

Q. "Talal Asad is considered as father of anthropology of secularism." What do you know about his work? Give your own critical perspective.

Explicating Talal Asad's Concept of Secularism

Talal Asad argues with universal applicability and neutrality of secularism in his book "Formation of the secular: Christianity, Islam and Modernity." He argues with traditional concept of secularism that states that secularism can be uniformly applied across different cultures, historical and political contexts without significant adaptation. He contends that secularism does not encompass neutral laws in fact this concept of secularism is shaped by particular historical and cultural forces that reflect power dynamics of the state.

Expounding Key Aspects of Talal Asad's

Concept of Secularism

a. Relation between Secularism and Modernity

According to Talal Asad, "secularism and modernity are mutually constitutive, with

modernity relying on secular principles to frame its political and social discourse. The project of modernity is intertwined with secularization of public spaces and marginalization of religious authority."

Example of French Revolution: The French Revolution was mainly the result of efforts made by Enlightenment Philosophers to dismantle power of Catholic Church and promote secular values. Talal Asad says that this secularization was considered ^{essential} for laying the foundation of modern French Empire.

b. Genealogy of Secularism

Talal Asad ^{has} traced the historical development of secularism, particularly in the West, highlighting its roots in specific historical and political contexts. He explores how secularism developed in Enlightenment, colonialism and modern societies.

Example of European Enlightenment: Talal Asad discusses how secularism developed in Enlightenment which is a foundational moment for modernity.

Example of Colonialism: Talal Asad has also discussed how European colonial powers imposed secularism on colonized societies.

Example of US Constitution: Talal Asad has also discussed US constitution that establishes clear separation of church and state. In this way he has examined how modern constitutional

frameworks often embed secular principles.

c- Relation between Secularism and Power Dynamics

According to Talal Asad, secular state's laws are not neutral but they are shaped by particular historical and cultural forces that reflect the power dynamics of state.

Example of British Colonial Administrators in Egypt: Talal Asad studied how these administrators introduced reforms in Egypt that reflect colonial interests and ideologies.

Example of Regulation of Religious Symbols in France: Talal Asad has also studied that ban on Hijab in France reflects power dynamics of France that are aimed at preventing Muslim norms to influence French secular norms.

d- Relation between Public Morality and secular Governance

Talal Asad discusses how secular states often enact laws that regulate morality in ways that reflect their own cultural and historical norms.

Example of Prohibition of Alcohol in US:

In the United States, Prohibition Era (1920 to 1933) saw the manufacture and transportation of alcohol banned under 18th amendment in US constitution and **Volsstead Act**. This prohibition was influenced by temperance movements that linked alcohol with rise in street crimes. So, the aim was to create a moral society. This shows US' cultural

and historical contexts shaped its regulatory framework (Daniel Okrent, *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition*, 2010).

e. Relation between Religion and Secularism

Talal Asad has challenged the rigid binary choice between religion and secularism. He contends there exists interplay and overlap between religion and secularism by explaining how secular laws in various countries often embody moral values that have religious origins.

Example of laws of US: laws regulating marriage, sexuality and public behavior in secular states like US reflect Christianity.

Example of state Management and Reform of Religion in line with Secular ^{National} Goals: In Turkey,

the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) oversees appointment of imams and content of sermons highlighting that secularism is not separation of religion from the state but it is reform of religion according to secular goals of the state (Istar Ghozaydin, *The Rise of Diyanet*, 2019).

f. Relation between Secularism and Eurocentrism

Talal Asad critiques liberal secularism for its claim to universalism, arguing that it imposes Western norms and values on non-Western societies. He argues against the imposition of single secular

curriculum that prioritizes western scientific paradigms over local religious perspectives.

Example of Theory of Evolution and Creationism
Talal Asad critiques the theory of evolution as the approach of teaching

scientific concept of biology while considering Creationism as a non-scientific concept. He criticizes marginalization of religious beliefs and advocates for educational curricula that can accommodate diverse religious perspectives.

Critical Analysis of Talal Asad's

Concept of Secularism

Positive Attributes of Talal Asad's Perspective On Secularism

Talal Asad's perspective on secularism has numerous positive attributes.

i. Deconstruction of Neutrality of Secularism

Talal Asad's critique helps deconstruct the idea of secularism as a neutral framework.

For instance, India's secularism involves state intervention in religious matters and leads to marginalization of religious minorities. The

Citizenship Amendment Act passed on December 11, 2019 marginalizes Muslims, exemplifying how

religious considerations can influence state policies and challenge neutrality of secular governance.

ii- Recognition of Cultural Specificity

Talal Asad's work emphasizes the need to recognize cultural contexts in which secularism operates, challenging the imposition of western norms on non-western societies for the sake of modernity. For instance, Enforcement of Blasphemy laws in Pakistan highlights how religious sentiments and cultural norms shape legal practices. These laws often conflict with secular principles that advocate for freedom of expression, illustrating the complexities of applying universal secular ideals in culturally specific contexts (Farhat Haq, *The Blasphemy Laws of Pakistan*, 2013).

iii- Highlighting Relation between Secularism and Power Dynamics

Talal Asad's approach sheds light on how secularism reflects power dynamics of the state and it can exclude religious minorities. For instance, the discrimination and surveillance faced by Muslims in western countries post-9/11 incident underscore how secularism, when framed through the lens of national security, can disproportionately impact and marginalize certain religious groups (Rachel M. Crillum,

Muslims in a Post-9/11 America, 2018).

iv. Impact on Global Discourse

Talal Asad's critical discourse on secularism encourages policymakers to consider alternative ways of implementing secular frameworks that respect religious diversity. For instance, Switzerland's approach to secularism helps its policymakers to accommodate diverse religious traditions. This contrasts with more rigid interpretations of secularism found in other countries.

Negative Attribute of Talal Asad's

Perspective on Secularism

The primary negative attribute of Talal Asad's perspective on secularism is that this perspective has underestimated secularism's benefits.

Underestimating Secularism's Benefits

Critics argue that Talal Asad downplays the positive aspects of secularism such as its role in promoting religious freedom and fostering a neutral public sphere. For instance, Mathew Mathews has explained that Singapore practices secularism in its governance. It remains neutral in matters of religion. This secular governance has played a significant role

in fostering a pluralist society (Managing Diversity in Singapore, 2016).

Concluding Thoughts

Talal Asad's work on secularism is of capital significance in anthropology as he has given a contrasting view on neutrality and universal applicability of secularism. That's why he is known as father of anthropology of secularism. He has given insights about relation between secularism and religion; secularism and power dynamics of state, and secularism and western domination in non-western societies. Although his work ignores the benefits of secularism to little extent, but still his concept is of great importance in anthropology.