

**Interrogating Post-Secularism:  
Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Talal Asad**

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# **Interrogating Post-Secularism: Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Talal Asad**

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## **Abstract**

This study is a comparative analysis of the theories of secularism by three influential contemporary scholars: Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Talal Asad. Jürgen Habermas proposes a new concept—post-secularism—to address “the continued existence of religious communities in a continually secularizing environment.” In this new context, Habermas suggests that religion and the secular have to learn from each other rather than subordinating religion to the authority of secular reason, like modern secularism. Yet Habermas insists that religion has to be “translated” by neutralizing its general dangerous components beforehand in order to contribute to the secular sphere. Broadly agreeing with Habermas, Charles Taylor argues that secularism is a way of managing the diversity of religious, non-religious, or anti-religious views without privileging one over another. However, for Taylor, since religious language is not understandable by all, a neutral “official” language has to be developed in a secular society. Whereas Talal Asad finds the essentialization of religion by modern secularists and continued by both Habermas and Taylor problematic; Asad instead suggests both religion and the secular are spatio-temporal constructions that have *no* universal essence. Therefore, for Asad, the increasing fear of a general religious revivalism, the rise of religious extremism, especially Islamic fundamentalism, could be addressed only by recognizing its construction in the particular socio-political circumstances instead of mystifying religion as *essentially* dangerous.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1.0</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.1</b>	<b>POST-SECUALRISM.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1.2</b>	<b>RESEARCH OBJECTIVES.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1.3</b>	<b>RESEARCH QUESTIONS.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>2.0</b>	<b>JÜRGEN HABERMAS .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>2.1</b>	<b>POST-SECULAR SOCIETY .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>2.2</b>	<b>PRE-POLITICAL ETHICS OF A SECULAR DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>2.3</b>	<b>AN AWARENESS OF WHAT IS MISSING.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>2.4</b>	<b>COMPLEMENTARY LEARNING PROCESS .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>3.0</b>	<b>CHARLES TAYLOR .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>3.1</b>	<b>REVISIONIST SECUALRIZATION THESIS .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>3.1.1</b>	<b>Two dominant models of secularism.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>3.1.2</b>	<b>Taylor's Model of Secularism: New Conditions of Belief.....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>4.0</b>	<b>TALAL ASAD .....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>4.1</b>	<b>PROBLEMS OF ESSENTIALIST DEFINITION OF RELIGION .....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>4.2</b>	<b>ANTI-ESSENTIALIST ESSENCE OF RELIGION.....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>4.3</b>	<b>UNDERSTANDING MODERN CONCEPTIONS OF THE SECULAR ....</b>	<b>40</b>

<b>4.4</b>	<b>UNDERSTNADING THE RELATIONSHIP OF RELIGION AND THE SECUALR.....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>4.5</b>	<b>PROBLEMS OF TRADITIONAL SECUALRIZATION THESIS.....</b>	<b>44</b>
4.5.1	Isn't separation a form of relationship? .....	48
4.5.2	Isn't anti-normativity another normative stance? .....	49
<b>4.6</b>	<b>WHAT DOES ASAD'S PROPOSITION OF SECUALRIZATION ENTAIL?.....</b>	<b>50</b>
4.6.1	Is there anything <i>essentially</i> religious in religious fundamentalism? .....	51
4.6.2	Is there any authentic meaning of the texts written by Asad? .....	53
<b>5.0</b>	<b>COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION: HABERMAS, TAYLOR, AND ASAD .....</b>	<b>57</b>
5.1	IS THERE ANY ESSENTIALLY DANGEROUS RELIGION? .....	59
5.2	HOW NEUTRAL IS THE NEUTRAL OFFICAL LANGUAGE?.....	62
5.3	DEMYSTIFICATION OF MODERN ESSENTIALIZATION .....	65
5.4	REASON NEEDS TO BE DISENTANGLLED FROM MODERN SECUALRITY.....	67
5.5	WHICH WAY FORWARD?.....	70
<b>6.0</b>	<b>CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>76</b>
	<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>82</b>

## **PREFACE**

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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

The historical process of the demystification of human understanding and, consequently, the declining or minimizing role of religion in the modern age is described as secularization. The decreasing influence of religion, the gradual waning of the role of religion in public life, and the increasing confinement of religion to the personal arena are some of the important characteristics of secular modern life. But the predictions of the decline of religion or of its decreasing influence have been challenged by the rise of religious extremism and the increasing religiosity in social and political life, all over the world, during the last thirty to forty years.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Norris and Inglehart (2004 in the last chapter) concluded by analyzing the World Values Survey data that the world is in general more religious than the previous years of the study, but in line with the projections of modernization theory the advanced industrial societies, with some exceptions, have been increasingly secularized. “Critics point to multiple indicators of religious health and vitality today, ranging from the continued popularity of churchgoing in the United States to the emergence of New Age spirituality in Western Europe, the growth in fundamentalist movements and religious parties in the Muslim world, the evangelical revival sweeping through Latin America, and the upsurge of ethno-religious conflict in international affairs” (Norris and Inglehart, 2004:3-4). Habermas summarizes some evidences of the contemporary religious revivalism: “Three overlapping phenomena, more than anything else, converge to create the impression of a worldwide ‘resurgence of religion’: (a) the missionary expansion of the major world religions; (b) their fundamentalist radicalization; and (c) the political instrumentalization of their inherent potential for violence: (a) First, a sign of their vibrancy is the fact that orthodox, or at any rate conservative, groups within the established religious organizations and churches are everywhere on the advance. This holds as much for Hinduism and Buddhism as it does for the three monotheistic religions. Most striking of all is the regional spread of these established religions in Africa and in the East and Southeast Asian countries. The missionary successes apparently depend also on the flexibility of the corresponding forms of organization. The transnational and multicultural Roman Catholic Church is adapting better to the globalizing trend than the nationally organized Protestant churches, which are the principal losers. Most dynamic of all are the decentralized networks of Islam (above all in sub-Saharan Africa) and the Evangelicals (especially in Latin America). What sets them apart is an ecstatic form of religiosity inspired by charismatic leaders. (b) The fastest-growing religious movements, such as the Pentecostals and the radical Muslims, can be most readily described as ‘fundamentalist’. They combat the modern world or they withdraw from it. Their forms of worship combine spiritualism and adventism with rigid moral conceptions and literal adherence to holy scripture. By

The world in the twenty-first century has witnessed multifarious speculations attached to the fear of the increasing role of religion, especially the issues of the rise of “religious extremism” and “militant Islam.” Islam is considered in the Western world as the “threat of a resurgent atavism”, a counter force to Western democracy and liberalism (Said 1998). Apart from the rise of religious extremism or militancy, the increasing religiosity of people all over the world is reported by numerous studies and newspaper reports. It is generally agreed that religion is not declining or at least not losing its influence in modern life, unlike classical modernization and secularization theories. Rather, religion is significantly present and playing an important role in both the public and private spheres of modern life. How do we explain the sustaining role of religion in modern life? What are the recent theoretical developments in explaining the emerging role of religion in contemporary times? What are the implications of these new theoretical explanations on the secularization thesis?

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contrast, the ‘new religious movements’ which have mushroomed since the 1970s are marked more by a ‘Californian’ syncretism, although they share with the Evangelicals a de-institutionalized form of religious observance. In Japan approximately 400 such sects have arisen, combining elements of Buddhism and popular religions with pseudoscientific and esoteric doctrines. In the People’s Republic of China, the political repression of the Falun Gong sect has highlighted the large number of ‘new religions’ whose followers are thought to number as many as eighty million.\* (c) The mullah regime in Iran and the worldwide Islamic terrorism are only the most spectacular examples of a political unleashing of the potential for violence innate in religion. Often smoldering conflicts with profane in origins first become ignited when they are coded in religious terms. This holds for the ‘desecularization’ of the Middle East conflict as much as for the politics of Hindu nationalism and the enduring conflict between India and Pakistan,\* or for the mobilization of the religious right in the United States before and during the invasion of Iraq.” (Habermas 2009:61-62 emphasis mine and \* means original footnote). Although there are ample evidences of the general rise of religiosity in recent years, it does not mean that this trend is common all over the world. There are some counter evidences that religion has been decreasing in recent years. [The study, conducted by scholars from the University of Arizona and Northwestern University, and presented at a meeting of the American Physical Society suggests that religion may be dying in nine countries. The study projects the extinction of religion in Australia, Austria, the Czech Republic, Canada, Finland, Ireland, New Zealand, the Netherlands and Switzerland,” retrieved on 5<sup>th</sup> April, 2011 from <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2011/04/02/religion-really-dying/#ixzz1fxp3QTm>). Also these empirical evidences should not imply any unidirectional historic trajectory, i.e., from theological predominance to secularism or vice versa. History does not have any universal trend, nor does it maintain any linear direction such as traditionalism to modernism and its ilk.

Some sociologists find secularization to be a failed project. The decline of religion as a consequence of the rise of modern science and technology is a myth; it is religious, not scientific claim (Bellah 1970 quoted in Goldstein 2009). Unlike secularization theorists, Robert Bellah does not think secularization is inevitable because religion still plays an important role in modern society; religion is not destined to decline because religious symbols are the medium through which people relate themselves to the conditions of their existence (Bellah 1970). Religion is still important because it solves some of the contradictions created by the differentiation in a secularized world (Luhmann quoted in Goldstein 2009). In addition, for Luhmann, the relevance of religion has generally decreased but not declined in the modern world. Religion has been adapting to the changing world in its own way. Thus secularization has lead to a regeneration of religion.<sup>2</sup> Peter Berger, one of the leading proponent of secularization and the author of the celebrated book on secularization, *The Sacred Canopy*, changed his opinion radically: Secularization theory is mistaken and provokes counter-secularization i.e., increasing religiosity, political religion, and religious fundamentalism (Berger 1999). Post-secularism is the latest development in the ongoing debate on secularization, which is the central focus of this study.

## 1.1 POST-SECUALRISM

Amidst these ongoing debates on secularization and counter-secularization, the prominent German philosopher Jürgen Habermas introduces a new concept to explain religion in

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<sup>2</sup> “Secularization does not mean the loss of function for religion, but rather religion adapting to the conditions of modern society (Luhmann 2000:301). As the social system becomes increasingly differentiated, there is a decline in people's need for religion. The function of religion for the system as a whole nevertheless persists” (Goldstein 2009:163).

contemporary times: post-secularism. Habermas tries to develop new conceptual tools to analyze the seemingly unexpected return of religion, i.e., religious revivalism. For Habermas, the age of post-secularism does not entail the rejection of the ongoing secularizing process and also not a return to the medieval theological predominance. Post-secular society is defined by “the continued existence of religious communities in a continually secularizing environment.” How do these apparently contradictory trends continue to coexist?

While counter-secularization propositions expose the broad limitations of classical secularization theses, post-secularization theses offer alternative ways of approaching secularization in the contemporary world. Post-secularism is not only an extension of previous secularization theories; it is a paradigm shift from the age of the predominance of the scientific and non-metaphysical rationality to a new metaphysical or post-metaphysical rationality, where neither metaphysics nor non-metaphysical rationality reigns alone.

Habermas raises some important questions about the core premises of secular modernity: Is the self-determining power of human being, triggered by the scientific and technological development, destined to destroy any possibility of religion? What is the role of a secular state regarding the growing religiosity in a secularizing society? Do we need to reformulate the basic presumptions of secularism and religion in light of the emerging complexities in contemporary times? Habermas proposes that both religion and the secular have to learn from each other and adapt themselves to this new post-secular context.

Charles Taylor, the eminent Canadian philosopher, extends Habermas’s argument by analyzing the development of secularism in Western or Atlantic civilization. Although Taylor does not use Habermas’s term “post-secular society,” he does not disagree with Habermas’

analysis of religion in our contemporary world. Taylor proposes a revisionist (to use Taylor's term) explanation of secularism by analyzing the limitations of secularist propositions.

Unlike the revisionist Habermas and Taylor, the anthropologist Talal Asad offers a radical break in the analysis of religion and secularism. According to Asad, traditional secularization theories fail to explain the role of religion in contemporary life; their normative presumption of the superiority of the secular over religion does not allow them to conduct an objective analysis. To understand the role of religion in contemporary times, we need to deconstruct both the normative secular presuppositions of the primacy of the secular over religion and the principle of the inevitable separation of religion from the state as well as the public sphere.

## 1.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor,<sup>3</sup> and Talal Asad<sup>4</sup> are three major contemporary thinkers who have made significant contributions to the understanding of the relationship between religion and

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<sup>3</sup>Social Science Research Council (SSRC) introduced Habermas and Taylor, among others, in this way: "Four of the world's leading public intellectuals came together on Thursday, October 22, in the historic Great Hall at Cooper Union to discuss 'Rethinking Secularism.' In an electrifying symposium convened by the Institute for Public Knowledge at NYU, the Social Science Research Council and the Humanities Institute at Stony Brook University, Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Cornel West gave powerful accounts of religion in the public sphere" (retrieved from <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2009/11/02/rethinking-secularism-audio/> on March 30, 2011). "Jürgen Habermas is one of the most prominent philosophers on the global scene of the last half century. His work is of an impressive range and depth," Taylor writes about Habermas (retrieved from <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2009/10/19/philosopher-citizen/> on March 30, 2011). Terry Eagleton praises Taylor for "his magisterial study *A Secular Age*" (2009:76). Some more complements for Taylor: "Given its scale, the stature of its author as one of the leading thinkers of our time, and the critical importance of the topic in contemporary thought and politics, *A Secular Age* demands serious engagement" (Warner, et al. 2000:1). The headline tells it all about the importance of Taylor: "SSRC Salutes Charles Taylor," where 8 prominent scholars praised Taylor highly (see for details: <http://www.ssrc.org/features/view/ssrc-salutes-charles-taylor/>).

modernity, especially secularism. To understand the state-of-the-art theoretical debates on the relationship between religion, modernity, and secularization, I intend to critically review those three influential thinkers.

Habermas, Taylor, and Asad have contributed significantly to post-secularism i.e., revisiting the classical secularization thesis. They have offered new approaches and opened up a new horizon of discussion: it's not only to accommodate religion in a secular age but also to interrogate the secular itself in order to be able to learn from religion. Put it another way: the secularism paradigm has been shifted from the theoretical project of recognizing the significance of religion in secular modern life to a new project of reexamining the secular as a prerequisite of recognizing the importance of religion. In interrogating the secular, although Habermas and Taylor share a common perspective, Asad offers a distinct way of understanding. In this study, I will reflect on their areas of agreement and disagreement.

Habermas and Taylor are the champions of a new metaphysics that questions the taken-for-granted superiority of the positivist and empiricist rationality over religion. Both of them propose a significant revision of that authority of the secular. On the other hand, Talal Asad rejects the basic premises of secularization and counter-secularization theses by problematizing the long-cherished binary opposition of religion and the secular. Thus Asad argues against any binary opposition between metaphysical and non-metaphysical rationality.

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<sup>4</sup> Talal Asad said in an interview with SSRC that he was impressed by learning Charles Taylor's idea in his student life: "I first met Charles Taylor when I was a student at Oxford and I attended a seminar he directed at All Souls College (where he was a fellow) on the philosophy of the social sciences. This was either in 1959-60 or 1960-61 -- I can't recall for sure, but it was before he had received his doctorate. This was for me a landmark: Taylor's seminar helped me to overcome my infatuation with positivism" (accessed from <http://www.ssrc.org/features/pages/ssrc-salutes-charles-taylor/318/321/> on 30 March 2011). Meanwhile, Asad's significant contributions in understanding religion and secularism have earned him the title of the central figure of a contemporary critical school about secularism (Warner, et al. 2010:25). A brief but informative biography and description of his intellectual works made available by Stanford University, where he gave a Stanford Presidential Lecture, can be accessed here: <http://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/asad/>.

Asad is considered the central figure of a contemporary critical school of thought about secularism. Given Asad's considerable influence on the contemporary scholarship about secularism,<sup>5</sup> his analysis deserves sincere attention. However, Taylor in his famous book, *A Secular Age*, does not address Asad at all. Questions are raised about why he does not address Asad at all (Warner, et al. 2010:25). Taylor is defended by arguing that he is mostly engaged with the role of Christendom in the West, whereas Asad focuses on Islam; that's why Asad gets excluded from the discussion. But Asad (1993, 2003) discusses in a great detail the role of Christianity in the genealogy of modern secularism.

Therefore, I have included these three influential thinkers given their distinct but significant contributions to the understanding of religion in contemporary times. I loosely bind them under the rubric of post-secularism, in which Habermas and Tylor offer a revision of secularization thesis, whereas Asad provides us with an epistemological break in understanding secularism.

Given their above mentioned significance, I have selected purposively those three major thinkers for this study. They are the three influential thinkers of the twenty-first century in understanding religion, modernity, and secularization. I choose to review their relevant books, articles, and interviews. In addition, I also include important books or articles written on those three important thinkers in my review list. Finally, I conduct a comparative discussion of their thoughts on religion, secularization, and post-secularization.

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<sup>5</sup> Some of the contemporary scholars highly influenced by Talal Asad are Saba Mahmood, Tomoko Masuzawa, Charles Hirschkind, and Hussein Ali Agrama.

### **1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Two research questions of this study are:

1. What are the conditions of post-secularism?
2. What forces seem to bind religion and the secular together in a post-secular society?

What are the conditions of contemporary society that lead to the increasing proximity of religion and the secular, which are traditionally perceived as irreconcilable?

## **2.0 JÜRGEN HABERMAS**

According to Habermas, neither classical secularization nor counter-secularization propositions are sufficient in understanding the increasing presence of religion and its consequent challenges against secularism in contemporary times. The conditions of the relationship of religion and the secular have changed, and hence arises the need to provide us with an alternative analysis—post-secularism.

Despite the disenchantment of public consciousness, functional differentiation of religion and state, and industrialization, the importance of religion has not been withered away; instead, a revival of religion has taken place in the contemporary world. Habermas defines religious revivalism as the growing influence of major religions, rise of fundamentalism, and flourishing religious violence. The religious resurgence does not debunk secularization entirely, nor does it lead to a “counter-secularizaiton” or “descularization.” Habermas argues that there has been a change in the social and political conditions as well as a change in “consciousness” that characterizes post-secular society.

## **2.1 POST-SECULAR SOCIETY**

Post-secular society is characterized by “the continued existence of religious communities in an increasingly secularized environment” (Habermas 2009:63). This succinct definition of post-

secular society specifies two important conclusions: 1) secularization does not essentially lead to the weakening of religious influence and 2) the increasing religious importance does not endanger the secularization process. However, it does not mean that there is no tension between religion and the secular. Post-secularism could be explained as the recovery of the strength of religion—religion strips off its presumed subordination to the secular. Neither religion nor the secular claims its supremacy; both of them count each other as equal opponents. What are the conditions of this radical reshuffle of the relationship between religion and the secular?

Habermas explains three important socio-political developments that lead to the change of consciousness in the post-secular society. First, the growing incidents of religiously motivated conflicts and the massive dissemination of news regarding these incidents by mass-media have contributed to the change of two perceptions: religion is not going to disappear, and modernization does not inevitably commission the influence of religion. Second, the influence of religion in the formation of both public opinion and private morality has been increasing. Finally, the growing number of immigrants with their traditional values in a secular society, especially in Europe, highlights the presence of public religion. In these new socio-political circumstances, how do people with changed consciousness maintain a balance between the increasing religious presence and the secular social and political order?

For Habermas, secularism, until the mid-twentieth century, was a “*modus vivendi*” where secular state had to take a neutral character to ensure balance among competing religious (i.e., Christian) groups in Europe; but, in contemporary times we have to develop a systematic and sustainable mechanism of achieving “a balance between shared citizenship and cultural difference.” Different cultures and religions coexist with a common national identity. From a classical secularization perspective, this national identity is a neutral non-religious (i.e., secular)

identity. But in this changed reality, religious revivalism and increasing religious influence compel us to rethink the process of the formation of a secular democratic national identity that ensures an equal and dignified role of religion along with the secular. Before moving into the discussion on Habermas' proposition on this new mode of balance, I would like to briefly discuss the debate on the role of religion in the formation of the secular democratic ethical subject. This debate is important in understanding the thesis of the "limits of secular reason" that justifies a need for reconsidering the significance of religion in a post-secular society.

## **2.2 PRE-POLITICAL ETHICS OF A SECULAR DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY**

Habermas holds that democracy is preconditioned by the presence of ethical subjects. Citizens of a democratic society have to ethically agree on some of its basic conditions: equal rights of all citizens regardless of race, religion, or gender and the majority's decision should be respected despite personal disagreements. Several questions can be asked about the possibility of pre-political ethics in a democratic state. Why should citizens be loyal to liberal democratic principles? Why do they need to be accommodative of others' religion and culture that they do not belong to? Why should they comply with the presupposition of equal rights of all citizens?

The pre-political ethics of a secular democratic state are often considered religious in origin. For example, some Christians invoke their biblical message that men are created in the image of God and the successful implementation of a peaceful and mutually respected secular society is the implementation of God's design. From this perspective, some argue that Christians owe their pre-political ethics to their religion. And that's why western secular democratic

subjects (at least, majority of them) agree to comply with those above mentioned principles of a democratic society.

Although Habermas does not agree with the *inevitable* role of Christianity in the formation of pre-political ethics of a democratic state, he recognizes the strong legacy of Christianity in it. Since God creates humans as free, one does not need to believe in those theological convictions anymore to be a rational autonomous subject (Habermas 2003:115). Habermas justifies the biblical reference as the source of human freedom and the autonomy of rational subjects. But according to this biblical reference, men are free to choose to believe in God but not free at all to decline to believe. Yet another concern remains: these biblical messages can be invoked by Christians, but what about non-Christians? What would be their “biblical” messages that interpellate them as rational autonomous subjects? Habermas left this question completely untouched. What is more striking is not that Habermas does not have an answer to this question, but that he seems to be content basing his only explanation on the Christian perspective. Habermas seems content to have no other explanations for non-Christians in understanding the conditions of a rational autonomous subject in post-secular societies (i.e., advanced industrialized countries), which are homes to millions of other religions, like Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.<sup>6</sup>

However, Habermas does not agree with this explanation that the pre-political ethics of a democratic state are religious in origin. Instead of their owing to religion, Habermas argues,

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<sup>6</sup> In fact Habermas recommends all other religions, especially Islam, to follow the same path of Western Christianity, which has developed a moderate explanation of their sacred texts. By doing this Habermas approves the superiority of Christianity over all others. Most importantly he suggests that the path Christianity has followed is the only way to be followed by all other religions—like typical colonial modern analysis of the unidirectional analysis of Western modernity that has to be imitated by the rest of the world, if needed has to be imposed, e.g., by colonial aggression or the ethical war, like the US invasion of Iraq, Afghanistan etc. What Habermas does not recognize is that there might be lots of other alternative ways developed by different religious communities all around the world throughout history, which could be worthy to engage with, instead of imposing an alien dogma.

secular democratic principles reflect on themselves to harness the necessary pre-political ethics; pre-political ethics of a secular state are autonomous and self-reflective (Ratzinger and Habermas 2006:27-28). The democratic practices of a secular state can generate a democratic will based on the rule of law, which is generally accepted by the rational subject. Habermas draws heavily on Kant's idea of a rational autonomous subject, to whom religion becomes the object of rational justification. So, in that sense, the pre-political ethics of a secular democratic state are not religious. There is no lack in the secular democratic state that needs to be fulfilled by religion, Habermas remarks. But, the historical origin of a secular democratic state does not discard religion completely; instead, religion has been translated into a generally accessible and neutral source over the years. Often this translated religion appears as a secular discourse. Secularization is, in a sense, the translation of religious discourse that enables religious vocabulary to take religion-neutral form.

Religion has to go through the process of translation in order to become the “reasonable” religion and be compatible with secular liberal principles. Habermas specifies three important criteria that religion has to meet in the translation process: “Religious consciousness must, first, come to terms with the cognitive dissonance of encountering other denominations and religions. It must, second, adapt to the authority of the sciences which hold the societal monopoly of secular knowledge. It must, last, agree to the premises of a constitutional state grounded in a profane morality” (Habermas 2003:104). Habermas also opines that religion has to fulfill these three criteria in order to be free of its inherent destructive potential. However, he finds this translation process of religion overtly biased against religion; an unjust burden has been imposed on religion while privileging secular reason.

## **2.3 AN AWARENESS OF WHAT IS MISSING**

Habermas argues that religion has to go through the translation process in order to be a “responsible religion,” but the undue privilege given to secular reason needs to be revisited. Religion has to go through the translation process in order to be free of its inherent destructive potential and also to gain a general acceptance among people of different religious beliefs and non-believers. But this transformation should not subordinate religion to the absolute authority of secular reason. Secularization has been understood so far as the authority of secular reason as a precondition of any rational discussion. Religion needs to be translated in order to recognize the equal rights of other religious or non-religious ideologies, but religion does not have to accept the absolute authority of secular reason. What is important here is to open up the possibility of engaging in a rational discussion without demeaning any other opposing ideologies. This rational discussion can be held by agreeing on some prior democratic assumptions that are self-reflective and autonomous. Secularization is essentially the transition from absolute theological dominance to the consensus of having a rational discussion among competing but equal status-holding groups. But the contemporary religious revivalism and the increasing influence of religion over the world have compelled us to rethink the undue privilege granted to secular reason. Awareness has been created of the missing discussion: the discussion on the undue privilege enjoyed by the secular reason.

Although Habermas raises concern about the undue privilege given to secular reason, he does grant an unquestioned privilege to the rational reasoning process and secular language. When Habermas says that there should be a rational discussion among different religious and non-religious groups, he accepts the supremacy of the secular reasoning process by which the

discussion should be conducted. However, the secular reason is not allowed to judge the validity of any religion.

“In short, post-metaphysical thought is prepared to learn from religion, but remains agnostic in the process. It insists on the difference between the certainties of faith, on the one hand, and validity claims that can be publicly criticized, on the other; but, *it refrains from the rationalist presumption that it can itself decide what part of the religious doctrines is rational and what part irrational*. The contents which reason appropriates through translation must not be lost for faith. However, an apology of faith with philosophical means is not the task of philosophy proper (Habermas 2006:17, emphasis added).

Habermas cautions that reason as a philosophical means should not be used to justify any religious faith, nor should it be used to judge the rationality or significance of any religion. However, it is reason, the philosophical means, which should be employed to differentiate the “certainties of faith” and its “validity claims” or between “faith and knowledge.”

Habermas also argues that even though religion should have the equal right to participate in a rational discussion, it should be translated into a secular language (“a generally accessible language”) to be included in the legal language. Religious believers should not be excluded from the discussion even though they are not able to employ secular languages; but, their religious language cannot be the part of a formal discussion like parliamentarian debate or law.

“However, the institutional thresholds between the ‘wild life’ of the political public sphere and the formal proceedings with political bodies are also a filter that from the Babel of voices in the informal flows of public communication allows only secular contributions to pass through. In, parliament, for example, the standing rules of procedure of the house must empower the house leader to have religious statements or justifications expunged from the minutes. The *truth content* of religious contributions *can only enter* into the institutionalized practice of deliberation and decision making if the necessary translation already occurs in the pre-parliamentarian domain, i.e., in the political public sphere” (Habermas 2006:10).

Habermas marks a strict line of separation between the languages of formal and informal discussions. In the formal discussion, religion cannot be allowed to enter, unless it is purified

beforehand. This is like relaxing the boundaries of the separation of religion and the secular state, a little bit further. But question remains about how to do differentiate the “truth content” of religion from false contents (so to speak) of religion, or how to identify the “secular contributions” of religious language.

Habermas calls for the end of the undue privilege of secular reason and the need for the mutual recognition of religion and the secular. If the secular presupposes religion as less important or impotent, it violates the principle of equal respect and mutual recognition. But when the translated religion, thus secular, is accepted the inalienable supremacy, doesn’t it violate the equal respect and mutual recognition principle? Furthermore when secular languages, which are supposed to be understood and recognized by all competing parties, are given similar divine status, the principle of the mutual recognition is shattered. Any religious language is considered to be incapable of being understood by all competing religious groups, although Habermas recognizes that, often, secular language is rooted in religious discourses. Holding to this inner contradiction, Habermas proposes a complementary learning process between religion and the secular in the post-secular society.

#### **2.4 COMPLEMENTARY LEARNING PROCESS**

Is it only religion which needs to learn from liberal secular discourse? Habermas answers that both the secular and religion need to reexamine themselves in order to learn from each other, especially for the secular to recognize their historical roots in religious discourse. The secular citizens also have to go through a “self-reflective transcending of a secularist self-understanding of modernity.” If secularists still presuppose that religion is an archaic and obsolete ideology that

has nothing to contribute to the secular democratic society, there cannot be a fruitful rational discussion among religious and secular ideologies. This secularist attitude fails to take into account the possibility of any potential religious contribution to the secular democratic society; it refuses to allow any possibility of the translation of religious potentialities.

According to Habermas, in the post-secular society, citizens have already adjusted to the changing situation in order to have a “reasonably expected disagreement” between religion and the secular. Secular citizens must have the cognitive openness to learn from religion and vice versa. They feel the need to have a complementary learning process of these two. “At any rate, a *complementary* learning process is required on the secular side – assuming that we do not confuse the neutrality of the secular state towards competing religious worldviews with the banishing of all religious contributions from the political public sphere” (Habermas 2009:76, emphasis original). Similarly, at the state level, a neutral secular state should not undermine the possibility of religious contribution; instead, the complementary learning process should facilitate meaningful discussions between religion and the secular.

The secular liberal state needs religious participation. For religion has the potential to contribute significantly to the development of a democratic state. Religion has the special power to enshrine public morality. “In moments like these, the unbelieving sons and daughter of modernity seem to believe that they owe more to one another, need more for themselves, than what is accessible to them, in translation, of religious tradition – as if the semantic potential of the latter was still not exhausted” (Habermas 2003:111). The democratic common sense of the modern subject should have the autonomy to remain open to both science and religion. “In its willingness to learn, democratic commonsense remains osmotically open to *both* sides, sciences and religion, without relinquishing its independence” (Habermas 2003: 105, emphasis original).

Openness to both science and religion can ensure complementary process. This complementary process also upholds the independence of both sides, although a safe distance from religion is recommended.

In the post-secular society, keeping safe distance from religion does not mean to be destructive i.e., to take over or to replace religion but to “counteract the insidious entropy of the scarce resource of meaning in its own realm.” Like disenchanted religion which overcomes myth and magic, the post-secular morality of a rational autonomous subject needs to overcome religion without forgetting its religious root. “Those moral feelings which only religious language has as yet been able to give a sufficiently differentiated expression may find universal resonance once a salvaging formulation turns up for something almost forgotten, but *implicitly missed*. The mode for nondestructive secularization is translation” (Habermas 2003: 114, emphasis added). Thus secularism in a post-secular society is a translation of religious discourse, not destruction.

Habermas’ call for a complementary learning process in the post-secular society, with special emphasis on the limitations of the secularist understanding, has been widely appreciated in the context of the contemporary religious revivalism. Charles Taylor, the prominent philosopher, supports Habermas’ argument and extends it by analyzing the historical transformation of secularism in Western civilization.

### **3.0 CHARLES TAYLOR**

Taylor's analysis of secularism, especially on the conditions of religion in contemporary times, helps us to understand his explanation of the conditions of the post-secular society. Taylor does not use the term post-secularism; he rather prefers "a secular age." Although Taylor uses a different term, he does not disagree with Habermas' analysis of the conditions of post-secularism. Taylor agrees with Habermas' call for reexamination of the traditional secularization theses, specifically about the relationship between secular modernity and religion. Taylor develops his own thesis of secularism by discussing the historical transformations of religion in the Western world (or in his term, the Atlantic world), specifically the relationship between secularity and Christianity.

Secular modernity has shaped and reshaped Christianity over the years, but it does not altogether discard Christianity. Rather, Taylor emphasizes that Christianity is imbued with the historical formation and the assumed superiority of the Western civilization as well as of the American nation.

In his revised secularization thesis, Taylor does not see the relationship between religion and secular modernity as essentially conflicting. He argues religion is not going to disappear; rather, religion is a permanent need of a "higher power" or the utmost need of the "sense of fullness" prevalent among modern people. A secular state does not have to be anti-religious or completely separated from the world of religion; the secular state is necessary in ensuring equal

participation, dignified coexistence, and maximum well-being of all religious, non-religious, or anti-religious people in the modern world.

Taylor is highly critical of the conception that science has already proved religion wrong or science is essentially anti-religious. He argues that there are some philosophers and scientists who took this extreme position but they are wrong. For Taylor, due to modernity and its self-sufficient humanism and rationalism, the conditions of religion have changed. People can lead their life as religious, anti-religious, non-religious and so on without essentially being forced to follow any particular path. But, what is important to notice in our secular age is that for many people religion provides the means to fulfill a general need for a “higher being” or a “sense of fullness”, albeit in many different ways. Taylor is one of those believers who do not see any essential conflict between religion and secularity; on the contrary, secular modernity is an essential condition to managing the diversity of religion.

In order to understand Taylor’s answers to our research questions, at first, I discuss Taylor’s extensive discussion on the mainstream propositions of secularism followed by the discussion on his “revisionist” proposition.

### **3.1 REVISIONIST SECUALRIZATION THESIS**

Taylor generally agrees with the mainstream propositions of secularism, such as the decreasing influence of religion, the institutional differentiation of religion from the public sphere and state, and the lack of predominance of the supernatural or higher power; but, he proposes a significant revision of those propositions. For example, due to the revolutionary developments in science and technology, urbanization, and industrialization, religion lost its predominance, but that is not

the decline of religion or the death of God. The institutional differentiation of religion and the public sphere does not mean the insuperable wall of separation between them. Taylor proposes a revisionist theory which agrees with the essence of those classic assumptions of secularism but reformulates them by analyzing the historical transformations of religion from an enchanted age to a disenchanted secular age.

“A secular age is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable; or better, it falls within the range of an imaginable life for masses of people. This is the crucial link between secularity and a self-sufficing humanism” (Taylor 2007:19-20). The secular age is a significant break from the medieval predominance of supernatural force; it allows the flourishing of the human capability to imagine one’s life with or without subordinating to the supernatural or divine authority. But this secularizing process was explained by social scientists in many different ways.

### **3.1.1 Two dominant models of secularism**

Taylor develops his revisionist theory of secularism by critically reviewing two other dominant models. Two other dominant models of secularism are: a) Institutional arrangement of the separation of church and state and b) the decline of belief and practice or the decline of faith in God.

#### **a) Institutional arrangement of the separation of church and state**

One of the dominant propositions of secularism is the institutional arrangement of the separation of church and state. It is sometimes explained as the absence of religion in public space. It is also characterized as the replacement of the transcendent God in social life and the secularized public space. According to this proposition, religion is confined to the private sphere and

withdrawn from the public sphere. Taylor sometime calls it the functional differentiation of religion and public sphere.

Even though Taylor does not disagree with the essence of the proposition of the functional differentiation of church and state or religion and state, he finds it problematic when people see religion and the public sphere are completely separated, i.e., they are free of each other's influence. “---that activity in a given sphere follows its own inherent rationality and doesn't permit of the older kind of faith-based norming doesn't mean that it cannot still be very much shaped by faith” (p.425). So, the autonomous status of public and private religious spheres does not obstruct the intrusion and interpenetration of the apparently rigid boundaries. That does not also mean that there has been no separation of church and state or no relegation of religion to private spheres; on the contrary, there is a functional differentiation in which the separation or the relegation is not rigid or the boundary of these two spheres are not impregnable.

Taylor cites José Casanova's argument on the widely neglected difference between “differentiation and privatization” as an example of the limitations of the type one secularization. Casanova argues that the institutional separation of religion and the public sphere does not mean privatization or marginalization of religion in modern life; on the contrary, religion continues to play an important role in the secular public sphere (1999 pp. 5, 20, 211). Taylor agrees with Casanova's argument that in modern life, state and religion are differentiated regarding their functions, but they are not separated. Religion plays significant roles in the public sphere of a secular state and it does not contradict to the principle of secularism. But, what is the fine line that determines publicly *accepted* and *unaccepted* religion in a secular life? What role the religion is allowed to play in an emancipated public sphere (from the specter of religion)

remained unanswered, and how? How do we minimize the contradictory status granted to the public religion in an emancipated secular society?

**b) The decline of belief and practice or the decline of faith in God**

Taylor does not find it convincing that secularization, as the inevitable consequence or the by-product of modernity, equals the death of God. Taylor generally agrees that there has been a tremendous downfall of the role and influence of religion in modern life. But, this change does not mean to the decline of religion or the death of God. Due to modernization—the revolutionary developments in science and technology, urbanization and industrialization—religion, in general, has lost its dominant role. These changes have lead not only to the loss of importance of religion but also generated new forms of religiosity and spirituality. So the decline of religion is not linear; it is not necessarily a “kind of heat death of faith” (Taylor 2007:437).

A secular society is “marked by an unheard of pluralism of outlooks, religious, and non-and anti-religious, in which the number of possible positions seems to be increasing *without end*” (p.437). Religion becomes one of the many options in modern life. Taylor emphasizes the important aspect of secularism: “a new placement of the sacred or spiritual in relation to individual and social life. This new placement is now the occasion for recompositions of spiritual life in new forms, for new ways of existing both in and out of relation to God” (p.437). Some may argue that the religious diversity is not a modern phenomenon; on the contrary, some of the primitive religions no more exist in the modern world. Nonetheless, I think it is generally correct to say that the diversity of opinions regarding religion is a salient feature of the modern life, where anti-religious or nonreligious positions are widely accepted as a significant part of the modern world.

Before we move to Taylor's third mode of secularism—revisionist proposal, let me briefly summarize his analysis of the history of the transformation—the enchanted world to the disenchanted—took place in the West, mainly in France, England, and USA. Taylor bases his new revisionist proposal of secularism on the historical transformation from 18<sup>th</sup> century of the age of “elite unbelief” to 21<sup>st</sup> century of “mass secularization.” In explaining the changes happened over the last couple of hundred years, Taylor classified the entire story in three different types: the “ancien régime”, the age of mobilization, and the age of authenticity. Taylor's analysis of the historical transformation of religious change still follows the binary categorization of religious and secular or from traditional “porous self” to modern “buffer self.” He still sees the historical transformation as a linear trajectory heading towards an obvious destiny: from traditional theological dominance to a progressive secular age. It is interesting to note that Taylor generalizes the entire Western civilization within his single paradigm of historical transformation and also tacitly endorses it as the ideal of the secularization for the rest of the world. This is surprising that still Taylor develops a linear and unidirectional history of religion. For Taylor, like typical modern historiography, history is always moving progressively. This linear historiography is widely criticized because of ignoring its non-linear trend, i.e., history is not always progressive. This normative historiography is often criticized for its underlying tendency to colonize other so called non-modern people in the name of modernization or civilization (Chatterjee 1986, Chakrabarty 2000).

However, according to Taylor, the enchanted “ancien régime” is characterized by the “hierarchical complementarily” based on divine will. The society was strictly under religious domination. The king and religious clerics were jointly ruling the people on behalf of a divine ordain. Religion was inevitable in the public sphere; the invocation of God was obvious for both

authoritative elites and the mass people. People widely practiced religious rituals for the fulfillment of their daily basic needs, e.g., for good harvest to spiritual salvation. But meanings of those religious rituals were understood by the elites quite differently than the mass people. An elite section of the society was rising who found those popular folk religious rites and rituals as superstitious, malicious, etc., which resulted in the Reformation. Taylor finds that that was the beginning of the disruption of the “ancien régime” when the elites started to enforce the “disenchantment” on the mass people and that resulted into the development of a new form of religion.

From 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the enchanted “ancien régime” had transformed into an age of mobilization. That age is characterized by the notion of the post-Newtonian science where there is *no* supernatural or divine power dictates the worldly activities and the aspirations of the people, but that does not mean the notion of God or religion does not play any role. Rather the presence of God is manifested in the creation of human being in this material world. “We build a society which plainly follows God’s design” (Taylor 2007:447). One example of this moral order is the American Declaration of Independence which says: “Men have been created equal, and have been endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights.”<sup>7</sup> This principle embodies the modern moral order that invites the followers of Christian belief, especially Protestants, to mobilize themselves collectively in order to construct a moral society based on mutual respect, cooperation, and tolerance. Taylor explains that this conception of the moral society was conceptualized by John Locke, Rousseau, and Marx, but Marx did it in a radical way.

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<sup>7</sup> Stated by Taylor in his *A secular Age*, p.447 without mentioning any source.

According to Taylor, modern moral order is essentially Christian, to be specific Protestant, which is known as “Providential.” This moral order can be fulfilled in a society by fulfilling the requirements of the design of God. “To live in such a society was to live in one where God was present, not at all in the way that belonged to enchanted world, through the sacred, but because we were following His [God’s] design. God is present as the designer of the way we live. We see ourselves, to quote a famous phrase, as ‘one people under God’ ” (p.447). So, modern moral individuals envision a moral society where God does not play any role except providing the design to be followed.

This age of mobilization is both a continuation and discontinuation of the “ancien régime.” The modern age of mobilization, Taylor carefully asserts, is not the complete absence of religion or God, nor is it the static continuation of the divine similar to the “ancien régime.” In the age of mobilization, on the one hand a worldly discipline, order, and cooperation were called for and, on the other hand, a renewed call for church attendance was necessitated for spiritual and moral inspiration. Taylor classified around 1800 to 1950/60 as the age of mobilization.

According to Taylor, the age of mobilization has transformed into the age of authenticity during last fifty years (since around 1960). The conditions of belief have radically altered by this time. From the individualistic age of mobilization has changed into the age of “expressive individualism.” The rise of consumer culture, extensive enthusiasm for explicit ways of identifying oneself with particular taste, choice, and expression have facilitated the age of authenticity. By “authenticity” Talyor means: “that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one’s own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority” (Taylor 2007:475). This authenticity is similar to

the late-eighteenth century Romantic expressivism, but in contemporary times it becomes a mass phenomenon. After the Second World War, Taylor observes, this unique style of thinking, presenting, and practicing authentic life styles or choices became predominant.

What is the consequence of the emergence of the age of authenticity on religion? Not only one's lifestyle becomes a matter of choice, one's belief in God and the practice and manifestation of that belief also become a matter of choice. So, should one believe in God or should one belong to a religious denomination becomes a matter of individual choice. The overall tendency to imagine an expressive individual's life extends into the domain of religion. This vehement tendency to authenticate oneself by his/her exclusive choice of faith contributes to the loss of the importance of the Durkheimian idea of an essential collective component of religion. This is what Taylor calls the neo-Durkheimian phase which is completely different from the paleo-Durkheimian age, which was dominated by the mandatory religious denomination.

Taylor argues that these changes does not mean the complete evaporation of religion from the society; rather a new form of religion has emerged, which is individualistic, a matter of choice, and not based on collective denominational ties. Moreover, this fractured individualistic religious existence is tied with the political identity based on Christendom, especially in the West. The superiority of Christianity has been upheld and untouched, even though there has been tremendous alteration within the domain of Christendom over the years. The superiority of Christianity, according to Taylor, is sometimes aligned with the superiority of Western civilization, and sometimes with the superiority of American nation.

We now move to Taylor's third model of secularism, which he develops by analyzing the role of religion in the contemporary times of the West. Taylor's third model of secularism is: the change in the conditions of belief which is predicated upon the rise of a "humanist alternative,"

the rise of “actual unbelief” and the “pluralization of alternatives” regarding religious belief and practice.

### **3.1.2 Taylor’s Model of Secularism: New Conditions of Belief**

To understand the change of conditions of belief in contemporary secular age, Taylor asks a canonical question: “Why is it so hard to believe in God (in many milieux) of the modern West, while in 1500 it was virtually impossible not to?” Based on the analysis, which I just summarized, Taylor shows that there have been significant shifts in the conditions of belief over the last couple of hundred years. The shift from the age of mobilization to the age of authenticity underlines the new conditions of contemporary secular age. In the last half-century, Taylor described the emergence of belief, non-belief, or against-belief has become feasible alternatives; a great deal of multiplicity of belief and practice characterizes the contemporary secular age. A need for a higher being or power seems inevitable for many people for their wellbeing or betterment; as well as, many people see no scope for any higher being or power because it is entirely this worldly calculations which is need to ensure their wellbeing. And there are lots of varieties in between these two frontiers.

Habermas asserts, if only one conclusion can be drawn about religion in the contemporary age it is this: people have a wide variety of choices regarding religious belief. No single mode of religious faith and practice has the predominance or superiority over another. So, the challenge of the secular society is to manage the diversity without enforcing any particular religion or non-religion or limiting their right to choose their own religion. That’s how Taylor becomes revisionist. For him, a secular age has no conflict with religion as well as no inclination with the

non-religion or anti-religion; it is to maintain an equal opportunity for all of those varieties without privileging one over another.

According to Taylor,<sup>8</sup> secular regime has three Goals: 1) Maximum freedom of conscience regardless of religion, ideology, culture, and so on, 2) Equality—religion is not central anymore; people of different religion have equal right, and 3) Freedom of exercise of conscience. Since a secular regime's main concern is to manage the diversity of religious belief and practice, Taylor provides these three basic principles to ensure that goal. All people regardless of their faith must have the maximum freedom of conscience. They should have equal right to choose their life, and lastly they should enjoy the maximum freedom to exercise their freedom of conscience. They should be free to exercise their own belief and practice. But there arises some problem regarding the implementation of these principles.

First, these principles often conflict with each other. For example, people of different religion like Muslims, Christian etc. have equal right to have freedom of conscience and the freedom of exercise of conscience, but if some Muslims want to implement their Islamic laws in a country where non-Muslims and probably some other Muslims do not belong to that. So, there appears lots of contradictions and dilemma among those three principles. So Taylor suggests that we must agree with three principles, but we need to solve the possible contradictions or dilemma by having a free discussion among different religious groups. That discussion should be handled even-handedly and without any bias to any particular group. From that perspective, Taylor criticizes some popular assumptions of secularism like the separation of church and state.

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<sup>8</sup> In a discussion on “Rethinking secularism: The power of Religion in the Public Sphere” at the Institute for Public Knowledge at New York University, held on Oct 22, 2009, Charles Taylor gave a talk on “Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism.” The audio recording of the lecture was accessed from the following website: <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2009/11/02/rethinking-secularism-audio/>.

Taylor holds that the notion of the separation of Church and state is wrong. It is not to separate or evict religion from the secular state but to maintain and ensure the equal and non-discriminated participation of tremendous diversity of religious values and practice in a secular state. It is to ensure no privilege of one religion over another or religion over no religion and vice versa. At the same there should be no democratic restrictions or control of how citizens argue with each other, rather a secular state needs to encourage them to do so.

Taylor explains that we do need to agree with three core propositions of secularization: 1) a common agreement among different religious groups, 2) no fetishized principle of “*Laïcité*” or the separation of Church and state, and 3) need an official language for law, which does not favor or disfavor one religion over another. He also mentions that, to have a free and fair discussion among different religious groups, we do not have to abandon religious languages, but we do need a neutral official language to formulate laws.<sup>9</sup>

Taylor’s proposes that there should be a non-biased, evenhanded discussion among different religion but the language of the discussion must not be free from religious influence (unlike the neutral legal language of a secular society). Taylor marks an impenetrable boundary or a non-porous wall of separation between legal language and the language of public discussion. But he fails to understand the inevitable interdependency of so called neutral language and the non-neutral religious language. Taylor seems to relax previously advocated wall of separation between church and state little bit further in order to allow religion in the public sphere given that it does not contaminate the holy neutral legal language of the secular state. How can it be possible to emancipate language from the religious influence? Does Taylor want to deny the

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<sup>9</sup> In an earlier talk Taylor offers similar propositions. It was on “The Future of the Secular” by Charles Taylor at New School for Social Research held on March 5, 2009, the video recording of the talk was accessed, on 6th February 2011, from [http://fora.tv/2009/03/05/Charles\\_Taylor\\_The\\_Future\\_of\\_the\\_Secular](http://fora.tv/2009/03/05/Charles_Taylor_The_Future_of_the_Secular).

intricate intermingling of words in the meaning-making process of a language? When Taylor agrees quite strongly that the differentiation is never a complete separation and the divisive wall is always porous, how is it possible to build the strictest wall of separation between language of discussion (biased religious language) and that of law (the holy neutral language)?

In a nutshell, a secular regime is a way of managing diversity of religious positions which assures maximum freedom of religious expression, equality of different religion and irreligious positions, and all of them have the right to give input to the secular regime. Although different civilizations have developed different modes of secularism that need to be dealt separately, Taylor hopes to shed some light on the general features of global secularism by discussing only Western secularism (p.21).

Taylor urges an open discussion among different religious groups at the end of his much discussed book *A Secular Age*. When Taylor agrees that the root of Western or North Atlantic civilization is “Latin Christendom,” how can a Christian dominated West ensure a free and fair discussion among Christians and non-Christians?

What are the conditions of having a non-biased discussion among different religious groups? When the Western or Atlantic civilization is predicated upon Latin Christendom, especially protestant, how can non-Christians be assured that there could be a free non-biased discussion? When there is a tremendous component of anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic sentiment imbibed with the protestant Western civilization, how can an even-handed, equal, and dignified participation of all non-Christians be ensured? As Taylor mentioned, there had been several attempts (failed, though) to declare USA as a Christian state. It is worthy to mention here that recently, there are appeals to halt or deny the democratic rights of Muslims because they do not deserve that yet,

claimed by some influential government officials.<sup>10</sup> If Muslims argue that a free nonbiased discussion among different religious groups could be held only in a socio-political setting predicated upon Islamic principles, would non-Muslims be willing to participate in the discussion without any fear of being discriminated? Saba Mahmood (2007)<sup>11</sup> asks some of these important questions. She argues that in order to devise any fruitful discussion among different religions, the singularity and universality of Christianity that dominates secularism and the global power, which is blessed by the Western Christendom, must be addressed. Taylor does not address these questions in his responses to the discussions on *A Secular Age*.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Different western government officials raised their concern for the possibility of Islamic Brotherhood, the so called Islamic fundamentalist group, to assume power, if democracy is allowed in Egypt, *immediately*. That's why the USA, England, France, to name a few reluctantly called for an "orderly transition" in Egypt, when hundreds of Egyptians had already embraced death in a desperate attempt to get rid of the long [US backed] dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak. Slavoj Žižek criticizes the West for its reaction to the recent uprisings in Middle East: "--- the most shameful and dangerously opportunistic reaction was that of Tony Blair as reported on CNN: change is necessary, but it should be a stable change. Stable change in Egypt today can mean only a compromise with the Mubarak forces by way of slightly enlarging the ruling circle. This is why *to talk about peaceful transition now is an obscenity*: by squashing the opposition, Mubarak himself made this impossible. After Mubarak sent the army against the protesters, the choice became clear: either a cosmetic change in which something changes so that everything stays the same, or a true break" (emphasis added). Žižek adds, "the hypocrisy of western liberals is breathtaking: they publicly supported democracy, and now, when the people revolt against the tyrants on behalf of secular freedom and justice, not on behalf of religion, they are all deeply concerned. Why concern, why not joy that freedom is given a chance?" (*The Guardian* on February 1st 2011, retrieved from

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/feb/01/egypt-tunisia-revolt>). The nature of the concern of the Western liberals is clarified by one Israeli minister: "Having said that, I'm not sure the time is right for the Arab region to go through the democratic process,"---"It might take a generation or so." See for details:

<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2044929,00.html#ixzz1CY2dp3EZ>. This kind of liberal dilemma could be traced back to John Stuart Mill, who denied democratic rights for the colonized people. Dipesh Chakravarty in his *Provincializing Europe, Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* summarizes Mills' position: "Indians and Africans were not yet civilized enough to rule themselves. Some historical time of development and civilization (colonial rule and education, to be precise) had to elapse before they could be considered prepared for such a task" (2000:8).

<sup>11</sup> In Warner, et al. Eds. Pp. 298-299.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor replies to the discussion on *A Secular Age* in his "Afterword: Apologia pro Libro suo," in Michael Warner, et al. Eds. 2010. *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press.

#### **4.0 TALAL ASAD<sup>13</sup>**

Talal Asad's genealogy of the secular and secularism is an epistemological break in the studies of secularism. For Asad, both classical secularization and contemporary counter-secularization or anti-secularization theses fail to explain the historical socio-political transformations throughout the secular modern age. His analysis of the discursive historical development of the relationship between religion and the secular in modern Europe challenged secularist normative and essentialist notions of religion and the sacred. Although Asad does not address Habermas' arguments on post-secularism or Taylor's revisionist thesis,<sup>14</sup> I find Asad's arguments on modern secularism quite relevant to engage critically with these latest developments in the study of secularism. In this chapter I will critically review Asad's critical analysis of classical secularization theories and his own propositions.

For Asad, traditional theories of secularization fail to conceptualize the actual changes that have taken place throughout last two to three centuries. He identifies the problems of those theories and proposes a different way of approaching secularization. For Asad, secularization is not a separation of religion from the public sphere (or the separation of religion from politics and

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<sup>13</sup> Talal Asad's major writings on secularism were published long before Habermas' and Taylor's writings on Post-Secularism. Naturally Asad did not use the newly invented term "Post-Secularism". Interestingly Asad did not engage with this term in later writings, too.

<sup>14</sup> Although Asad does not deal extensively with Taylor's arguments on secularism but discusses a little in a separate article: "Thinking About Religious Belief and Politics" which is supposed to be published in *Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies* edited by Robert Orsi. Accessed on March 2011 (<http://iah.unc.edu/news/EventDocuments/asadreligionpolitics>).

the state); instead, it is a process of establishing a new form of normative secular power (discourse) over the modern subject. Instead of denouncing secularism entirely, Asad reorients its focus. When secularists take the rise of religion in the public sphere or the rise of religious fundamentalism as deep assaults upon their normative secular values, Asad claims to create space outside of such normative judgment and offers alternative ways of understanding those phenomena.

#### **4.1 PROBLEMS OF ESSENTIALIST DEFINITION OF RELIGION**

According to Asad, one of the problems of modern secularism is its essentialist definitions of religion. Modern secularism essentializes religion by developing a universal and rigid definition of religion. Asad specifically criticizes Emile Durkheim and Clifford Geertz for their essentialist definitions of religion. Whether Asad argues that no universal definition of religion is possible. He explains the defining characters of religion by indicating the limitations of a general definition of religion. Any universal definition of religion is partial. “My problem with universal definitions of religion is that by insisting on an essential singularity, they divert us from asking questions about what the definition includes and what it excludes—how, by whom, for what purpose, and so on” (Asad 2001:220). For Asad, the important thing to note is the politics of universal definitions.

Asad argues, “To define “religion” is *first and foremost an act*” (Asad 2001:220, emphasis added). Asad further explains, in the same text, that defining religion by identifying an essence (e.g. belief in God) is to identify certain actions, signs, and symbols as religious. This identification in fact (re)formulates religion in specific time and context by some people. But the

absence of any analysis of the politics of these (re)formulations is important to note. He explains that a definition based on the importance of God, transcendental component, or belief excludes their intimate “others.” “To stress the centrality of “God” in the definition is to exclude Buddhism; to stress the centrality of “transcendence” is to exclude immanence; and to stress the centrality of belief is to exclude practice without belief” (Asad 2001:220). The point Asad is making here is to stress the nature of exclusion in a definition. At the same time, one could ask what Asad is excluding by stressing one particular aspect of definition. However, we can better understand Asad by analyzing his criticism of Durkheim’s and Geertz’s definitions of religion.

Durkheim defined religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to *sacred* things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (Durkheim 1995 [1912]: 62, emphasis added). In Durkheim’s definition, there are two important things: the collectivity (church) and the binary opposition between sacred and profane. For Asad, the role of church is important because it involves the material expression of the faith. But the binary opposition of sacred and profane is deeply problematic, for two main reasons: the universal character of the definition and its essentialist or triumphalist nature. Any universal definition of religion, for Asad, fails to understand the diversity and complex (re)formulation of religion across time and space. On the other hand, the essentialism of a universal definition is a false formulation because there is nothing essential in religion or sacred (I will discuss more of it later). However, Asad agrees with Durkheim when he excludes the “supernatural” and the “divine” from the definition of religion. But Asad debunks this essential definition of religion as something “mythical.”

Geertz defined religion as “(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a

general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Geertz 1973: 90). This is the most complex definition of religion developed so far. Two key aspects of the definition are: “system of symbol” and its “interpretation.” For Geertz, a system of symbols formulates a general order which bears an authority and authenticity. Geertz argues anthropologists need to interpret the system of symbols, which includes both religion and culture, to produce “thick description.” Asad raises questions on the possibility of interpretation of symbols. According to Asad, symbols do not have any hidden meaning in themselves that needs to be interpreted (or revealed) by the anthropologists (Asad 1993. Pp. 27-54). On the contrary, religious symbols need to be understood by considering their relationship with non-religious symbols: “Religious symbols [---] cannot be understood independently of their historical relations with nonreligious symbols or of their articulations in and of social life, in which work and power are always crucial” (Asad 1993:53). He also stresses that religious symbols are not simply related to social life; these symbols are validated and made meaningful by their practices and discourses. In the same vein with the post-Structuralists, especially Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, Asad refuses to find any hidden meaning beneath the symbols. In addition, Asad proposes that the symbols are made meaningful only through their mode of deployments in material life e.g., religious practices. Again, Asad remains focused on the inseparable relationship of symbols and their material process of deployment, like the inseparable bond between faith and practice.

Asad’s critique of Geertz regarding the meaning of symbols and their interpretation is crucial for understanding Asad’s anti-essential stance on religion and his emphasis on the mutually constitutive role of belief and the practice of religion. According to Geertz, there is a prior authority of “a general order of” religious system of meanings which needs to be related

*later* to the “socio-structural and psychological process” (Geertz 1973: 125)<sup>15</sup>. For Asad, there is no prior authority, nothing called “general order” of the religious symbols; for him, religious symbols become meaningful *only* through their use in a particular time and space. Asad finds religious and secular meanings are mutually constitutive.

#### **4.2 ANTI-ESSENTIALIST ESSENCE OF RELIGION**

We can try to understand Asad’s rejection of any definition of religion by analyzing the role of faith in religion. Asad criticizes W. C. Smith’s “The Meaning and End of Religion”<sup>16</sup> by invoking the fragility of Smith’s anti-essentialist definition of religion. Although Smith intends to develop an anti-essentialist definition of religion, Asad argues it is a failed effort. Since religion is a noun it has to name some existing things in the world. A noun cannot name a thing which does not exist in the world. There is no exact thing in the world which is called religion, except “the personal quality of faith” (Asad 2001:206), which is reified in the name of religion. Asad takes on Smith by scrutinizing Smith’s use of adjectives (i.e., religious) but not adverbs. Asad argues that Smith fails to understand the role of actions in religion by neglecting the adverbial functions of religion. It leads to a development crucial for Asad’s thinking on religion. He describes the adverbial function of religion i.e., the role of action as crucial in understanding religion (but that does not mean belief is not important). Unlike Durkheim, Asad explains that the importance of action is not similar to that of ritual in religion. Asad highlights the role of

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<sup>15</sup> Geertz, Clifford. 1973. “Religion as Cultural System.” In *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books.

<sup>16</sup> Asad, Talal. 2001. “Reading a Modern Classic: W.C. Smith’s ‘The Meaning and End of Religion.’” *History of Religions* 40.3 (2001): 205-222.

actions and develops his own anti-essentialist essence of religion by criticizing Smith's anti-essentialist notion of religion.

W. C. Smith, in his *The Meaning and End of Religion*, proposes an anti-essentialist definition of religion, but, as paraphrased by Asad, at the same time according to Smith that the presence of "universal and transcendental he calls faith" (Asad 2001:208). Asad points out one of Smith's assumptions behind the universal presence of religious condition (faith) is that only the unchanging things of religion can be understood, not the contrary i.e., changeable things. That unchanging thing (e.g. faith) becomes the essence of religion in Smith. Asad argues, however, the essence of religion is not constant; it is simultaneously sustained and contested by its followers. Religion survives in the diverse and dynamic processes of practices of its followers in different circumstances. "The *essence* of *each* religion is thus not something unchanging and unchangeable but something that is *at once* to be preserved and defended as well as argued over and reformed in the changing historical circumstances that the tradition inhabits. And people are religious *to the extent* that they belong actively to developing religious traditions, preserving or reformulating them" (Asad 2001: 208, emphasis added). It is interesting to note that although Asad is an anti-essentialist, he proposes another form of the essence of religion. It becomes a paradox: the anti-essentialism creates another essence. However, Asad's anti-essentialist essence of religion should not be confused with other essentialist definition of religion (e.g. Durkheim's and obviously not with Smith's anti-essentialist essence, either).

Asad proposes that the essence of religion<sup>17</sup> is something which is simultaneously preserved and reformed; in that sense, it is both dynamic and static. When Asad says something to be preserved and reformed, it seems unclear that whether he is saying some aspects of religion

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<sup>17</sup> However, Asad says, there is nothing *essentially* religious or scared. I quote him later in this article.

remain unchanged and some do not. Since he does not believe in anything unchanged in religion, it contradicts Asad to interpret him as saying that some aspects of religion remain unchanged. On the other hand, things which are changed and reformed cannot be preserved or defended at the same time. For example, can we say that the belief in God has been at once preserved and reformed? We may argue that the way people express their belief in God has changed; but, does the belief itself remain unchanged? However, the unchanged and changed aspects of belief in God are not the same thing. In that sense, what Asad proposes is not quite clear. If we argue that belief itself has no essence without its form of expression or forms of employment by its adherents, we may conclude that there is nothing unchanged even in the belief in God. But one important question remains: Isn't it another form of esentialization to make forms of expression or modes of employment (adverbial function) of belief *central* in understanding religion?

Asad raises an important question: "But if "thing" simply means a referent in the world, why can not personal piety be a thing?" (Asad 2001:209). Criticizing Smith's definition of faith as an inner state, Asad argues that faith is "a relationship created through, maintained by, and expressed in practice" (p. 208). The relationship between faith and practice is interesting to note. Asad finds that practices play central role in both the formation and the survival of faith. One wonders: Is the relationship itself a faith? Or, does faith mediate the relationship between believers' state of mind and their practices? In addition, what is the relationship and difference between individual piety and faith? Piety and faith are interconnected, but they are not the same.

#### **4.3 UNDERSTANDING MODERN CONCEPTIONS OF THE SECULAR**

The concept of the secular, Asad argues, had diverse meanings and a variety of practices until the late nineteen century. He also says that a universal, generalized, and organized conceptualization of the sacred was developed by the modern anthropologists: “It was late nineteenth-century anthropological and theological thought that rendered a variety of overlapping social usages rooted in changing and heterogeneous forms of life into a single immutable essence, and claimed it to be the object of a universal human experience called “religious” ” (Aad 2003:31). A strong unified narrative of “religion” which is identified with the “secular” was developed by Durkheim. Asad criticizes the Durkheimian binary opposition of the sacred and profane: neither of these two concepts can be separated rigidly because they are “scrambled together” and mutually interchangeable.

What is more interesting about Asad’s observation regarding the development of the concept of the secular is that the essentialized and transcendent criteria of the secular was imposed by the European enlightenment thinkers through their interactions with their “other”—non-Europeans (Asad 2003:35). The strength of modern reason was harnessed by mystifying the traditionally worshipped objects and venerated ideas. Enlightenment reason conceptualized traditionally honored objects as objects of “superstition”. The notion of superstition insists on a necessity to be rationalized. The justification for rationalization lies in the persuasive (or compelling) articulation of the superstitious character of those “sacred” objects. So, here is the irony: the social and political necessity of rationalization in the process of institutionalization of secular “Reason”, in turn, transformed (reified) the less organized and diverse objects or ideas into unified, predatory, and powerful concepts. That’s how a binary and oppositional relationship between the secular and religion was advanced.

#### **4.4 UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP OF RELIGION AND THE SECULAR**

The mutually exclusive categorization and the binary opposition of the secular and religion are modern constructions; they are modern inventions and thus they were absent in the pre-modern world (Asad 2003:32). The secular is, Asad explains, neither a “mask of religion” nor another form of religion. Nor is it even enough to say that religion and the secular sometimes overlap each other. The Secular is a “Siamese twin” of religion (Asad 2001:221). One cannot be understood without the other. The secular, according to Asad, is “a concept that brings together certain behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life” (p 25). The introduction of new “behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities” are accompanied by the imposition of the unified definition and the binary categorization of religion and the secular. The definition of and the relationship between the secular and religious are interwoven with each other and vary in different contexts. For Asad, neither religion nor the secular precede or follow each other; secularism introduced a new form of hierarchical and normative relationship between religion and secular power. The relationship between religion and the secular has not been a strict separation; rather, it has been characterized by the control over religion by secular modern power.

“[---] there is nothing *essentially* religious, nor any universal essence that defines “sacred language” or “sacred experience”. But I also assume that there were breaks between Christian and secular life in which words and practices were rearranged, and new discursive grammars replaced previous ones” (Asad 2003: 25, Italics original).

As I discussed earlier, Asad’s takes an anti-essential stance on religion; he also adds that secularism brought a breakthrough in the traditional religious domination, i.e. Christianity. Although the idea of secularism has drawn heavily upon Christianity, it cannot be identified with

Christianity.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, that does not mean we could separate religion from the secular, public reason from private belief; on the contrary, the conditions of being anti-secular or religious e.g., mythical, transcendental, divine, revealed, etc. are notably present in secular modern ideology and practices (pp. 26-37).

From those analyses, we could identify what religion and the sacred *are not*; but we don't know what *they are*. We therefore came to know that religion and the secular have multiple meanings, origins, and implications, so we cannot define them. We also came to know that religion and the secular are not the same; they cannot be categorized as binary oppositional, even though they have mutual and diverse influence on each other. How do we know what they are? How do we recognize (if not define) them? *If we cannot define them, how can we differentiate them, since we know they are not the same, either?* We know we need to understand the discursive formation of both religion and the secular under specific conditions, but *what is the relationship between their discursive formation in a given society or state with the formation in other societies or states?* If we agree with Edward Said that *no* society or culture can be explained adequately without taking into consideration the mutual interdependence with other societies or cultures; how can we explain the discursive and mutually constitutive role of formation of religion and the secular in different societies? Asad seems to ignore this aspect of the formation and the mode of functioning of religion and the secular.

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<sup>18</sup> In response to an article by Gil Anidjar on secularism, Asad responded, "But precisely because it [Christianity] sometimes conflicted with secular colonial authority—and even adapted to it in an exploitative manner—Christian missionizing cannot, I think, be regarded as identical with it. There are connections between Christian movements, values, etc. on the one hand and secular European imperialism on the other, but they are not identical." See his article: Asad, Talal. 2007. Secularism, hegemony, and fullness. *The Immanent Frame*.  
<http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2007/11/17/secularism-hegemony-and-fullness/> (accessed October 28, 2010).

Like many post-structuralists or post-modernists, Asad destabilizes well-established secular versus religious notions by opening up (quite convincingly) the multifarious crisis of secular modernity, and poses serious objections to developing concrete conceptualizations of religion and the secular which have practical implications, like making laws. Law frequently has to define concretely what religion or the sacred is, and it has to set general indicators or criteria for them, at least locally (e.g., state). According to Asad's analysis, a general definition of religion is neither possible nor important. For academic purposes, we might avoid the general definition or operationalization, but for policy making it is a *must*.

As Asad said, secularism can be better understood by analyzing its "shadow" effects or better approached indirectly (p. 67). Probably because of this indirect analysis, Asad is less interested in understanding the direct consequences of destabilizing secular/religious classification, and for developing well-defined concepts convertible into practical policies or laws. In fact, Asad does not explain why the indirect approach or shadow analysis is the best approach. I am reminded a popular adage in Bangladesh—the best way to criticize any idea is to criticize its strong points, not the contrary (criticizing weak points). Similarly, the best way to understand secularism or religion might be to analyze its strong and direct effects, not its weak ones.

Based on the critique of the definitions of, and the relationship between religion and the secular, Asad develops his critique of secularization theories. Asad particularly emphasizes the problem of the secular norm of the separation of the public and private spheres and the separation of religion from politics (or the state).

#### **4.5 PROBLEMS OF TRADITIONAL SECUALRIZATION THESIS**

In a debate with José Casanova, Asad makes his critical remarks on secularization. José Casanova defines three basic elements of secularization, as summarized by Asad: “(1) the increasing structural differentiation of social spaces resulting in the separation of religion from politics, economy, science, and so on; (2) the privatization of religion within its own sphere; and (3) the declining social significance of religious belief, commitment, and institutions” (1999:178). Casanova (2006) finds the core proposition of the secularization thesis—a functional differentiation of the secular and religious spheres—is still valid. The two other propositions have already been proven wrong. The increasing religious participation of people all around the world and the rise of religious politics (Norris and Inglehart 2004) are often cited as compelling evidence for rejecting the second and the third propositions. However, Asad finds none of those three feasible.

Casanova defines the functional separation of religion (private sphere) from state (public sphere) as the core proposition of secularization, which is still valid. Casanova mentions the institutionalized separation of religion from the state in the USA and Europe. On the contrary, Asad (2006:208) replies to Casanova that the nature and the mode of functioning of the claimed separation of religion and the state are multiple; in fact, they are not separated but function in complex interdependent relationships. Asad presents two examples: the USA and France. The people of the USA are generally religious, although the state is constitutionally bound to act neutrally regarding religious affairs. In France, the state is “aggressively antireligious,” but at the same time it employs religious clerics. The people of France are mostly nonreligious, but the aggressively antireligious state owns religious property and recruits priests, ministers, and rabbis (as state employees). Citing those examples, Asad emphasizes the multiplicity of the functioning

of secularization in different countries which cannot be characterized as a separation of state and religion.

Asad argues against the proposition that if it promotes civil society and public debate and does not hinder individual freedom, public religion (which already has entered into the public sphere) could be considered consonant with secularization. Asad contends, when religion enters into the public sphere it surely influences politics, economics, education etc., and thus violates the secular distinction of the public versus private spheres (Asad 1999:179-182). And that's why Asad also remarks that the separation of religion from the public sphere is not feasible. When private religion plays a crucial role in the development of the moral personality of a secular citizen, it is impossible to insist on a public sphere (dominated by secular citizens on whom private religion has significant influence) free of religious influence. When the personalities of modern subjects are crucially influenced by the private religion, the public sphere is susceptible to religious influence; religion challenges the secular authority.

Asad (2003) clarifies his disagreement with some popular hypotheses on secularization. Four common propositions on secularization, Asad disagrees with: 1) Secularization has been a failed project or anti-Secularization, 2) Secularization is a European project and thus not applicable to non-European countries, 3) The secular is a mask of religion, and 4) Nationalism is another form of religion. According to Asad, as I read him, secularism is not a failed project: it has been a very significant event in the modern era, but scholars have failed to theorize the changes that have taken place regarding religious affairs. Secondly, secularism has not been confined to Europe only; it has been adopted (although in very different ways) in non-European countries including some Muslim majority countries, like Egypt. Third, secularism is a breakthrough in the religious dominance. Although it has extensive legacy of Christianity, it has

established the supremacy of the secular power over religion. Lastly, the rise of secularism has in many cases coincided with the development of nationalism but they are not identical (Asad 1999:183-188).

What does Asad propose regarding secularism? Asad proposes that secularism is postulated on a new worldview. Traditional secularization theories reduced it to a few propositions; but For Asad it encompasses more aspects of modern life.

[---] that (1) “the world” is a single epistemic space, occupied by a series of mutually confirming sciences [--] that not only employ something called “the scientific method” but also conform it as the model for reason; (2) that the knowledges gained from these disciplines together support an enlightened morality, that is to say, rules for how everyone should behave if they are to live humanely; and (3) that in the political realm this requires particular institutional separations and arrangements that are the only guarantee of a tolerant world, because only by compelling religion, as concept and practice, to remain within prescribed limits can the transcendent power of the secular state secure liberty of belief and expression (Asad 2001:221).

Secularism is a worldview which encompasses all aspects of human life including private life. Secularism works through the scientific model of reason and rationality which provides the guideline to set acceptable modes of knowledge, practices, and values. That's how secularism has appeared as a normative proposition: the world needs to be secularized to make progress (scientific, technological, and moral). Secularism not only establishes the normative supremacy of rationality over religion, it also introduces the construction of a subject (modern rational agency) who embraces this normative supremacy. The privatized religion plays a significant role in nourishing the psychology of modern subject amenable to the secular worldview. Thus, the claim of the separation of religion from public life is problematic for Asad. Participation in religious festivals in the public arena is one example of the violation of the principle of separation. Moreover, instead of a separation, a complex mutually constitutive interaction of the public and private aspects of religion characterizes the secularization process. For example, the

secular state defines the role and acceptable limits of religion; it continues to ensure the reproduction of publicly ineffective private religion. Asad extends the line of argument:

“The point I would stress is not merely that religion and the secular interpenetrate, but that (a) both are historically constituted, (b) this happens through accidental processes bringing together a variety of concepts, practices, and sensibilities, and (c) in modern society the law is crucially involved in defining and defending the distinctiveness of social spaces—especially the legitimate space for religion” (Asad 2006:209).

Asad identifies three important aspects of the secularization process: historically constituted religion and the secular, the accidental process, and the supreme power of law. The historical construction of both religion and the secular makes up the entire secularization process, where the supremacy of law plays a critical role. But what Asad means by the “accidental process” is not clear. However, going back to the question of the relationship between religion and the secular, we see that the secular (re)defines religion and thus reproduce religion. The secular court defines “true religion” according to the Freedom of Religion provisions in the USA. In Bangladesh, a ruling by the Supreme Court has reinstated secularism in the constitution. So, the secular state defines the margins of religion; it defines “proper religion” or “modern/moderate religion”. Here comes another crucial turn, a paradox of the secularization thesis: the secular persists through reproducing a special form of religion and vice versa.

Asad argues, in the classical theories of religion like those of Tylor, Frazer, and their continuation in Freud, Marx etc., the material conditions of this-worldly life produced the idea of superstitious religion, the imagined God, the illusion of religion, the false consciousness of supernatural being etc. Thus, whereas secular life created religion in the pre-modern phase of human history, in modern time, the same secular life has given birth to the privatized individualized “enlightened and tolerant religion.” In Asad’s words: “Thus the insistence on a sharp separation between the religious and the secular goes with the paradoxical claim that the latter *continually produces* the former” (Asad 1999:186) (emphasis added).

#### **4.5.1 Isn't separation a form of relationship?**

Asad repeatedly insists that the secular state intervenes into the private domain of modern subject (the domain of private religion) to persistently reproduce the supremacy of the powers of secular reason and its state apparatus (borrowing Althusser's concept). Thus, secularism is not the separation but a new form of relationship between the private and public spheres. While this is a significant breakthrough in understanding the functioning of secularism, Asad, it seems to me, does not consider that the separation is also a form of relationship. To be separate, one has to define what separation is and how to execute the separation. So, the secular state defines the separate domain of private religion and also monitors the persistent reproduction of the separation.

Asad points out that the secular law of a state defines the domain of religion and intervenes into the private domain of a modern subject to monitor the compliance (and violation) with the principle of the separation. Thus, for Asad, secular state is not separated from religion. But he fails to notice that the secular state has to intervene into the private domain to define, monitor and reproduce the separation. That's not a violation of the principle of separation; rather, the intervention is an inevitable condition of the separation. However, I find merit in Asad's argument because it explains that secularism is not merely the separation of religion and politics but a bigger project—a worldview and a discursive process aimed at the establishing secular power's supremacy.

#### 4.5.2 Isn't anti-normativity another normative stance?

Secularists take the principle of the separation of religion from politics as axiomatic; they maintain as normative the stance that we have to separate religion and politics in order to have the peaceful coexistence of different religions, to have the public sphere free from religious conservatism, and so on. Asad argues that this normative assumption hinders secularists from understanding the actual changes happening in the world.<sup>19</sup> So, instead of analyzing social reality, secularists measure the progress towards implementing a particular taken for granted assumption; they are apprehensive about any deviation from this essentialized principle. That's why secularists fail to analyze the actual changes taking places in different countries. I think Asad misplaces the focus: instead of scrutinizing the justifying reasons of a normative claim, he emphasizes the normative position itself. If a normative position is a problem, then, isn't anti-normativity *another* normative stance? Moreover, when Asad attacks secularists for being normative by defending secularism, he introduces another normative position:

“If one accepts this conclusion [what makes secularism unique is its varieties], one may resist the temptation to think that one must either “defend secularism” or “attack civil religion.” One might instead learn to argue about the best ways of supporting particular liberties while limiting others, of minimizing social and individual harm. In brief, one might content oneself with assessing *particular* demands and threats without having to confront the *general* “danger of religion”” (Asad 2006:526). (Italics original)

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<sup>19</sup> “Once one is in the business of uncovering dangerous hidden meanings, as in the Spanish Inquisitor’s search for hidden beliefs, one will find what one is looking for” (Asad:2006:524). Here Asad points to Geertz’s approach to interpretation of hidden religious meaning, one the one hand, and the normativity of the secularist, on the other.

It seems paradoxical that Asad rejects secularist normativity but advocates a new normative call for promoting individual liberties while minimizing social and individual harm. For me, the normative position is not a problem because there is hardly any position which is not ultimately normative. I argue it is not important to attack normativity itself; rather, what is important is why a normative position is problematic or what the problems of justifying reasons of the normative stance are.<sup>20</sup> Regarding secularism, we can explain the problems of the role of the normative assumptions in the defense of secularism.

#### **4.6 WHAT DOES ASAD'S PROPOSITION OF SECUALRIZATION ENTAIL?**

Asad's conceptualization of secularization *saves secularism from dogmatism*. Although traditional secularization theories find religion is a misconception or an illusion which withers away through the invasion of science, technology, and rationality, they mystify religion as something unique which can produce fundamentalism, bigotry or fanaticism. Asad helps us to underscore their limitations in approaching fundamentalism, bigotry or fanaticism by explaining it as something which has been made possible by the practical world. It is the temporal socio-political conditions where certain types of religious fundamentalism, for example, are made possible; whereas, in different circumstances failed to produce the same religious phenomena. In that sense, in religious fundamentalism, it is nothing uniquely religious (essentially supernatural, mythical or transcendental). There is nothing religious, outside the practical world, which cannot be explained by the laws of the material world.

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<sup>20</sup> This is a normative claim, too.

#### **4.6.1 Is there anything *essentially* religious in religious fundamentalism?**

If we agree with Asad that there is nothing essentially religious (or sacred) we can conclude that the definition and categorization of the secular become meaningless. The absence of any essential category of religion makes the category of the sacred unworthy; the sacred category loses its *distinctiveness*. If there is nothing essentially sacred or secular, religion and the secular cease to exist as two *distinct* categories, instead, Asad explains their relationship as a mutually constitutive. If we agree with the explanation, we can logically extrapolate that the separation between the sacred and the secular is not feasible. What about religious fundamentalism? If there is nothing *essentially* religious in religion,<sup>21</sup> we can say there is nothing *essentially religious* in religious fanaticism/fundamentalism. It does not mean that there is nothing called religious fundamentalism. It is *not* even sufficient (probably wrong, according to Asad) to say that religious fundamentalism is nothing but secular problems (e.g. poverty, lack of scientific education etc.) emanating from this material world (and its byproduct, the non-material world), transformed and expressed in a different form. Asad explains it briefly but does not develop it further.

However, as Asad argues, religion cannot be understood in isolation from its material expression; this material expression makes religion meaningful and *unique* to a certain time and context. In that line, I could argue that there is nothing *essentially religious* in religious fundamentalism; rather, it is its interaction with a spatio-temporal socio-political context which paves the way for a religion to be fanatic or fundamentalist. To make it clear, what I am arguing is not that within a religious fundamentalist group, religion does not play any role. On the

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<sup>21</sup> “[---] there is nothing *essentially* religious, nor any universal essence that defines “sacred language” or “sacred experience.” (Asad 2003: 25, Italics original).

contrary, the role of religion in religious fundamentalism cannot be traced back to the religious scriptures; religious scriptures, as text, have no hidden meaning to be interpreted, nor do they have any essential or general meaning. The disciples or followers of a religion make their scriptures meaningful in a particular socio-cultural and political context. This position is not similar to the materialist interpretation of religion, where religion or religious texts are illusion or false consciousness. What I am arguing is that, like any other texts (e.g., *Capital* by Karl Marx), religious scriptures (e.g., The Holy *Quran*) guide, influence, and shape their disciples' behavior, sensibilities, and activities differently in different times and spaces, depending on their socio-political circumstances. Similarly, the meaning and importance of the same verse or text is understood differently in different times and contexts. That's why Asad asks, why the same verses of Quran are used to justify the "militancy" or "fundamentalism" *only* in a certain time and space and why people in different time and context do not find similar types of motivation from the same text. What people do with their sacred or holy text does not depend on the words (signs) in isolation from the real world; instead, the real world activities define the importance of the sacred texts.

Asad's latest book, *On Suicide Bombing*, is the best example of explaining religious fundamentalism or religious militancy according to the anti-essential essence of religion. In this book, Asad compares the popularly used reasons to denounce the acts of suicide bombing (e.g., killing innocent people) with the secular defense of war and violence in modern society. Asad, again, discusses the problems (dangers) of traditional dichotomization of liberal versus terror. He does not see Islamic fundamentalism as something essential to Islamic doctrine; nor has he tried to legitimize suicide bombing (or violence in the name of religion). Asad simply aims to explain the activities of Islamic militant groups by analyzing its specific socio-political circumstances.

#### **4.6.2 Is there any authentic meaning of the texts written by Asad?**

What do people do with Asad's book, e.g., *On Suicide Bombing*, is more important than the literal interpretation of its meaning, even more important than Asad's own interpretation. In an interview, Asad was asked to respond to some of the harsh critiques against him: "You have been accused of sympathizing with nativism, "Islamic Fundamentalism," and the like. Recently one critic charged you (along with others) of cultivating an 'aura of authenticity'" (Shaikh 2007:221). Asad replied quite convincingly by saying that people who carefully read his writings do not make such spurious comments. I am not interested in justifying Asad's own position or that of his critics; I am interested to understand the meaning making process of a book, the process of reading a book (making meaningful), and the role of the author in this meaning-making process. Asad does not claim, like Foucault, that the author is dead. On the contrary, Asad condemns the misreading of his book. What is at stake here is Asad's anti-essentialist position. When Asad says there is no universal or essential meaning of a text; it's to its interlocutors (in this case readers) alone to make the text meaningful in a certain sociopolitical circumstances. Asad, by insisting on an authentic meaning of his own book, tends to negate his anti-essentialist position. However, I find merit in Asad's anti-essentialist position; but I also find it its policy implications problematic. For academic discussions, we may not find any problem in practicing anti-essentialist philosophy, but in the practical world (e.g., for making laws), we have no alternative but to set arbitrary definitions or meaning. Such definitions may not be universal but it has to be concrete (quantifiable, measurable, etc.) in a specific time and space. So, what about the meaning of the Asad's own text? When Asad defends his own logic by exercising his authority as an author, does he claim that there is an essential meaning of his

book? This is a problem I find in Asad's anti-essentialist position; but, that does *not* mean his critiques against the essentialist definition of religion and the secular are invalid.

To summarize Asad's viewpoints on modern secularism, we need to study its three most important aspects: (1) the universal definition of religion, (2) the binary opposition between religion versus the secular, and (3) the separation of religion from the public sphere (i.e., the separation of religion from politics/state). Asad finds the formulation of the universal essentialist definition of religion problematic for two reasons: first, there is no universal essence of any religion or the sacred and the essential definition of religion (or sacred) is a modern construction, and second, these reified definitions ignore the inherent multiplicity of the meaning and practice of religion across time and space. So, Asad criticizes Durkheim's universal definition of and the binary categorization of sacred and profane. Asad also finds Geertz's definition of religion problematic because there is no prior authority, "general order" of the religious symbols; religious symbols become meaningful *only* through their modes of deployment in a particular time and space. Asad finds religious and secular meanings are mutually constitutive. Similarly, to understand the secular, we need to study its historical construction; for Asad the secular cannot be understood in isolation from religion because religion is the "Siamese twin" of the secular.

In a debate with Casanova, Asad criticizes the traditional secularization theories. Casanova finds the core of secularization—the functional differentiation of religion and state—still defensible; Asad finds the claim of separation is not valid because of the inevitable intrusion of religion in public life in different ways e.g. the significant role of private religion in developing the moral secular subject. Asad does not see secularization as a separation; rather, it's a new form of relationship between religion and the secular where secular power determines the

legitimate space for religion in a modern state. For Asad, secularization works through the scientific model of rationality, which provides the guideline for defining the acceptable modes of knowledge, practices and values. That's how secularism has appeared as a normative proposition. Asad debunks the normative proposition of the separation of religion from the public sphere; he proposes to see secularization as a process which authorizes a new power relationship between religion and the secular.

Instead of denouncing all of secularism, Asad reorients the focus of secularism. Instead of taking the normative secular propositions for granted, Asad questions them and finds a new approach to understanding religion and secularism. So, instead of being apprehensive, like normative secularists, about religious revivalism or religious fundamentalism, Asad proposes to understand the actual socio-political circumstances which make that possible in a certain time and space. Asad finds there is nothing *essentially* religious in a religion which could be blamed for producing religious fundamentalism. In line with Asad's anti-essentialist analysis, I argue, there is nothing *essentially religious* in religious fundamentalism; in order to understand religious fundamentalism, we need to analyze how specific sociopolitical events *make religious fundamentalism possible*, instead of asking why a particular religion produces fundamentalism (because there is *no* universal character of a particular religion).

Talal Asad provides us with conceptual tools with which to understand contemporary social and political phenomena, especially the role of religion, from a different perspective. Talal Asad calls us to question the axiomatic assumptions of secularism which prevent us from understanding social phenomena objectively (unlike the positivists). Talal Asad allows us to *avoid* essentializing any particular religion, culture, or community as progress-resistant, conservative or fundamentalist; because *no* religion, culture, or community has any essential

character. That's why, Talal Asad represents an invitation to new intellectual enquiries. Talal Asad is the beginning of a new era, at least in understanding the secularism and religion. In the following chapter I will comparatively discuss Asad's new propositions of secularism with Habermas and Taylor's arguments on post-secularism.

## **5.0 COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION: HABERMAS, TAYLOR, AND ASAD**

Amid the growing influence of public and private religion all over the world, post-secularism puts forward a proposal to rethink the relationship of religion and the secular. Habermas proposes to revisit the authority of the supremacy of the secular over religion but insists on the significant difference between secular and religious reason. Secular Reason cannot judge the validity of religion; but religion has to be translated in order to contribute to a secular sphere. Moreover, both the secular and religion have to be open to learn from each other without any prejudice (i.e., religion is destined to be withered away, and it has nothing to contribute to the secular world). Although, Taylor disagrees with Habermas on any distinction between religious and secular reason, Taylor also argues against any discriminatory prejudice against religious belief and agrees to allow all forms of religion to enter into the public sphere. Taylor proposes his revisionist thesis of secularization as a way of managing different competing religious or irreligious or anti-religious views. But, religious language, as such, cannot be incorporated into the “official,” i.e., secular language of the state; religious language needs to be neutralized for that. Whereas, Asad does not agree with the binary categorization of religious and the secular; he sees secularization as the historical consolidation of the supremacy of the secular power over religion.

All three scholars agree that the traditional secularization thesis needs to be revisited but they differ significantly in terms of their alternative propositions. They all agree that

secularization is not merely the separation of religion from the state or the confinement of religion in the private sphere. But there are some strong disagreements among these three thinkers regarding the approach in understanding the relationship between religion and the secular.

Taylor does not agree with Habermas' insistence on any difference between secular and religious reason. Whereas Habermas disagrees when Taylor does not see any "dangerous" element in religion, for which it needs to be differentiated from secular reason.<sup>22</sup> Despite their disagreements, both of them agree that religion needs to be transformed to some extent in a secular state. While Habermas argues for the translation of religion, Taylor finds the necessity of a neutralization of religion as a perquisite of an official language. But for Asad *no* religion is an *essential* ideology or practice to be translated or neutralized; instead, we need to recognize the essential diversity and heterogeneity of a religious discourse. We need to debunk secular modernity that has constructed an imaginary universal definition of religion. Asad argues that the very *act* of religion is spatio-temporal and it has no universal character. Even though they share similar texts of a particular religion, people in different times and places find different meaning of the same texts and develop different religious practices.

According to Asad's analysis, as I read him, both Habermas and Taylor are problematic. Asad criticizes the binary opposition of religion and the secular. For Asad, the essentialization of religion or the secular is the core of the problem. No particular religion has any universal characteristics that can be characterized as *essentially* "dangerous" or progressive. That does not mean that there is no "dangerous" *manifestation* of religion like religious fundamentalism. It is

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<sup>22</sup> To listen and read the entire debate between Habermas and Taylor: Editors, The. 2009. Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor in conversation. The Immanent Frame. <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2009/11/20/rethinking-secularism-jurgen-habermas-and-charles-taylor-in-conversation/> (accessed March 7, 2011).

simply to say that the very *act* of religion (belief and practices, regardless of its dangerous or progressive character) is contingent upon relevant socio-political circumstances. Similarly, any dangerous manifestation of religion, like religious fundamentalism, is not produced by any essential religious and supernatural belief; instead, the socio-political circumstances of a particular time and place make religious fundamentalism possible. That's why the same religion and religious texts are not invoked for fundamentalism *always* and *everywhere*; on the contrary, the same religion and religious texts have been believed and translated into practice in diverse ways by the people of different times and places.

### **5.1 IS THERE ANY ESSENTIALLY DANGEROUS RELIGION?**

Habermas' insistence on the essential “dangerous” characteristics of religion (for which religion needs to be translated) is problematic. When Habermas insists on the universal and eternal character of religion i.e., something essentially dangerous, he fails to recognize that the dangerous manifestations of religion is spatio-temporal. Moreover, why Habermas finds religion essentially dangerous is not clear. However, like modernist discourse, Habermas finds religion contains some essentially irrational or non-rational (to be euphemistic) elements. Some commonly raised practical implications of irrational (thus dangerous) religion are religious fundamentalism, fanaticism, or dogmatism. The problem of this proposition is that it imagines an essentially dangerous criterion of religion. It fails to recognize that there is no *essential* religion in the world; different socio-political circumstances allow people to construct their religious discourses (belief and practice) in diverse ways. Similarly there is no general danger in religion; instead, certain socio-cultural circumstances make dangerous manifestation of religion possible.

My concern here is *not* about potential danger in religion but defining religion as essentially dangerous.<sup>23</sup>

Accordingly, dangerous manifestations of religion (e.g. religious fundamentalism) in particular times and spaces cannot be generalized as *essential* in religion. Habermas fails to recognize that the “dangerous” manifestations of religion are not dependent on any *essential* irrational belief of any supernatural or divine ordain. Rather *we need to explain why some of the people, who believe to be dictated by any superhuman force, find affirmative motivations for their fundamentalist activities and some do not.* For example, *Al Qaida* interprets the same Islamic text in support of launching suicide attacks, whereas millions of Muslims all around the world invoke the same text (in many different ways) to condemn those suicide attacks. So, instead of mystifying religion as essentially dangerous, we need to recognize that “dangerous” manifestations of religion or fundamentalist activities are conditioned upon specific socio-political circumstances; only in the context of specific socio-political circumstances, fundamentalists are able to harness their source of inspiration from religious text(s). Whereas the same text(s) are invoked by others for entirely different purposes; they are interpreted in radically different ways. I expand this point by analyzing the example of diverse interpretations of *Quran* by Muslims around the world.

Any particular religion or religious text does *not* have any *essential* character or meaning; it is understood, interpreted, and practiced differently in different times and places. For example,

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<sup>23</sup> To be specific I do *not* argue that dangerous religious fundamentalism or dogmatism is not possible; instead I find it problematic when Habermas finds some essentially dangerous elements in religion. For Habermas some aspects of religion are universally and eternally dangerous. Habermas does not recognize that dangerous religious manifestations of religion cannot be universal because the irrational beliefs or practices (like myth) are rooted in specific socio-cultural circumstances. People of different cultures have come up with different mythical or superstitious beliefs and practices. If Habermas insists on any essential (universal and eternal) element of religion, he in fact mystifies the historical socio-cultural construction of religion as transcendental. That is the crucial problem of modern secularism.

the same religion, Islam, and its sacred text, *Quran*, have been invoked by the protesters in the Middle East in waging rebellion against their tyrant rulers, whereas the tyrants have invoked the same text to condemn the massive protests and to support their continuation as power-holders. The same sacred text is invoked to condemn any violent activities e.g., suicide bombing by the governments of almost all Muslim countries, whereas insurgent groups like Al Qaida or Hamas invoked it for entirely different reasons. (It is not at all meant to say that Al Qaida or Hamas cannot be called fundamentalist; instead, it is to draw attention to the particular socio-cultural circumstances which allow the formation of these groups and allow them to interpret the text in a certain way. It is to recognize that their claim of supernatural or divine inspiration has nothing to do with supernatural or divine forces; those divine or supernatural claims are their worldly constructions and temporal imaginations. It is worth mentioning here Hume's analysis of the supernatural or divine God that it is nothing supernatural or divine but our imaginary construction (Hume 2007:97). And importantly, I want to add that the notion of any supernatural or divine God has no universal character; it has been invoked and practiced by the believers in diverse ways. That's why the same divine God is often invoked (e.g. "Islam does not allow suicide bombing or violence") by law enforcing agencies, experts and religious clerics to condemn violent activities of different so called religious extremists, who also evoke the same God in support to their activities) Let alone the numerous divisions within Islam (like Sunni and Shiite) in terms of the interpretations of its sacred text.

Therefore, any prior assumption of essentially dangerous religion is no less dangerous. Asad reminds us, "once one is in the business of uncovering dangerous hidden meanings, as in the Spanish Inquisitor's search for hidden beliefs, one will find what one is looking for" (Asad:2006:524). Probably that's why secularists tend to be suspicious (instead of being critical)

of any religion that reflects the pervasive policing culture of our contemporary security state. So, instead of deliberately searching for essential dangerous elements of religion, we can aim at “assessing particular demands and threats without having to confront the *general* ‘danger of religion’” (Asad 2006:526, Italics original).

Habermas’ erroneous essentialization of religion as “dangerous” propels him to demand a mandatory translation of religious discourse as a precondition of a secular society. This erroneous essentialization is a modern construction, as Asad reminds us. It is this erroneous essentialization which needs to be debunked in order to understand the historical consolidation of the secular power over religion. If we can overcome this essentialization we will be able to understand that religion and the secular are not two essentially rigid categories. Similarly Habermas’ distinction between official language and religious language is not essential; the separation wall is porous.

## 5.2 HOW NEUTRAL IS THE NEUTRAL OFFICIAL LANGUAGE?

By insisting on the obvious need of neutralizing religious language in order to develop an official language (i.e., generally understandable and translated religious language),<sup>24</sup> Taylor reifies the differences between religious and official languages. His definitions of the religious and secular

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<sup>24</sup> “In a constitutional state, all *enforceable* [original emphasis] legal norms must be capable of being formulated and publicly justified in a *language intelligible to all of the citizens*. Yet the state’s neutrality does not speak against the permissibility of religious utterances within the political public sphere, provided that a clear separation remains between the *institutionalized consultative and decision-making process at the parliamentary, judicial, ministerial, and administrative levels and the informal flows of political communication and opinion formation among the broader public of citizens*. The ‘separation of church and state’ calls for a filter between these two spheres which allows only ‘translated’, hence secular, contributions from among the *confused din of voices* in the public sphere to find their way onto the formal agendas of the institutions of the state” (Habermas 2009:76).

languages fail to understand the problems of generalizing the difference of the religious and secular language. Thus Taylor ignores the essential instability of the meaning of any language regardless of its religious or secular nature.

Although Taylor recognizes the historical transformation of the meaning of some religious (i.e., Christian) terminology such as “tolerance”, “order” etc. into secular, he clings to the essential difference between religious and secular language. Taylor deemphasizes the spatio-temporal meaning-making process of words or languages. He does not recognize that the meaning of a particular word or terminology is not static; it's ever changing. The meaning of a particular word or terminology is context-dependent. Moreover, one particular word or terminology can signify different meanings in a particular country or community. For example, the meaning of the word *Jihad* has appeared to be very different in different contexts. Now-a-days, sometimes *Jihad* is used to signify fundamentalist Islamic activities, whereas for most of the Muslims it is a religious war against any form of injustice. It is also interesting to note that sometimes people use *Jihad* for entirely different purposes e.g. “Jihad against corruption.” So, even though *Jihad* is popular as a religious terminology it has multiple connotative and denotative meanings in different uses (Wiktorowicz 2001).<sup>25</sup> Since there is nothing *essentially* religious in religious terminologies, we cannot assign any essential meaning of a particular word like *Jihad* by which we can develop essential categories, like religious versus secular language. Any particular word or terminology can signify multiple meanings, but identifying one specific meaning as “dominant” is an arbitrary construction contingent upon the power dynamics.

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<sup>25</sup> Certainly small radical groups, such as Islamic Jihad, produced material that justified assassination and other forms of violence, but these justifications were rejected by most Islamists and remained limited in number and reach” (Wiktorowicz 2001:22).

The dominant meaning of a word or terminology depends on the power dynamics of the relevant socio-cultural unit. Similarly the official language or the transformation from religious language to secular is contingent upon the power structure of a particular society. Thus meaning-making process is a political process. No word or terminology bears any essential, unchangeable, and static meaning by which we can essentially differentiate religious language from official or secular language. That does not mean to say that there is no commonly understood and consistent meaning of any word or terminology; on the contrary, the commonly agreed meanings of some words are ephemeral and subject to change according to the spatio-temporal and changing power dynamics. For example, in the contemporary debate surrounding terrorism, what would be the criteria of terrorism and who would be identified as terror defends largely on the spatio-temporal power dynamics. That's why while Hamas is identified as terrorist by the West, but the people of Palestine, who elected them as their leader, see them entirely differently: may be as freedom fighters. But, at the same time, the continuous eviction of Palestinians from their motherland and illegal occupation by Israelis are not considered as terrorist or terrorist activities by the majority of the west. So, it is the power dynamics which plays the decisive role in the arbitrary process of institutionalizing a particular meaning as dominant. One of the essentially unstable meanings of a particular word or concept become dominant through the continuous production and reproduction of a specific meaning through the state and ideological apparatus (borrowing Althusser's terminology) such as educational institutions and legal institutions.

So, the religious or secular meanings of some words depend on the spatio-temporal power dynamics. While we know that there is nothing essentially religious or secular meaning of words, it is impossible to draw an essential dividing line between these two. But that does not mean that there is no difference between religious or secular meanings or words; on the contrary,

it is to emphasize that the difference is not universal and unchangeable. The difference of meaning is contingent upon the spatio-temporal power relationship. Religion and the secular are two different types of meaning constructed out of same symbols, words, or images.

### **5.3 DEMYSTIFICATION OF MODERN ESSENTIALIZATION**

According to Asad the presumed essential categories of religion and the secular are mutually constitutive of each other; they cannot be understood without taking into consideration their interdependency and mutual influence. As Asad puts it, religion is the “Siamese twin” of the secular. So, the reified binary distinctions of the secular (translated religion) vs. religion or religious language vs. official (secular) language are problematic.

For Asad, we can neither undermine the historical consolidation of the authority of secular power over religion, nor can we essentialize the acts of religion or the secular. Instead of devising an essential analysis of the secularization process, we can try to analyze the spatio-temporal developments of the authority of the secular over religion. Instead of defining religion as essentially supernatural, divine, or dangerous we need to study the socio-political manifestation of a particular nature of religion in a specific time and space.

In a post-secular society, secularization is not to single out the *essential* dangers of supernatural dogmatic beliefs; instead, it is to debunk the modern construction of essential religion as something dogmatic, supernatural, divine, and dangerous (like Habermas). It is to recognize the spatio-temporal and natural construction of the supernatural, divine, or dogmatic religion. The notions of supernatural or divine are the reflections of and fostered by the particular socio-political circumstances of our material world.

In response to the increasing religiosity of our contemporary times, we do not need to push the essential separation line between religion and the secular public sphere little bit further (e.g. from the separation of religion and state to the separation of official and religious language or formal secular discussion i.e., parliament and informal public discussion); instead, we need to question the mystification of the natural and this-worldly constructions of religious beliefs as essentially supernatural or divine. Neither do we need to relinquish the authority of secular reason for judging the validity of a religious belief, nor do we need to reify the distinction between religious and secular language. On the contrary, we *need to recognize the essential heterogeneity, diversity, and instability of religious and secular concepts, meanings, and discourses.*

In response to the growing diversity of religious, non-religious or anti-religious viewpoints, unlike Habermas and Taylor, we do not need to imagine a utopian neutral state entity to host a non-biased discussion among competing groups. We can never imagine a neutral personality (either individual or institution) indifferent to all forms of ideologies. For every individual possesses some forms of sensibilities and convictions. For example, an individual, who believes in a particular religion in his/her private life, cannot remain absolutely indifferent to his personal convictions and sensibilities (which is the essential condition of a neutral individual) when s/he is in performing public duties. Similarly one who does not believe in any particular religion cannot also be indifferent to all other faiths. So, a neutral entity is a utopian ideal. Rather, neutrality is an arbitrary consensus among competing powerful groups and susceptible to be challenged. That's why neutrality has to be endorsed and *enforced* by the powerful political group(s).

Unlike Habermas, secular reason does not have to relinquish its judging authority, nor does it need to consider religion especially, i.e., as something potentially important with the condition of mandatory translation; rather, we need to recognize that both the secular and religion are this-worldly constructions, i.e., socio-political constructions evolved throughout the history. We do not need to balance the undue privilege of the secular over religion; rather, we need to debunk the spurious constructions of the essentially inferior religion and essentially superior secularity.

#### **5.4 REASON NEEDS TO BE DISENTANGLED FROM MODERN SECUALRITY**

Secular modernity has constructed the mystified conception of universal religion and as something essentially dangerous. Based on that mystified conception, Habermas explains secularization as a mandatory “translation” of religion. Asad helps us to understand that unlike secularist conception of essential religion, people in different socio-cultural settings make their religion meaningful in diverse ways and through diverse religious practices. That’s why instead of understanding religion from an essential viewpoint, Asad proposes to examine specific socio-political possibilities and obstacles that makes particular manifestation of religion possible in a given time and space. And there is *no* neutral entity or neutral official language (i.e., secular language) indifferent to the given power dynamics; it is power dynamics that determine the religious or secular status of a language and their implications. Secular reasoning (as a methodology), by which we identify, classify, and analyze both religion and the secular needs to be disentangled from modern secularity. The power of modern secularity has identified itself

with secular reason, and that misidentification contributes to the spurious dominance of modern secularity over the essentially inferior religion.

Neither the notion of religion nor the secular is privileged over another. For secular reason, both religion and modern secularity are objects of analysis. Secular reason neither supports nor disproves any religious or secular viewpoints.<sup>26</sup> But the use of secular reason is always contingent upon power dynamics. Thus any analytical conclusion reached through secular reasoning is political. It is through the use of secular reasoning we (the dominant powerful group(s)) attribute prominence of one over another e.g. the secular over religion.<sup>27</sup> It is this-worldly political calculations by which we praise or condemn some aspects of our activities, imagination, and conceptions. It is this politically charged secular reasoning by which we categorize our worldly activities, imaginations, and perceptions as superior or inferior e.g. religion or the secular. Moreover, this categorization of the inferior religion and superior secular is essentially unstable, arbitrary, and susceptible to disruption. The activities, imaginations, and conceptions that we categorize as religious in a particular time and space may be considered secular from a different perspective or vice versa in a different time and space. And even the categorization is not beyond controversy. It is the power relationship among competing groups in a particular socio-cultural setting which determines the conditions of a temporary agreement on such categorization. So, it is not any essential religion which gets condemnation or praise, nor are there some specific activities, imaginations and conceptions that are essentially considered as

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<sup>26</sup> Although secular reason does not endorse any transcendental force, nor does it begin with any proposition that there is nothing like that. But the only provision secular reason maintains is that it is ever open to any conclusion reached thorough reasoning. Also the very method of reasoning is *not* beyond question; the method has been developed by the people throughout history; and it is ever open to negation or revision provided that better method is discovered.

<sup>27</sup> It is not argue that this inferiority or superiority is right or wrong but to underscore that these categorizations are political and not universal.

superior (i.e., the secular). The categories of religious and the secular are porous and that's why same words, images or metaphors are sometimes considered religious or sometimes as secular.

Habermas confounds secular reason with modern secularity. When Habermas insists on the essential “dangerous” characteristics of religion, he confounds modern secularity and secular reason. Habermas fails to understand that there is nothing essentially religious, rather it is the power of secular reason which temporarily categorizes some of worldly activities, imaginations, and conceptions as religious.<sup>28</sup> That's why when Habermas insists on the difference between religious and secular reason, he does it being inspired by a wrong presupposition. Habermas does not recognize that it is this worldly activities, imaginations, and conceptions which are categorized as religious and secular. We do not have to essentialize the difference of the secular and religious if we recognize that it is only through the use of secular reason we put forth these arbitrary categories.

Taylor confounds secular reasoning both with modern secularity and religion; thus he does not recognize any difference between secular reason and religion. Moreover, Taylor tends to employ secular reason to endorse the existence and importance of the divine (the universal need for ‘sense of fullness’ etc.).<sup>29</sup> When Taylor refutes Habermas’ claim of the essential

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<sup>28</sup> It is not all mean to say that these religious or secular classifications are wrong or we cannot classify them as such. On the contrary, it is to emphasize that these classification are spatio-temporal, essentially unstable and subject to be challenged.

<sup>29</sup> Taylor describes modern secularity as not the negation of religion but as a call for peaceful worldly life by invoking the Christian paradigm that God has created human being as free and it's God's design according to which believers work to ensure a peaceful coexistence with all others. So, modern secularism is not denying God but implementing God's design. He also defended that this Christian notion is the key to Western secularization by which the West has developed respect not only among its different fractions but also for other religions and beliefs. It is also worthy to remember that Taylor is a Catholic practitioner. It is also worthy to remember that Kant, who is considered the key philosopher of modernity, believed that “of all the ‘public religions’ that ever were, *only the Christian* religion will have been a ‘moral’ religion (end of the first General Remark)” (Derrida 2002: 49, emphasis added). Moreover, “the liberal values --- were partly shaped by Christianity and Judaism. The key liberal theorists of toleration are John Locke, who defended religious freedom in explicitly Christian terms, and Benedict

distinction of secular and religious reason, Taylor does not recognize that reasoning is a distinct methodology, which cannot be identified with its different uses like religious or secular reasoning or indigenous reason etc. Reasoning<sup>30</sup> does not presume any divine power, but one may reasonably argue the possibility of “transcendence” in many different ways. I think Taylor would not disagree with that. But he would probably disagree that the notion of divine or transcendence is constructed by the human imagination. Divinity has no universal character; it is spatio-temporal. Taylor fails to understand that there is no preexistence of the divine beyond our worldly imaginations. The notion of preexistence of divine or God is also our worldly imaginations.<sup>31</sup> That's why there is no universal and unchangeable conception of the divine and that's why our imaginations of divine appear vivid in different times and spaces.

## 5.5 WHICH WAY FORWARD?

Going back to the primary concern regarding the increasing importance of religion in the contemporary world, following Asad, I would like to argue that secularization in this post-secular world is primarily to debunk the spurious essentializaiton and binary categorization of

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Spinoza, a Jewish rationalist who was also a mystic”, writes John Gray in an article “The atheist delusion” published in *The Guardian* on 15 March 2008.

<sup>30</sup> I often use reason or reasoning and secular reason interchangeably. I use secular reason because it does not approve or disprove any unquestioned conclusion and it is ever open to any reasonable conclusions. But it's different from Habermas' explanation of secular reason or Taylor's reason.

<sup>31</sup> “The idea of God, as meaning an infinitely intelligent, wise, and good Being, arises from reflecting on the operations of our mind, and augmenting, without limit, those qualities of goodness and wisdom” (Hume 2000:97).

the inferior religion and superior secularity. Recognizing the essential instability and interdependency of religion and the secular is crucial to forestall the artificially orchestrated tension between them. Moreover, secular reason and modern secularity has to be the disentangled in order to debunk the modern constructions of essential notions of religion and the secular.

Secular reason is a distinct *method* of human understanding by which both religion and modern secularity are analyzed, understood, and made amenable to practices. It is secular reason which is employed in determining the criteria of religion and the secular. Moreover, secular reason cannot be understood in isolation from the real-world politics; it is embedded in power dynamics. Secular reason is being employed by the powerful group(s) of a particular society in order to reach an arbitrary consensus, which is later enforced and popularized as “reasonable” or “scientific.” So, the production of “reasonable religion” or modern secularity depends on the power dynamics of a given society. And this power dynamics has been dictated by some elite subsections of a given society that needs to be delegitimized.

Secularization in a post-secular society is opening up the possibility of unleashing the *universal* capability of the mass people to employ secular reason *equally* along with the already advantaged groups like intellectuals, researchers, security experts etc. Secularization in a post-secular society is to debunk the mythical institutionalization of the quality of secular reasoning as confined only to those elite sections, i.e., people who are educated and trained according to a prescribed model such as modern schools (not religious schools), of a society. That’s why secularists mark local knowledge, indigenous wisdom, and historically accumulated informal (e.g., oral tradition) learning *generally* as backward, non-scientific etc. Secular modern institutions that produce and reproduce the legitimacy of this elite perception needs to be

exposed and delegitimized in order to recognize the universal human capability of reasoning, regardless of their class, caste, color, gender, culture, religion, or geographical location. That's how the tendency of excluding religious clerics from the formal discussion, or excluding religious language from formal discussion, e.g., parliament or from "official" language, or denying the right to religious politics and so on can be averted. That's how we can challenge the elitist tendency of modern secularity of denying political and civil rights of some people in the name of secularism. That's how, unlike many Westerners, the tendency of denying democratic rights of Muslims, e.g., in Egypt and Algeria by invoking the fear of Islamic fundamentalism can be challenged. That's how the justifying reasons of forcefully evicting democratically elected leaders, e.g., in Palestine can be delegitimized.

Secularization in a post-secular society is to delegitimize the artificial impediments against mass people's active participation in the political construction of certain knowledge and enforceable moral principles, e.g., essentially superstitious and dangerous religion that has to be translated. Modern secularity has denied certain groups of people (like peasants, uneducated workers, religious clerics, etc.) the access to the political realm of the production of some knowledge and enforceable legal and moral principles in the name of backwardness, superstitious beliefs, fundamentalism, etc. Their wisdom and viewpoints have been identified as "unreasonable" and thus considered not worthy of incorporating into the secular civil discussion. That's why amid the growing contemporary religious resurgence, both Habermas and Taylor propose a strategic response to selectively incorporate the previously excluded groups like religious clerics in the secular public discussions. . But they fail to address the root of the problem.

Secular modern institutions or the modern ideological state apparatuses, especially educational institutions, have produced and reproduced a discriminatory social and political discourse in the name of “progress”, “civilization”, “modernity”, and “secularity” (Chatterjee 1986, Chakrabarty 2000) On the one hand, those so called backward, uncivilized, and illiterate people have been denied the access to education and civil discussion<sup>32</sup> and, on the other hand, they are generally blamed of being uncivil or dangerously religious i.e., fundamentalist, dogmatic, etc. Instead of focusing on the specific socio-cultural circumstances which allow the flourishing of dogmatism and fundamentalism, secular modernity has essentialized certain groups of people, certain beliefs, or certain religions as fundamental, dogmatic, and unreasonable.

So, secularization in our age is to challenge and delegitimize those discriminatory impediments employed differently in different places, and to facilitate universal participation of mass people in the public discussion. Universal access to education and civic and political participation of all people need to be ensured so that they can disclose the spatio-temporal and socio-political constructions of myths, superstitions, fundamentalist (both religious and secular) beliefs, attitudes, and practices. It is imperative to expose the ideological and political mechanism, i.e., power dynamics that continues to deny mass people's access to education and active political participation.

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<sup>32</sup> Most of the secular and some religious educational institutions deny poor people the possibility to educate themselves, but later these poor people have been blamed as incapable of being a competitor in the capitalist market. Although secular modernity declares to believe that all human being should be treated equally, but the same discourse discriminates poor people and their children. Only because of being born in poor families, billions of people in the world have been labeled as incompetent and thus subject to universal discrimination. That's why it is a deception to still believe in modern slogans like all human beings are equal and equal before law (only people who have money, who can hire skilled lawyers, are allowed to be treated differently).

Secular reason does not produce any *single* reasonable conclusion or pre-endorse any universal ideology (e.g. colonial modernity). It does not allow any presumed conclusion, nor does it pre-exclude any ideology as “unworthy” or “obsolete” (e.g. essentially dogmatic religion). Secular reason itself cannot work alone; different powerful groups can employ reason to reach different (often conflicting) conclusions. Unlike modern secularity one does not have to presume some non-violable principles such as the public and private spheres have to be separated. Unlike Habermas’ claim that religion must be translated, or unlike Taylor’s that religion has to be neutralized, any authoritative and normative presumptions of some reasonable conclusions or “reasonable religions” need to be delegitimized. Instead, the mechanism of the power dynamics of a given society that determines the temporary ascription of any particular conclusion as “reasonable”, “dominant”, “mainstream” or “popular” need to be studied.

Secularization in this post-secular age (if we agree with Habermas’ definition: “the continued existence of religious communities in a continually secularizing environment”) needs to facilitate the opening up of the possibility of a multitude of reasonable conclusions. So, western secularity does not have to be exported to the rest of the world in the name of civilization, modernization, or secularization. The entire world does not have to follow Habermas’ or Taylor’s prescriptions of secularism. Rather, the multitude of ideas, suggestions, or principles cherished in different corners of the globe need to be recognized. Instead of labeling certain knowledge, wisdom, and culture as *essentially* superstitious, traditional, or dogmatic, the universal capability of the mass people needs to be appreciated.<sup>33</sup> Only the recognition of the

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<sup>33</sup> People who argue for the selective incorporation of indigenous knowledge and local wisdom into secular modern discussion, they often do not challenge the underlying assumption of the essential inferiority of those indigenous stock of knowledge. I would argue that we need to challenge the normative secular position that upholds the essential superiority of secular modern. Only if we can delegitimize the politics of normative exclusion, all sources of knowledge and practices can be equally taken into consideration.

power of the universal human capability of reasoning can facilitate secularization of the contemporary world. And a successful delegitimization of the artificial socio-cultural and political impediments obstructing mass-participation in the political construction of knowledge and enforceable moral principles, like law, can lead to the demystification of modern secularity.

While Asad devotes almost his entire academic career so far to underscore the importance of the spatio-temporal power dynamics in understanding modern secularism, neither Habermas nor Taylor is willing to recognize this. Keeping the current discriminating socio-political discourse unchallenged, Taylor calls for an open discussion among all religious groups. Similarly without examining the socio-cultural conditions which allow the emergence of dangerous religion, Habermas calls for a mandatory “translation” of that dangerous religion. None of these two renowned philosophers of our post-secular age questions the discriminating power dynamics of modern secularity. Probably that is what needs to be addressed primarily to deal with the growing anxiety associated with the increasing presence of religion all over the world.

## **6.0 CONCLUSION**

In response to the seemingly all-pervasive fear of a general religious revivalism in the contemporary world, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Talal Asad propose significantly revisiting the classical secularization thesis; they develop their distinct analyses of religion and secularity. Jürgen Habermas proposed a new concept to represent the current role of religion in contemporary times: post-secularism, i.e., “the continued existence of religious communities in an increasingly secularized environment” (Habermas 2009:63). Although Taylor and Asad agree to revisit the classical secularization thesis, none of them use the term “post-secularism.” Moreover, while Habermas and Taylor’s new analyses share some common positions, Asad offers a radical epistemological break in understanding religion and secularism.

Habermas challenges the classical secularization assumption of the supremacy of secular reason over religion, which obliges religion to be subordinated to the authority of reason in a secular society. For Habermas this is an undue privilege of secular reason over religion, which is no longer valid in the context of the growing importance of religion. In the post-secular society, secular reason has to recognize the equal status of religion. And to be able to recognize the importance of religion, secular reason also has to abandon its presumed supremacy over religion. Secular reason can no longer have the authority of judging the validity or the importance of religion. Thus Habermas calls for a complementary learning process of religion and secular reason without any subordination or supremacy of one over another. But Habermas fails to

understand that secular reason is a distinct methodology that cannot be confounded with secular modernity. Before reason, both religion and secularity are objects of analysis. Any rational analysis could lead to multiple conclusions, one of which may support secular modernity. So, instead of arguing against the authority of secular reason over religion, the root of the problem, i.e., the confounding of reason with secular modernity, needs to be addressed.

Habermas also insists that religion has to be translated before it can be allowed to contribute in a secular world; religion needs to be purged of some essentially dangerous elements. But Asad reminds us that there is no essentially dangerous religion that needs to be translated universally. Asad also argues that there is no essential religion, which could be universally defined. The very *act* of religion is spatio-temporal and embedded in relevant power dynamics. Thus, for Asad, “religion is the Siamese twin of the secular.” In the same vein, any dangerous manifestation of religion, like religious fundamentalism, is made possible by the socio-political circumstances of a given time and space. Like secular modernists, Habermas imagines an essentially dangerous religion instead of focusing on particular socio-political settings that make religious fundamentalism possible.

Taylor offers a revisionist proposition of secularism by extending Habermas’ key arguments of post-secularism. By analyzing the historical trajectory of secularism in the West, Taylor shows that secularism has neither been the separation of religion and the state nor has it been the death of God; instead, secularism is the even-handed management of the diversity of religious, non-religious, or anti-religious views by a neutral and democratic state. But Taylor seems to ignore that there is no neutral entity or state that can be given the role of a neutral manger; all state institutions and ideological apparatus are contingent upon power dynamics.

Thus, neutrality is nothing but politically negotiated and temporal agreements among different competing powerful groups in a given time and space.

While Habermas proposes a mandatory translation of religion, Taylor proposes an essential differentiation between religious language and official language, i.e., secular language. For Taylor religious languages are not intelligible to all and that's why a neutral official langue has to be developed in a secular state. Although Taylor agrees that in Western civilization, many Christian terminologies have been transformed into secular discourses, he fails to recognize that any official language cannot be essentially separated from its religious roots. Moreover, the meaning of any word is essentially unstable and heterogeneous; the same word can take different meanings in different times and contexts. The categorization of any meaning of a particular word as official, e.g., secular, depends on the relevant power dynamics. Asad emphasizes that meanings of any religious terminology or text are not universal; rather, meanings are determined temporarily through negotiations among relevant powerful groups in particular socio-cultural contexts.

Taylor agrees with Habermas' proposal to consider religion and secularity with equal status, but unlike Habermas, Taylor refuses to differentiate secular reason from religious reason. While Habermas finds essential danger in religion, Taylor tends to employ secular reason to justify the notion of transcendence or divinity by invoking a general need for the "sense of fullness." Again Taylor confounds secular reason with both secularity and transcendental religion; he fails to recognize that reasoning is a distinct methodology that is not predestined to prove or disprove secularity or divinity. And secular reason is always subject to politics. Secular reason is employed by the powerful groups of a particular society to solidify one particular conclusion as legitimate or reasonable, although there is no single reasonable conclusion. It is the

power dynamics, which determine one particular conclusion as reasonable and dominant, e.g., by making laws or by specifying particular meanings of some words.

Finally, Taylor invites an open and even-handed dialogue among different religious, non-religious, and anti-religious groups, but he does not address at all the conditions of an unbiased discussion among those groups. Even though Taylor agrees that the current power dynamics of Western civilization has been significantly shaped by Christendom, he remains inattentive to the potential concerns of non-Christians about the possibility of any such dialogue keeping the embedded Christianity with the current power dynamics intact. Although Taylor recognizes that sometimes the supremacy of Western civilization and the American nation is identified with the supremacy of Christianity, he does not discuss the possibility and obstacles of having a neutral dialogue without addressing the historical legacy of the privilege of Christianity over others.

Although Asad conceptualized his major critiques of modern secularism earlier than Habermas and Taylor, Asad's old critiques are still applicable for these two thinkers' recent thoughts. Asad's two important critiques of modern secularism are about the essentialization of religion and the binary classification of religion and the secular. Yet Habermas and Taylor define religion as something essentially dangerous and incomprehensible by everyone, respectively. Moreover, Habermas calls for a mandatory translation of religion and Taylor calls for a neutral official language that has to be understood by all unlike religious language. Whereas Asad devotes most of his energy in explaining that the definition and categorization of religion as something essentially inferior to the secular is imaginary, it is a modern construction. Asad also stresses that the specific socio-cultural situations need to be studied in order to understand the *act* of religion in a given context. It is the particular socio-political circumstances and the power dynamics of relevant societies that makes different manifestations of religion possible in

different contexts. At the end, Habermas invites all other non-Christians, especially Muslims, of the entire world to follow the western Christian path of translation of religious discourse, i.e., secularization; Taylor urges an open dialogue among all religious, non-religious, and anti-religious groups without questioning power dynamics that defend and are defended by the supremacy of Christianity. On the contrary, instead of imposing any universal model of secularization, Asad urges studying particular socio-political contexts separately that allow or suppress different arrangements of religion and the secular. Asad also emphasizes the importance of recognizing the diversity of the relationship between religion and the secular flourishing in different cultures all over the world.

So, the thesis of post-secularism, introduced by Habermas and extended by Taylor, rightly underscores the limitations of classical secularization thesis but fails to address the core of the problem: essentialization of religion. While both Habermas and Taylor essentialize religion as dangerous and incomprehensible by all, respectively, Asad argues that religion has no essential characteristics; the *act* of religion is always spatio-temporal. So, a dangerous manifestation of religion or an incomprehensible religion (if any) can be understood only in a particular situation that has no universal essence. However, Habermas's call for incorporating religion by revisiting the authority of the secular is a strategic response to the growing importance of religion in the contemporary times. Similarly Taylor's call for an open discussion among all religious, non-religious, and anti-religious groups fails to address the socio-political apparatus, i.e., power dynamics that have privileged one religion (Christianity) over another in the West. So, instead of arguing the selective incorporation of religion or an even-handed management among all religions without focusing on the socio-political history and power dynamics, following Asad, I think the essential diversity of religion needs to be recognized and

the diverse mechanisms of dealing with the problems and prospects of diversity of religious, non-religious, or anti-religious positions in different societies need to be studied independently. More importantly, how the power dynamics of a given society hinders or facilitates the relationship among different religions or non-religious groups needs to be understood carefully.

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