

Title—Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity

Author—Talal Asad

Year—2003

Categories: Islam, Religion, Secularism, Culture

Place: UK, US, France, Colonial Egypt

Time: 1780-Present

Argument Synopsis:

Asad's book is a first attempt at answering what an anthropology of secularism would look like. According to Asad, secularism presupposes new concepts of 'religion', 'ethics', 'politics', and new imperatives associated with them. Secularism is an enactment by which a political medium (representation of citizenship) redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender, and religion. Asad wonders: can anthropology contribute anything to the classification of questions about secularism? He views anthropology as more than a method and claims that it should not be equated with the direction given to inquiry by the pseudoscientific notion of 'fieldwork.' Central to the book is the separation between secularism and the secular; Asad is concerned with how the latter was formed and how the former operates in practice. He argues that secularism in practice moves from the secular as a religious concept to nationalism as a political agenda, which is an implicit religion in terms of subordinate values.

Each chapter of the book reads as standalone essays on a variety of topics focused around the concept of the secular. The general organization of the book is as follows: it begins with a partial genealogy of the concept of secularism, aimed specifically at questioning its self-evident character while simultaneously asserting that it marks something real. He claims that because the secular is so much a part of modern life, it is difficult to grasp it directly. Through this genealogy of secularism, Asad concludes that one outcome of the advent of secularism is the doctrine of 'human rights.' The other chapters in the first, more theoretical, section cover the notion of myth and discuss agency, pain, and cruelty in relation to embodiment. Asad reveals the social construction of pain and torture compared to incarceration, where pain and torture are considered inhumane while incarceration is privileged. The issue of crime and punishment cannot be separated from human rights, which in itself cannot be separated from power interests and secularism.

The second half of the book takes up Asad's theory in a more applied way. He uses his understanding of the secular to consider the notion of 'religious minorities' in Europe, in particular the characterization of European Muslims as minorities. Asad highlights Europe's current failure to articulate complex space that allows for multiple ways of life to flourish, in part due to the commitment to a specific doctrine of secularism. This ties into the following chapter that attempts to determine whether nationalism itself is essentially secular or religious. He questions whether in Europe's current state if it is possible for Muslims, or any other immigrants, to be represented as themselves.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The need to unpack big concepts like "secularization" and "modernization" is rarely recognized in modern society, to its detriment
- A secular state is a complex arrangement of legal reasoning, moral practice, and political authority
- False assumption that the essence of secularism is the protection of civil freedoms from the tyranny of religious discourse