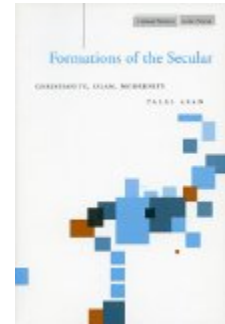


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Rethinking Religion and the Modern

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With the late-twentieth-century resurgence of Hindu nationalism, political Islam, Christian conservatism, and other assertively public religions, the question of the role of religion in the modern world has taken on a new and urgent intensity. Earlier, in the aftermath of the Second World War, it was a truism of social and political theory that the more a society becomes modern, the more its religious traditions decline or are, at the very least, privatized. Although a few old-guard theorists still cling to this latter idea, opinion in political and religious studies as a whole has shifted against this key premise of secularization theory. At the same time, although most scholars believe that the time is right for a new model of religion and modernity, there is as yet surprisingly little consensus on just what such a revisionist model might require. A distinguished professor of anthropology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, Talal Asad has in recent years been one of the most vocal and original of scholars attempting to lay the groundwork for just such a rethinking of religion and the modern. Asad's role in this effort is all the more noteworthy inasmuch as the discipline of anthropology has been largely uninvolved in this discussion. The neglect reflects the fact that most anthropologists were never particularly impressed by secularization theories one way or another. In addition, until, roughly, the 1980s, most anthropologists were not interested in the equally expansive question of what it means for a society to be modern. In the 1980s and 1990s, however, the question of the modern moved to a position of

central importance in anthropological theory. In part this was an effect of postmodernist debates. But it was also the result of far-reaching changes in the local communities anthropologists study. Despite the growing interest in questions of modernity, however, most anthropologists continued to show little interest in questions of secularity and secularization. As Asad notes, even today the main textbooks in the anthropology of religion make no reference to these issues (p. 22). Meanwhile, in other social sciences and humanities, debates rage as to whether secularity is a phenomenon intrinsic to the entire modern world, a condition unique to the West, or an ideological mythology that, even in the West, obscures the wellsprings of religiosity running through all societies. Asad's *Formation of the Secular* does not attempt to take on these last issues directly, but instead places the question of religion and secularity at the center of a richly eclectic but deliberately unfinished anthropology of modernity. A mix of new chapters and essays originally written in the late 1990s, the book takes aim at these questions "indirectly" (p. 67), by way of epistemic reflections on the genealogy of "the secular" and "secularism." As this latter phrasing hints, Asad's approach owes as much to Foucauldian methodologies as it does anything specifically anthropological. In the volume's introduction, Asad takes exception to colleagues who equate the anthropological method with "the pseudoscientific notion of 'fieldwork'" (p. 17). It is not fieldwork that underlies the anthropological method, Asad counters, but, following Marcel Mauss and Mary Douglas, "the comparison of embedded concepts (represent-

tations) between societies differently located in time or space“ (p. 17). He adds, “the important thing in this comparative analysis is not their origin..., but the forms of life that articulate them, the powers they release or disable“ (p. 17). Even this authorial aside fails to capture the peculiarities of Asad’s methodology. Whereas social anthropologists like Mary Douglas develop their comparisons of embedded concepts from the aggregate particularities of concrete interactions, Asad’s analytic begins with the macrosociology and epistemology he believes undergirds modern society and modern systems of knowledge. In his discussion of the secular, then, Asad is less concerned with concrete social particulars than he is with the general concatenations of capitalism, the nation state, and the “new concepts of ‘religion,’ ‘ethics,’ and ‘politics’“ they have engendered (p. 2). The approach bears a stronger resemblance to the macro-civilizational analyses of Nietzsche, Weber, and, especially, Foucault, than it does Oxford social anthropology. It is this broader concern with, so to speak, epistemic hegemonies that unites the volume’s eight chapters. The book opens with an overview of the category of the secular in Western social history, and then moves on to a longer and equally fascinating chapter on “What Might an Anthropology of Secularism Look Like?” “The next three chapters come at the issue of the secular more “indirectly“ (p. 67), talking about agency and pain, cruelty and torture, and the epistemological assumptions of the “human“ in human rights. The premise that links these essays is that Western discourses on these matters became possible only after the secularization of popular understandings of the body, the mind, and the relationship of individuals to abstract social imaginaries like “humanity.“ This is an important point, one that Asad develops by way of a far-ranging survey of contemporary debates in moral philosophy, political theory, and the anthropology of subjectivity. In these and other chapters, Asad shows a preference for reading contemporary culture from the perspective of high intellectual commentaries rather than local social actors. When he does speak about actors-in-context, as in his discussion of Malcolm X’s views of human rights (pp. 141-144), the result is invariably original and convincing. Where the Olympian method becomes less bracing, however, is when it is used to explain the diffusion of concepts like democracy, human rights, and the secular across civilizational divides. When speaking about non-Western modernities, in particular, Asad places primary emphasis on the role of Western domination in globalizing new systems of knowledge and new social disciplines, including those of the marketplace, governance, and neo-secular understandings of “religion.“ He writes:

“Assumptions about the integrated character of ‘modernity’ are themselves part of practical and political reality. They direct the way in which people committed to it act in critical situations.... Modernity is a project—or rather, a series of interlinked projects—that certain people in power seek to achieve. The project aims at institutionalizing a number of (sometimes conflicting, often evolving) principles: constitutionalism, moral autonomy, democracy, human rights, civil equality, industry, consumerism, freedom of the market—and secularism.” (p. 13) Of course there are powerful agencies in the West dedicated to the promotion of human rights and democracy in non-Western settings. However, to leave the matter there is to lose sight of some of the most far-reaching and grassroots changes taking place in our world. Whether among Mayan activists challenging ethnic exclusions in Guatemala, Indonesian Muslims promoting a civic-pluralist interpretation of Muslim politics, or Taiwanese women invoking their traditional role as custodians of the hearthhold to justify their participation in new forms of environmental activism, democratization is an emergent effect of varied influences, the most decisive of which are as much local as anything Western.[1] At several points in his analysis, Asad seems on the verge of acknowledging this fact. However, his genealogical method always pushes him back toward a culture-strong and actor-weak understanding of democratic culture and politics. The book’s last three chapters are the most comprehensively sociological, and provide the clearest statement of Asad’s own normative position on questions of politics and pluralism. “Muslims as a ‘Religious Minority’ in Europe” explores the impact of the “grammar of a discourse” about “Europe” on mainstream European attitudes toward Muslims (p. 161). Although some readers may find Asad’s deconstruction of the “narrative of Europe” ironically homogenizing, its critique is no less unnerving. The next chapter, “Secularism, Nation-State, Religion,” makes a related and equally compelling argument about the way in which the modern public sphere in the West has, contrary to Habermasian idealizations, always been a space of social exclusions, in which those invited to speak may do so only inasmuch as they conform to certain liberal habits of knowledge and practice. The most critical of these requirements, Asad argues, has been that religion be either privatized or stripped of public political demands. As Asad shows in the book’s last chapter, a brilliant discussion of the “Reconfigurations of Law and Ethics in Colonial Egypt,” this latter requirement has posed especially vexing problems in the Muslim world. There the separation of religion and state demanded by secularizing governments “presupposes a very different

conception of ethics from the one embedded in the classical *shari'a*" (p. 209). This last statement is consistent with much contemporary scholarship on *shari'a* politics, as is Asad's observation that throughout the postcolonial Muslim world the *shari'a* has been transmuted into "a subdivision of legal norms (*fiqh*) that are authorized and maintained by the centralizing state" (p. 227). However, here, as in the previous two essays, Asad's critique of the modern sequestering of the *shari'a* has an unexpected irony. He comments in passing that some modern Muslim writers "have claimed that secular life was always central to the past ... [b]ecause religious law (that is, the *shari'a*) always occupied a restricted space in the governance of society" (pp. 205-206). But Asad never says whether this claim has any historic truth. More generally, the often problematic relationship of *shari'a* to other Islamic norms is noted in passing but not systematically engaged. Asad recognizes that the *shari'a* courts were never but one of the various systems used in the administration of law in Egypt and other Muslim countries (p. 210). In a highly original rereading of Muhammad Abduh's ideas, he also provides a provocative analysis of the way in which, contrary to many Orientalist readings, there is in mainstream Islamic tradition no binary opposition between Sufism and the *shari'a*. However, when discussing Muslim Egyptians' reservations about reliance on *shari'a*-based codes as the foundation for the country's modern legal system, Asad dismisses such opposition with the startling claim that it "represents an aspiration for a Westernized future rather than for a reformed continuity of the recent past" (p. 215). This observation flies in the face of the fact that pious believers like Abdulkarim Soroush of Iran and Nurcholish Madjid of Indonesia have concluded that the most compelling reason for a (relative) separation of political and religious authority is so as to protect the integrity of Islamic ideals from corrupt rulers and statist monopolies. This blind-spot is in turn related to what sociological readers of this book will regard as its most startling theoretical omission: Asad's tendency to conflate secular differentiation with secularism as an "epistemic category" and "a political doctrine" (p. 1). As the recent controversy in France over the *hijab* sadly reminds us, there are fiercely secularist ideologies in the modern West, and the category of the secular is one to which many, although by no means all, modern Western political philosophers adhere. However, as Jos=Casanova has argued in his *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994), secularization theory was always concerned not just with the category of the secular or the political doctrine of secularism, but with the growing differentiation of roles, disciplines, and knowl-

edge in society. This differentiation and its attendant tensions are by no means a uniquely modern phenomenon; both were visible in the post-prophetic Muslim community. Moreover a recurring feature of Muslim civilizational history has been the tension between totalizing interpretations of the faith intent on controlling all aspects of social life and the demand—religious as well as secular—for an acceptance of differentiation, specialization, and self-organization. As Sami Zubaida has recently demonstrated in his *Law and Power in the Islamic World* (2003), the attempt to fuse religious and political authority into a monopolistic whole has provoked fierce resistance in Muslim societies, not because of secular ideologies, but because such efforts threaten the integrity of the law and the welfare of believers themselves. To the degree that a relative separation of religious and political authority has long existed in the Muslim world, then, it has done so in part because many believers are convinced that such a separation is demanded by the deepest Muslim ideals. Although he tends to downplay the Muslim world's pluralism, Asad's own political views embrace just such a pluralist vision. In an important conclusion to his essay on Muslims in Europe, Asad sets out the terms for what he calls a "decentered pluralism," a notion he adapts from the political philosopher W. E. Connolly. Asad argues that Muslims in Europe will find little institutional representation as long as they are represented as a minority opposed to and presided over by a majority nation (pp. 177-178). Effective representation demands a decentered pluralism characterized by a "continuous readiness to deconstruct historical narratives" and to open up space for the full multiplicity of overlapping (rather than opposed) social identities (p. 177). This is an appealing formula, one consistent with an emerging body of deep-pluralist opinion in democratic theory. One problem Asad's formulation leaves largely unresolved is that some authority figures, in both the ostensibly "mainstream" and "minority" communities, will oppose such a differentiating proposal because it challenges the elite's in-group privileges. The violence of these controlling elites will in turn prompt some within the "minority" community to appeal for outside intervention, once again raising the question of how to balance citizen rights with decentered pluralities. A dark but brilliantly original work, *Formations of the Secular* is one of the most important books on religion and the modern in recent years. Some readers may wonder whether the genealogy of the secular developed in these chapters is too Olympian and discourse-centric for its own good. Not just an effect of Western hegemones, in growing numbers of societies the challenge of pluralism and participation makes vernacularized ideals

of citizenship meaningful to the most diverse social actors, including Muslims. Whatever one's viewpoint on these matters, Asad's book is a significant achievement. It provides a rich and troubling perspective on one of the central problems of our age: how to live together in a world in which religious difference has become, not a diminished, but a growing part of our public, plural lives. Note

[1]. See, respectively, Kay B. Warren, *Indigenous Movements and Their Critics: Pan-Maya Activism in Guatemala* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Robert P. Weller, *Alternate Civilities: Democracy and Culture in China and Taiwan* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999).

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