilfred. C. Smith in his book *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1991) Assad's critique of Smith examines Smith's failed efforts to underscore the importance of the '*adverbial function of religion*' and how actions are necessary components in understanding religion (20).

To fully assimilate Assad's and Taylor's theses, we must underscore the nuances between secularism, secularization and the secular. Differences between these terms exist in a mutable status. That is to say, they are not static but rather subject to ideological and historical changes. José Casanova (2011) provides a tentative definition of secularization based upon recent widespread usage of the term in the classical theory of secularization: '*Secularization as a decline of religious beliefs and practices... as the privatization of religion... as the differentiation of the secular spheres*' (7). According to many scholars, Secularization represents a transformation from religiosity to secular practices and behaviors. Therefore, an increase of secular values at the expense of religious values is taking place in the modern era. These definitions were debated and evaluated both by Assad and Casanova.

The secular is '*neither singular in origin nor stable in its historical identity*' (Assad, 2003, 121). Thus, it is not easy to address it directly; instead, it is better to approach it through its '*shadows*' (16); that is, through its historical and concrete representations. The secular had several meanings until the late nineteenth century when modern anthropologists allegedly unified and universalized the concept of the secular. From this unification of the secular, secularism legitimizes itself. This was also a Durkheimian attitude in unifying the concept that Assad criticizes. According to Assad, the secular is a concept that precedes the political doctrine of secularism. It is a concept that is formed out of concepts, practices and sensibilities. Taylor also highlights the theological origins of the secular from Christianity and how the secular is currently denoting the sphere of the '*not sacred*' or the '*not religious*'. (123)

It is important to demonstrate that Assad's intention in the *Formation of the Secular* is not to come up with alternatives regarding secularism but rather to problematize the *secular* as an epistemic category and to show how '*certain practices, concepts and sensibilities*' have produced secularism (2003). His criticism of secularism aims at demonstrating the historical practices that produce the secular at the expense of the religious.

From the twentieth century onward, secularism has become associated with modernity and a mode of political practice and doctrine. According to Assad, secularism is a transcendent political medium that mediates different practices like religion, class and gender in allegedly coherent modernity. Matthew Scherer (2013) clearly states the ideological justifications of secularism in the public sphere: '*Secularism is an idealized vision of political life that dredges out of public life as much cultural depth as possible to secure the authority of public reason and a rational morality*' (4). Since the conceptualization of the secular is contingent upon historical epistemes, no possible transcendental definition will exist.

Still, the preliminary definitions of the three concepts are meant to provide a comprehensible and agreed platform for further examination of the secular, secularization and secularism in both Assad's and Taylor's scholarships.

Like Assad, Taylor traces the mutual and historical influence between religion and secularism and argues in his groundbreaking book *The Secular Age* to reexamine the traditional secularist thesis through his analysis of a historical transformation of religion, namely Christianity. Taylor's thesis rejects the taken-for-granted assumption that positivism or rationalism is superior to religion. He contends that the modern secular age in the status quo is attributed to historical moral narratives that exert an influence on Christianity to reshape itself and that the Reformation, for example, in Europe is not attributed to the emergence or advancement of science or technology, but rather to historical pressure on religion to adapt itself to the secular society. Therefore, religion in the contemporary condition has not disappeared but rather reformed.

Assad and Taylor underscore the vital importance of religion in the formation of the secular and vice versa. Ironically, while the secular has assimilated several non-secular and religious practices historically, it tends to forget that it is in debt to religion. For this reason, any attempt to put religion and the secular in binary opposition or a linear state will emancipate neither religion nor the secular from the essentialist and rigid definition.

4. Methodology

Due to the theoretical nature of this paper, the researcher will adopt an interdisciplinary approach that emphasizes anthropological, historical and philosophical frameworks. For this reason, two main corpora will be analyzed and discussed as key references namely Assad's *Formations of the Secular* (2003) and Taylor's book *A Secular Age* (2007). These corpora provide a general basis for this research paper. This research also draws on two methodological approaches: the analysis of textual primary sources of both Assad and Taylor and the historical contextualization of concepts. The proposed research will also discuss several related works of literature that produce interdisciplinary sections: new historicism, cultural anthropology, politics, cultural studies and religious studies.

As far as the anticipated problems are concerned, one of the expected difficulties that I will encounter in this research is the terminology and how to delimit the concepts by defining or referring to a certain scholar's definitions of the secular, secularization and secularism. This is because this paper does not provide an answer to the definition of the secular but rather questions and critiques the taken-for-granted essentialist definition of the secular as well as problematizes the category of the secular. Therefore, for the sake of clarity, this paper shall provide definitions based on scholarly references.

Since secularism is a consequence of historical change, chiefly those which occurred to religion, it is evident that a comparative study would crystallize the historical movement of secularism by providing an acute exploration of the secular thesis. In her article 'Reflections on Comparative Literature in the Twenty-First Century', [Susan Bassnett](#) (2011) provides the following definition:

'It should be seen simply as a method of approaching literature, one that foregrounds the role of the reader, but which is always mindful of the historical context in which the act of writing and the act of reading takes place'. (9)

No concept can be studied in isolation, and rightly so, no one should attempt such a reductionist approach. This historical foregrounding treats knowledge as a haven of symbiotic parts, which, if approached comparatively, can illuminate moments of reciprocal understanding. As this research paper purports, the differing secular approach of Assad and Taylor converges in their examination of religious stipulations. As befits the initiation of this comparative study, it is essential to flesh out the following affirmations:

- Alternating between conceptions.
- Symbiotic study of the thinkers.
- Symbiotic study of convergences and divergences.
- Delineation of historical contexts.

5. Comparative Analysis of Assad and Taylor

The religious influence within the secular societies today urges us to think about the fact that the historical and conceptual relationship between religion and the secular is not necessarily conflicting. Therefore, secular liberalism should be revisited so that secularism's virtues will be preserved. Assad and Taylor attempt to highlight the same argument that secularization is not a separation between religion and state or the marginalization of religion in the private space. However, their approaches applied to tackle the reexamination of secularization are different.

Taylor endorses a historical narrative to explain how people moved from a state when believing in God was not a choice to a state when God became an option among other alternatives. He illustrates that the modern condition of belief has been diversified in the secular age, leading to new forms of beliefs. These new ways undermine secularization's classical assumptions that religion decreases or is marginalized. Assad focuses more on the genealogical examination of the secular instead of historical narratives of secularization or secularism. He adopts an anthropological approach to trace the construction of the secular genealogically and how such formation is not linear. That is to say, the formation of the secular does not only move from religion to the secular with the decline of religion but also from the secular to the religious as well, which proves the interdependence of the two.

To penetrate, albeit acutely, the differing views of Assad and Taylor about the question of secularism, it is first essential to demarcate the overarching categories of comparison. However, before this is possible, it is of paramount value to advance that this comparative study forges a symbiotic analysis of conceptions and ideas, namely, to enclose the question of Indeed, secularism and its conflicting demands:

- The Plight of Transformation: The Religious and the Secular
- Secularity: Between Humanism and Genealogy
- Persistent Ordeal: Defining Religion

6. The Plight of Transformation: The Religious and the Secular

It is worth mentioning that both Assad and Taylor examine the issue of religious transformation and its relation to the secular. Assad insists on the fact that the genealogy of the secular is full of essential postulates which are mainly contradictory. The secular, just as the religious, keep changing throughout history due to political and ideological push and pull factors. Assad argues that religion is an *act* that is subject to Spatio-temporal attributes and therefore no universal characteristics exist. Such religious and secular fluidity is imperative in that it avoids any essential characteristics and thus produces more diversity and heterogeneity of religious discourse than homogeneity or universality. Although there is one religious text in a certain religion, people have dealt with it differently and have produced different practices in different times and spaces. That is why Assad insists that any religion is not essentially dangerous. Here, he is alluding to Islam. For instance, the concept of Islamophobia was introduced to the English language in 1923. The question that imposes itself is why not before that date. Why do fundamentalist discourses today attract more attention from the scholastic discussions and conferences than in the previous centuries although we are about to deal with the same Islamic texts? of course, western discussions about threats of Islam might be as old as Plato's cave, it is not until the last century that religious discourses about Islam and extremism have been intensified. There are indeed other variables and internal factors that have affected the spread of religious fundamentalism, but the genealogy of the secular through history has been an effective contributor to the extreme religious status quo. As Assad (2003) illustrates: 'It might be reasonable therefore to evaluate particular religious threats without the need to confront the general danger of religion' (526). Religion in this sense is not dangerous per se.

Likewise, Taylor (2007) underscores the fact that religion has been moulded into other 'religious' forms. Christianity has adapted itself although it has undergone historical pressure. Now there is an 'unheard of pluralism of outlooks, religious, non-religious and anti-religious conditions, in which the number of possible positions seems to be increasing without end. He states:

'But the interesting story is not simply one of decline, but also of a new placement of the sacred or spiritual concerning individual and social life. This new placement is now the occasion for re-composition of spiritual life in *new forms*, and for new ways of existing both in and out of relation to God' (437).

Taylor criticizes the 'subtraction stories' which are based on the assumption that the secular age emerges when humans liberate themselves from religious and confining beliefs. He also argues against secularization theory on the fact that the modern and secular age is the outcome of 'new inventions, newly constructed self-understanding and related practices' (22). It seems plausible to say that just as human beings were innovative in the construction of modernity, they were also innovative in regenerating Christianity. If Christianity can be reshaped, could Islam experience the same path although both religions had different historical accumulations?

While Taylor extensively discusses Christianity in relation to secularism, he overlooks the implementation of his theory on other religions namely Islam. However, Taylor makes it clear that secularism is historically bounded to Western culture and its religion; therefore, no generalization is possible. Similarly, Assad argues for the fact that 'Islam' is subject to perpetual modification due to the social context in which Islamic discourse endorses, whether such social context is secular or non-secular. Assad's essay *'The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam'* (2009) expresses the relationship between context and Islam in shaping the concept of Islam:

'My argument is that if the anthropologist seeks to understand religion by placing it conceptually in its social context, then how that social context is described must affect the understanding of religion' (16)

Undoubtedly, the way Islam is perceived and understood in secular societies from the perspective of Muslim immigrants is not similar to the way it is understood from the perspective of fundamentalists in the Middle East or by Indonesian Muslims. It seems that any religion and its social context depend on each other to identify themselves because no religion can be fully perceived as a self-sufficient and all-inclusive entity.

For Taylor, it is only through a mutual acknowledgement that Christianity and exclusive humanism can admit their fragile condition and reestablish them to face their common issues. Both Assad and Taylor highlight the polarities' fragility. For Assad, the secular attempts to avoid and overlook its internal contradiction through essentializing religion and accordingly essentializing itself, while for Taylor the fragility of the secular age is based on what he calls 'buffered selves'. These are secular selves that believe in self-sufficient agency and individuality without stepping out of the immanent frame. The emptiness and the malaise of the immanent frame are attributed firstly to the failure of the buffered selves for not stepping outside its parochial frame to reach the fullness and secondly to the assumption that religion is a dichotomy to their immanent frame.

The relationship between secularism and religion does not necessarily lead to conflict especially if we trace back their interdependence to capitalism. Like Assad and Taylor, In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber (2013) highlights the ascetic attitudes among Protestants. Weber demonstrates how the concept of 'calling' denotes religious tasks set by God as obligations, and that such tasks must be achieved in worldly activities. It is interesting to show how religious and moral justifications especially in the Reformation paved the way to worldly tasks. Calvinism as a branch of Protestantism is a typical example that demonstrates how Predestination shaped the spirit of capitalism namely in the

Western countries. Because God has already determined who should be saved ordained, Calvinists searched for worldly activities and therefore clues that ensure their salvation. As a result, their inclination to profit and material

achievements was purely a religious clue to God's salvation. Later, Protestant ethics became no longer necessary to maintain the spirit of capitalism because profit and materialism became salient features of the secular age and its economy. Therefore, Protestantism displaced to the so-called private space where those ethics become more personal and private than public. Western capitalism in the secular age entered the secular sphere while religion remained in the private sphere.

7. Secularity: Between Humanism and Genealogy

Although both thinkers have approached religion to the secular, there are still some main differences between them concerning defining religion. Taylor discusses secularity based on a western definition of religion as 'a sense of fullness'. The sense of fullness is not necessarily beliefs derived only from a transcendental and religious world, but rather it is something wider, more meaningful and deeper than our immanent frame. It cannot be expressed outside the humanist immanent frame. The sense of fullness in modern times is occasionally expressed. Modern people can rarely go beyond everyday concerns, and even when they start moving beyond immanence, rituals contribute to such fullness. The sense of fullness was prevailing and permanently accessible in the pre-modern period when both material and non-material worlds existed. However, Assad does not attribute any essentialist definition to religion, nor does he attempt to do that; instead, he has extensively discussed the ever-lasting tension between the secular and religion without clinging to static identities. Because religion and the secular are unfixed entities, they can never be identified. In the *Genealogies of Religion*, Assad (1993) addresses how religion becomes a de-historicized category and a trans-cultural phenomenon, which elevates religion to an autonomous essence.

8. The Strife of Religion and Secularity

It is also worth discussing the way both philosophers approach the tension between religion and secularity. Assad considers the binary opposition of religion and the secular as the core problem in *Formations of the Secular* and criticizes the universal characteristics of both polarities. For that reason, he espouses an anthropological approach based on a critical evaluation of time and space that denies any universal essentialism. Anthropologists have overlooked studies of the secular when they have approached religion. This is not sufficient for Assad because there is no way that an anthropologist can study religion in isolation from the secular.

Although Taylor problematizes the secularization thesis, he takes on a historical narrative of secularization as his approach. He tells the story of a gradual shift of belief from one religious condition of belief to several options of belief in our secular age. This seems contradictory in Taylor's scholastic endeavors. However, as Taylor argues, *A 'Secular Age'* is not meant to discuss a historical narrative of how secularity emerges to the surface but rather to give us a lesson that the linear trajectory of secularism does not lead to the loss of belief. Indeed, Taylor did not consider other non-western frames like the Islamic world; however, Taylor is so aware of the specificities of the Western tradition that adopting a universal approach would mistakenly reflect Christian history on non-western worlds.

More importantly, both thinkers explain the resurgence of religion differently. Assad examines the emergence of religion in the modern world through an essentialist definition that the secular gives in to religion. By essentializing religion, the secular identifies itself as a coherent totality through the process of secularization. It is essential to mention that Assad examines the relationship between the secular and the religious from the tension that exists namely between Islam and secularism. Assad argues that Islamic fundamentalism and secularism are in perpetual stimulus and response tension that is attributed to the binary opposition. However, Taylor merely examines the reemergence of religion and the different forms of religious belief and ethics from a North Atlantic and a Western historical view. He is more concerned with the 'we' and how the Christian belief took different forms in the secular age.

9. Persistent Ordeal: Defining Religion

The main reason behind the current conflict between religion and secularism is the definition of religion. The use of the theistic definition of religion causes a secular state to become practically atheistic. When secularism defines religion as purely theistic, it implicitly deduces that what remains is non-religious and therefore atheistically secular. For example, by eliminating religious language from the secular sphere, education and teaching become Godless and thus atheistic, but not truly secular. So, instead of being secular and neutral in approaching religion and non-religious practices, secularism becomes a-theocratic. The alliance of secularism with atheism is emphasized when secularism associate's religion with myth and non-religion with reason. This fact would alienate religion not only because it is theistic but also because it is subjective in the eyes of secularism. (Calvert, 2004)

This is where Assad's and Taylor's theses converge. Taylor and Assad avoid a dichotomous condition regarding the religious and the secular by refusing to define or essentialize religion. For Assad, the non-essentialist postulates of religion lessen the conflictual gaps between the secular and the religious. Such non-essentialism would keep religion unspecified to secularism. Likewise, For Taylor, keeping religion unidentified would trigger other forms and ways of beliefs that will not necessarily become religious in the traditional sense. Both thinkers highlight the fact that religion has its independent agency emancipated from any form of unique identity whether it is fundamentalist, moderate or indifferent to religious discourses.

10. Conclusion

The relationship between religion and secularism has proven to be historically and contemporarily dynamic although both polarities do not admit this fact. This is because secularism and religion are mistakenly keeping distance

and barriers for fear of transgressing each other's spheres. Practically, neither modern authoritarian regimes nor the most democratic countries can successfully banish religion to the private sphere. Indeed, it could be possible for authoritarian systems to use their repressive strategies against religion; but democratic regimes are more likely to have difficulty doing so unless they resort to their secular majority to repress religious minorities. This might be the case with France and its concept of 'Laïcité'. The French 'Laïcité' can be described as a sacralized doctrine accepted by most citizens to banish all forms of religious symbols that could represent a threat to historical and national achievements. The opposite is true in the United States, where the secular minority is likely to feel the menace of the Protestant majority.

There is no sufficient reason to separate religion from the public space in a democratic system; on the contrary, separating religion from politics can be counter-productive for democracy itself. As Casanova (2011) explains:

'Curtailling the 'free exercise of religion' per se must lead to curtailling the free exercise of the religious citizens civil and political rights and will ultimately infringe on the vitality of a democratic civil society'. (20)

It seems therefore that a rigid boundary against religion is not a requirement for democracy. The democratic principles employed to fight the oppression of the religious majority should be the same democratic measures to fight the oppression of the democratic majority. Democratic systems should protect all forms of religious practices or secular ones and ensure their access to political, social, and legal rights. There are many sufficient reasons to expect religion to remain and to maintain a position in the liberal democratic states. Transnational migrations, multiculturalism and the dramatic rise of globalization contribute to the increase of religious involvement in the political sphere. With the interference of science and technology in human space whether public or private and with the human power to construct and deconstruct itself, fragmented selves will necessitate a religious response and moral engagement in the age of pluralism and multiculturalism.

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