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## Review of Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity.*

Marilyn Booth  
*University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

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**Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003. 269 pp. ISBN 0804747679.**

**Reviewed by Marilyn Booth, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign**

"Secular" is a quality that is often invoked, suggesting a concept that is transparent. That assumption in itself, together with the concept's easy prevalence in public discourse today, is a product of the forces that form the word's genealogy, suggests Talal Asad's deeply thoughtful meditation on human beings' struggles to live together in today's world. This is a timely book, for these days the bases of our understandings of political legitimacy appear open to question—or should be open to debate—as much as they have ever been in recent times, despite increasingly sophisticated theorizations of the nation-state as the modern unit of collective life. *Formations of the Secular* is also a difficult if stunningly eloquent book, a response both elusive and forthright to the many shelves of "books on terrorism" which this country's trade publishers are rushing into print. Would that consumers of those volumes were readers of this one, but as Asad takes on academic cultural theory as well as contemporary politics in this series of interlinked essays, the audience is likely to remain an academic one.

Asad observes that scholars have paid more attention to "secularism" than to "the idea of the secular" (21) (and far more attention to religion than to either one). Yet we cannot understand the political doctrine—secularism—without coming to grips with the epistemological category of "the secular." And, argues Asad, "the secular is best approached indirectly" (67). This is exactly how he proceeds, through a bracing series of entry points—theories of liberalism; changing notions of myth running from the Greeks to Fontenelle to Paul de Man to Adonis, along with the modern belief that "disenchantment" means closer access to "the real"; radically different practices concerning relationships among bodily pain, suffering, and agency. Asad then considers "secularism" against understandings of the nation-state and "modernity"; in relation to human rights discourse and its "international" elaborations; and with regard to how resident Muslim communities in Europe challenge notions of "European identity." If *Formations* begins with the general finding that secularism "is an enactment by which a *political medium*(representation of citizenship) redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender, and religion" (5), proliferating elaborations of the concept's work in the world add complexity to that view:

'the secular' should not be thought of as the space in which real human life gradually emancipates itself from the controlling power of 'religion' and thus achieves the latter's relocation. It is this assumption that allows us to think of religion as 'infecting' the secular domain or as replicating within it the structure of theological concepts. .... Secularism doesn't simply insist that religious practice and belief be confined to a space where they cannot threaten political stability or the liberties of 'free-thinking' citizens. Secularism builds on a particular conception of the world. (191)

Practically speaking, the objective must be the creation of a horizontal solidarity that requires not a redeployment of categories so much as a change in their meaning: politics, ethics, religion. In the book's final essay, Asad illustrates the process of category change in formation through an

inquiry into late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Egypt, a colonial state undergoing transformation of its legal system, among other radical changes.

From within his discipline of anthropology, Asad—who is Distinguished Professor of Anthropology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York—also has much to say about academe. He offers a forthright critique of academics' tendencies to deploy *au courant* terms without thinking through their meanings, and he does put forward his own thinking-through of such terms as "empowerment," "agency," "intentionality," "resistance," and of course "autonomy" and "modernity." Asad works from an understanding of anthropology that draws in particular from the work of Marcel Mauss, which he routes through Mary Douglas, emphasizing "the comparison of embedded concepts (representations) between societies differently located in time or space . . . the forms of life that articulate them, the powers they release or disable" (17). In considering secularism as an "embedded concept" across different societies, and in drawing on its different relations to structures of metaphor and varying conceptions of how humans represent themselves, Asad's work speaks to concerns and methodologies of comparatists in all domains of expressive culture.

Asad argues that "the secular" is a way of thinking "the human" which had to occur before "secularism" could find the purchase it has in contemporary, globalizing societies. "The secular" is both formative of and consequent on Western historical narratives of collective being. Secularism, Asad reminds us, doesn't clear the playing field but rather draws the lines differently: "A secular state does not guarantee toleration; it puts into play different structures of ambition and fear. The law never seeks to eliminate violence since its objective is always to *regulate* violence" (8). Yes, assumptions that tolerance would inevitably arise in secular systems based on "reason" have been interrogated by such writers as Michael Taussig. Yet these inquiries, Asad claims, don't reopen the space of the secular to examination.

A strength of Asad's discussion is that he does not abstract the nation-state, civil society, or anything else from the realm of power politics, arguing against Charles Taylor, for instance, that one cannot assume a public sphere in which "persuasion and negotiation" reign supreme, and against Martha Nussbaum that the free use of "good capabilities" is subject to whatever in a particular public sphere of freedom has the power to define what "good capabilities" are. "The nation-state is not a generous agent," remarks Asad, "and its law does not deal in persuasion" (6). This attention to realities of coercion—from demands for "freed" markets to calibrated practices of torture to the inevitability of a public sphere that presupposes certain categories of participants—is one feature that gives the book its almost uncanny timeliness. Thus, American narratives of redemption work on the global stage to foreground certain constituencies and to erase others, in conjunction with a secular notion of "the human" that defines certain kinds of pain as gratuitous while other types are "necessary" to attain something we call modernity: Asad maps the political onto his genealogy of the secular, not as an "illustration" of the latter but as a constituent element of its primacy. To think through the historical construction of "the secular" and the production of "secularism" as a political project is to open an analytic window on "modernity," in its equally normative quality.

Asad draws upon Foucault's notion of "genealogy" in tracing the secular, characterizing "genealogy" beautifully as "a way of working back from our present to the contingencies that

have come together to give us our certainties" (16). He grounds his investigation of how people understand 'the secular' in attitudes to and practices of embodiment. How, for example, are our attitudes to personal responsibility formed by different ways of linking bodily experience to sources of authority? And how are notions of authority by and through which we live shaped by the ways we explain bodily experiences and practices? Asad's most sustained analysis here has to do with economies of pain: with what culturally specific meanings the experience of pain comes to be endowed. Can pain itself *be*—rather than *spur*—agency? And doesn't this possibility undermine the easy assumption of cultural theorists now that agency necessarily means "history-making"? How is a denial of pain as agency connected to the prime position that rationality holds in our notion of secular subjectivities? Isn't that assumption of primacy part of our constitution as modern secular subjects?

The secular is neither a "mask for religion" (26) nor a replacement; it does not fill the same space but rather redraws conceptual and political maps; a comparative perspective can look at the "series of particular oppositions" through which secularism "works" (25). As part of his multi-pronged attack on the assumption that the secular is the obverse of the religious, Asad historicizes another familiar dichotomy: the sacred versus the profane. Based on the careful scholarship of a number of anthropologists and historians of religion, his discussion notes that "the sacred" moved from being a quality of discrete "places, objects, and times, each requiring specific conduct" to "sacredness" as a "unitary domain" constructed in large part through the needs of anthropologists. In other words, in certain culturally and historically specific settings the relationship between the object as set-aside and the bases of its sacral quality, or the conduct this required, had not been a constant. It was the *construction* of "the sacred" as a domain rather than a quality that, among other things, signaled formation of something called "the secular," whereas orienting these two as oppositions was a rhetorical move that effaced the particular meanings of each. And this was also a change from sacred quality residing in an object wherein signifier and signified were not separable to "the essentialization of 'the sacred' as an external, transcendent power" (35).

Asad suggests, somewhat sketchily, that this conception of the sacred as a space apart, with disciplinary implications, had to do with Europe's imperialist quests, as indeed "sacred" comes to name those aspects of European post-Enlightenment political organization that can become justificatory arguments for colonial "tutelage," while "superstition" comes to name those practices that require taming in the name of (European) "civilization." Thus Asad appears to mourn the loss of certain kinds of habitus—of bodily, sensory experiences of a divine presence, of faith as lived through bodily practice, a loss sustained when "faith" becomes instead an epistemological category, a mode of knowledge acquisition. He contrasts secular notions of embodiment that assume that a state of pain will necessarily denote passivity, to the Muslim's formation of virtuous conduct through embodied practices wherein "conscious commitment," embodied learned practices, emotions that carry pain, are all part of and expressive of faith—where "the-body-and-its-capacities is not owned solely by the individual but is subject to a variety of obligations held by others as fellow Muslims" (91).

It will be evident from the discussion thus far that this book takes up many issues familiar to dwellers in the postmodern academy. Asad draws boldly and appreciatively on a wide range of scholarship in history, philosophy, and the study of law to use as signposts in his own

meanderings. He is adept at, and honest about, prising from his wide reading elements that allow him to riff on his own interests, sometimes haunting their byways ("what interests me more here is . . ."). He gives us the academic equivalent of an exhilarating roller-coaster ride. Of course, the danger in such synthetic boldness is that one opens oneself to specialists in each field who may have their quarrels to pick. My particular bailiwick compels me to raise a few questions about his final chapter. Asad argues that the practical redefinition of *shari'a* (law and way, a mode of living based on Islam's foundational texts, including those inscribing the Prophet's acts and advisories) into "personal status law" in modern Egypt meant not simply a relegation of "religious law" to a smaller sphere but rather a rethinking and re-placement of the categories of law, ethics, and politics that made it possible to articulate a separation, in that time and place, not only of legal spheres but indeed of "law" as opposed to the embodied *sunna*, or way of the Prophet, as an all-encompassing mode of collective as well as individual being in the world.

Drawing on several eminent scholars of *shari'a* and *fiqh* (jurisprudence), Asad reminds us that for centuries, and throughout Muslim-majority societies, Muslim thinkers and practitioners of the law have critically debated the elaborations of this "way." Criticism, rather than a rejection of the tradition, is in fact interior to that tradition and in line with it. Yet in representing certain strands of debate within turn-of-the-twentieth-century Egypt (as one historically specific setting of such debates), Asad's urging of historically sensitive, careful and precise comparative work seems occasionally at odds with the particular terminologies on which he relies. He makes much of the historically specific emergence of certain terms, but I'm not convinced that his genealogical work here is as specific as it could be. In tracing Arabic lexica—'*almanayy*, "secular"; *mujtama'*, "society"—he relies on major dictionaries published at distinct points in the nineteenth century. These dictionaries were produced by European orientalists or (in one case) by a Christian Arab associated with the American Protestant missionary crowd in Beirut. Although they are respected sources, one needs to ask whether they encapsulate usage in the eras in which they emerged and among the constituents—Arab Muslim intellectuals—this essay pinpoints. Moreover, dictionaries tend to legislate after the fact, once a word is in usage, a point Asad doesn't appear to take into account. He notes that the word now used for society, *mujtama'*, does not appear in any of them. Yet, at least one term derived from the same lexical root was in use before the turn of the century, *al-hay'a al-ijtima'iyya*, "the social structure," but in public polemics the term often connoted "society" while foregrounding its formalized, institutional nature. When did "social institution/structure" become "society," and is this a significant shift or a semantic-neutral replacement to a less awkward usage? Also, Asad decides that Arabic had no concept for "secularism" before (to go by his dictionaries) 1870, and he notes that in Europe the term emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, yet implies that there was a longer time lag than this actual dating suggests. (This is one of myriad concepts—feminism is another one—for which it has been generally assumed that Arabic was far behind when in fact, in usage, Arabic speakers were not much later at all in using the terminology, whether or not in the same ways.) Similarly, Asad explains that the use of *umma* to denote not the Islamic *umma*—the community of believers, a "theologically defined space" permitting worldly practice of religious obligations (197)—but rather national or ethnic-cultural collectivities is a very significant conceptual change. That is certainly true. But Asad implies that this transformation is very recent. However, in Egypt at least *umma* was being used to designate "nation" in the sense of "community" (rather than *bilad* as country or *watan* as homeland) in the nineteenth century, in a secular sense, before the high period of Arab nationalism. Contrary to Asad's assessment (230), the term was indeed

"available" in the late nineteenth century as a means of approximating "national community." The recognition that *umma* was used slyly to mean perhaps-this and perhaps-that, confusions or slippages or redundancies or new linkages in the emerging print culture of the time, might contribute new dimensions to Asad's tracing of social spaces.

These points do not necessarily threaten the author's overarching analysis. But, since he insists sensibly on "careful analysis of culturally distinct concepts and their articulation with one another" (206), I would like to hold him to that excellent standard. This may make a difference in attending to the ways local discourses were managing and reshaping imported ones. Surprisingly, given his carefully historicized tracings of other concepts, Asad follows the now-canonical view (but one challenged by some of us) that colonial mimicry best describes the work of Qasim Amin, an early and controversial commentator on "the status of women." As the author says, "the question of woman" (*qadiyat al-mar'a*) was a label for discussing (and defining) "the family" as social/political unit in the urgent context of disengaging a collectivity from British imperial rule. (It was also a camouflage for debate on ideal and changing masculinities, truly the problem that has no name, or rather refuses a name).

In all but name, Qasim Amin set himself up as "the father of Egyptian feminism," an epithet which became more rather than less salient as time went on. Yet he was joining a debate in progress rather than beginning one, and much of what he said responded to that local debate rather than—or more significantly than—echoing the pious pronouncements of British imperialists on the status of Egyptian women and the family. This, too, is important "genealogically" because what Asad suggests was new—constructing the family in a mode consonant with a rearticulation of social spaces—had been going on for some time. I'm not convinced that this "new" articulation of family, around an emerging discourse on modern femininity that was particularly interesting for its construction of classed femininities in the emerging polity, was either limited to "Western-educated reformers" (233) or necessarily as neatly convergent with imperial discourse or, ultimately, "formations of the secular" as Asad suggests. One need only read "Islamic nationalist" (for lack of a better rubric) daily newspapers from the 1890s to wonder.

Amin supported different agendas at different moments, a point that scholars have long noted but that needs to be inserted into a broader study of discourse in the period. Amin's "westernizing" tendency is generally linked to what he had to say about "the veil." But here, at least before his latest writing (and Asad refers to his second, not his third book), Amin was considerably more nuanced than the now-dominant narrative suggests. When Amin writes of "veiling," his comments actually have more to do with seclusion in the home: *ihtijab* as opposed to *hijab*, and in the nineteenth century these lexically related words were sometimes used interchangeably, to varying rhetorical effect. Women commentators on gender at the time, whose named presence in public debate preceded Amin's controversial 1899 book, sometimes made careful distinctions between the two, arguing that practices of extreme seclusion that still held sway among most upper-class families were detrimental to women's lives but that veiling was not in itself a deterrent to anything. And it is also important to keep in mind that what "unveiling" signified when Amin was writing is what now, in Egypt, usually signifies "veiling": uncovered hands, feet, and face, but covered hair and body. He was not necessarily advocating "westernization" of Egypt's women or its families. (And I wonder how Asad can confidently observe that Amin and

his peers believed "affection between husband and wife [was] unknown in Egypt until Western reformers proposed it" [234]). Amin's argument had to do not only with the emerging formation of the nuclear family (whose newness was perhaps more discursive than otherwise, which supports rather than undermines Asad's thesis), but also with arguments about urban women's productive, waged work outside the home. Moreover, Amin, in 1899, made a far more careful argument than Asad implies, and I disagree with Asad, who follows Leila Ahmed on this point, that Amin's argument misogynistically echoed the justificatory rhetoric of British colonial officials, who did inveigh against veiling in their bid to "civilize" Egypt by that familiar rhetorical route, "saving the local women." The substance and rhetorical trajectory of Amin's argument differed in its routing through a reading of *shari'a* and its subordination of the issue of clothing practices to that of the absolute seclusion of females from adolescence on. Amin, like dozens of other commentators on this issue at the time, drew from more than one well to steep his concoction, and not simply from the poisoned well of would-be mentors among Egypt's colonial administrators and among the more informal, overlapping layers of European presence in the region.

To produce the important grounded research that Asad calls for will require more work in nineteenth-century Arabic texts, the specific rhetorics of which have been largely ignored. For example, the contributions of the nineteenth-century Arabic novel—the very *existence* of which has been barely acknowledged by scholars of Arabic letters until recently—to emergent understandings of the family in/as society constitute a crucial area of inquiry. (As Asad notes *en passant*, it is not simply the print culture of a society that matters to imagining community, as Benedict Anderson has so famously outlined, but fiction, as a way of imagining pasts and futures [p. 14n15]).

The importance of this book lies in its synthetic brilliance, its suggestive linkages and its warnings against facile and self-indulgent academic polemics. A good book compels one to grapple with the understandings one brings to its reading, and *Formations of the Secular* gets an impeccable score on those grounds. With the fall of triumphalist narratives of modernization that assumed a teleological path toward secularization worldwide, scholars must question rigorously the purchase of "the secular" on our concepts of and assumptions about "modernity." At the same time, we must avoid an opposite path: the tendency to explain collective and individual motivations as based on a reified notion of "the religious," disturbingly evident now in the uses public discourse makes of terms such as "Islamic," "fundamentalist," and *jihad*. Asad's forceful and passionate work demonstrates that the problem of incommensurate categories, whether they be "Islam" and "the West" or "secular" and "religious," is not simply an analytic problem. Rather, getting such categories wrong is a political error that feeds misunderstanding and violence in today's world, ones that secularism's "tolerance" not only cannot undo but also has helped to foster or even to create.