

Review Essay: Talal Asad: *Genealogies of Religion*, and *Formations of the Secular*

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Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.

The salutary and unsettling effect of these two books by Talal Asad—an anthropologist of Muslim beliefs and practices—is to make strange the “religion” of the West, as it is conceived by various tribes of the academy, and to make almost savage the concept of “the secular” that is so precious to natives of Western liberalism. Quietly powerful and carefully argued, Asad’s essays move with extraordinary skill between fields as diverse as history, literature, moral philosophy, politics, psychology, religious studies, and sociology. Anyone working in these fields and grappling with questions of religion can learn a great deal from Asad, but where he breaks new ground is in his analysis of the secular, bringing to light the way it depends on and circumscribes the conceptual boundaries of religion.

Genealogies of Religion is a collection of eight essays, all previously published except for one, which are held together with the help of a good index and cumulative list of references. In the introduction, Asad says that his “explorations into Christian and post-Christian history” are “motivated by the conviction that its conceptual geology has profound implications for the ways in which non-Western traditions are able to grow and change” (1). The essays are organized into pairs in four usefully named sections—“genealogies,” “archaisms,” “translations,” “polem-

ics”—with each section roughly marking a stage in Asad’s inquiry.

In the first section, Asad criticizes the way anthropologists have constructed religion and ritual as realms of merely symbolic activity, unrelated to the instrumental behavior of everyday life. Anthropologists habitually read cultural phenomena like texts, Asad says, and as a result they too often overlook the way religious discourse depends on practices and discourses that are often not “religious” at all, at least not in ways that textualized concepts can catch. In the second section, Asad examines changes in medieval practices of penance and judicial inquiry in order to unsettle the assumption that pain and discipline are basically religious concepts that steadily wane in significance with the coming of modernity. His respect for and disagreement with Michel Foucault are clearest in this section, where Asad reexamines the works of John Cassian and Bernard of Clairvaux to uncover what he calls the “discipline of agents,” practices of penance and obedience that play a positive role in the formation of the self. The third section begins with an essay that criticizes the concept of “cultural translation” as yet another instance of the textualization of cultures, what Asad calls the “semantic principle” in anthropological studies, whereby cultures are distilled into texts and the connections between various disciplinary practices, of which reading is only one, are consequently hidden from view. This prepares the ground for a fascinating essay on Islamic public argument in Saudi Arabia. Finally, the fourth section moves to England with an extended critique of the various responses to the Rushdie affair that flew under the banner of multiculturalism. Used only to tolerating Muslim practices in the Middle East, government officials and liberal critics failed to address what Asad asks, what it would mean for Muslims to live in Europe as Muslims.

Between two questions at the very end of *Genealogies of Religion*, one can hear the line of criticism that Asad will take up in *Formations of the Secular*. He asks, “Must our critical ethnographies of other traditions in modern nation-states adopt the categories offered by liberal theory? Or can they contribute to the formulation of very different political futures in which other traditions can thrive?” (306). Dissatisfied with attempts to refine “liberal theory,” Asad hopes to cultivate “very different political futures” with his work. Western liberalism is a tradition that does not have within it the resources to address contemporary social needs, especially when it comes to matters of religious pluralism. Asad’s insights become even sharper and more trenchant when he focuses his analysis on the conceptual bulwark of Western liberalism—the secular.

Formations of the Secular is a collection of seven more recent essays by Asad, all of them previously published or presented, except for the difficult, acrobatic introduction. There is no cumulative bibliography, but there is a decent index, and the essays show signs of careful revision at their beginnings and ends to clarify the scope of the local argument and hint at their place in the book as a whole. In the introduction, Asad articulates the major premise of his study, namely that “over time a variety of concepts, practices, and sensibilities have come together to form the ‘the secular’ [which is] conceptually prior to the political doctrine of ‘secularism’” (16). I found Asad’s premise immensely instructive because it suggests that concepts are not simply universal ideas nor the outcome of an earlier necessarily

dialectical conflict. Concepts combine multiple other concepts and are articulated by a variety of practices that change over time. On this view concepts can be shown as powerful for what they combine and richly connected to ways of living and vulnerable to change. In order to uncover the combination of beliefs and practices that constitute the secular and then illustrate the social effects of that concept, Asad arranges the essays into three sections: “secular,” “secularism,” and “secularization.”

The three essays that make up the first section address the ways concepts of the religious and secular are made and remade underneath the related discourses of myth, agency, pain, cruelty, and torture. Asad illuminates aspects of the “secular” that are hidden or lost in the seemingly simple notion of “the secular,” where the addition of the article *the*, after Asad’s analysis, becomes a sign not of the universality of “the secular,” but of its calcification. The second section comprises three essays that look at the way secularism operates as a political doctrine in debates about Muslims as a religious minority in Europe, in controversy over human rights, and in conceptions of the modern nation-state. The third section traces the narrowing of the scope of *shari’a* (religious law) in Egypt during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when European legal codes were being imported. Asad argues that what occurred was not merely the curtailment of religious law to the domain of the family, but a transmutation of the *shari’a* itself. Its own tradition of debate, its distinct manner of making room for human reasoning, was stripped away in the process of becoming “sacred” and instituting “the family” in Egypt.

A cursory summary of these two books by sections will leave out a great deal, but it does serve as a warning to readers who may be misled by the subtitles into looking for an extended comparative analysis of Christianity and Islam. Asad says explicitly that he has no interest in coming up with any definition of religion that comprehends both. Only one essay in each book discusses Muslim practices in any detail, and it is significantly located at or near the end. The arrangement suggests that in order to come to terms with the resourcelessness of so much debate about religion and public life in the world today, readers must first undergo a severe measure of disciplinary self-scrutiny and learn something from religious practices in other times and other places. The sections are not intended to point to any argument about the history of “religion” as a concept or about how secularization occurs exactly, although there are wonderful insights about such things scattered throughout the essays. The overall arrangement is better understood as a reflection of Asad’s strategy in each essay. In other words, the ambition of Asad’s project—to take Western readers through the intellectual exercises necessary to think about Islam today—is less distributed over the whole than it is repeated in each essay.

The seventeen-page introduction to *Formations of the Secular* is a typical example, and since it is Asad’s most recent written assessment of the problem of secularism, I try to describe it in some detail here. First, Asad challenges the idealizing depictions of the modern nation-state as an equal-access society. Whereas most political theorists write from the vantage point of the rational individual or the minority group, Asad’s strategy is to think from the vantage point of the state and its institutions. Thus, in response to Charles Taylor’s elegant refinement of John

Rawls's idea that people with very different "background justifications" can nevertheless come to agreement on "core principles" in public deliberation, Asad says that such analyses overlook the fact that it is not people but the state, through its legal institutions and media representatives, that draws in advance the line between "core principles" and "background justifications." Who has the authority to determine the differences between core and background, private and public? Asad then jumps to discuss the Bible and literature, suggesting that the sense of the Bible as a sacred text is largely the back formation of the widespread reading of imaginative literature that occurred in the early 1800s. Who determines the difference between literary and sacred readings? Asad suggests by analogy that secularism draws the line between literature and sacred texts, just as it does between public principle and private reason. He raises the question of whether Islamic literature must follow the same course in relationship to the Koran. Next, after criticizing those content to say that there is no coherent West, no single modernity, Asad defends the anthropological analysis of concepts against a preoccupation with the particularities of fieldwork or thick description, advocated by Clifford Geertz following Gilbert Ryle. Asad says that conceptual analysis is as old as philosophy, but "what is distinctive about modern anthropology is the comparison of embedded concepts (representations) between societies differently located in time or space. The important thing in this comparative analysis is not their origin (Western or non-Western), but the forms of life that articulate them, the powers they release or disable. Secularism—like religion—is such a concept" (17).

What distinguishes Asad's work is not the dizzying array of topics that display his erudition or his remarkable fluency in so many disciplinary discourses, but his extraordinary restraint in argument. He never falls into the self-reflexive rhapsodies or iconoclastic frenzies that critics are prone to when venturing into the territory of theology. There is a polite bow of acknowledgment to Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* in the title to Asad's earlier collection, and he says in the introduction to *Formations of the Secular* that his own genealogical method "obviously derives from ways it has been deployed by Foucault and Nietzsche, although it does not claim," he adds with barely audible irony, "to follow them religiously" (16). Such understatement is typical of Asad, especially when his criticism threatens to sound political. For example, when talking about the response of supposedly radical critics in the wake of the Rushdie affair, he says, "Neither the invention of an expressive youth culture (music, dance, street fashions, etc.), as Gilroy seems to think, nor the making of hybrid cultural forms, as Bhabha supposes, holds any anxieties for defenders of the status quo" (265). Asad delivers his blow and then moves on. His reticence to indulge in ideological confession of any kind is bracing, and it keeps readers focused on his larger purpose of opening up the secular to interdisciplinary critique.

Asad's restraint is also exemplary in that while he tenaciously exposes the ways that secularism is propped up by opponents and defenders of religion both, he never weighs in on Christianity or Islam itself. This is especially true of *Formations of the Secular*, where he is more careful to distinguish the ambition for world redemption that one finds in Christian theology and in secular politics. "In secular

redemptive politics there is no place for the idea of a redeemer saving sinners through *his* submission to suffering” (61–62). While illuminating the ways that seemingly universal and unitary concepts are often the fragments of a more complex, fragile, and changing tradition to which they once belonged, Asad consistently defends tradition-based moral reasoning, whereby apprehension of the good life is rooted in certain practices or ways of living that join one to a particular moral community. In that defense, Asad’s work opens up the possibility of rational exchange between two seemingly incommensurable religious traditions—Christianity and Islam. However, he carefully avoids evaluating the truth claims of either, and his respect for Christianity and Islam should not be confused with his deeper concern to revitalize the broadly humanistic, intellectual task of genealogical inquiry, the virtues of which are primarily negative. But Asad’s critical essays also do something positively too: by refusing to put into words a vision for some ideal, universal relationship between the religious and the secular, he leaves room for new ways of articulating those concepts beyond academia and its writing. Asad’s modest genealogies make room for new ways of living in the world.

Early in his *Genealogies of Religion*, Asad writes that the reports anthropologists carry home with them from the field are embedded with concepts of the primitive, irrational, mythic, and traditional that have exerted a powerful, often tacit, influence on the disciplinary foundations of their colleagues in, for example, psychology, religious studies, sociology, politics, and literature. Asad calls that influence into question, but one can only hope that his analyses of the secular and its symptomatic religion will exert a similarly strong but more widely acknowledged influence on studies to come. For the toleration of religion that is emerging in academia, there are few better goads than these essays.