

**Powers of the Secular Modern:  
Talal Asad and His Interlocutors**

*David Scott and Charles Hirschkind, eds.*

*Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 2006. 355 pages.*

For more than three decades, anthropologist Talal Asad has challenged the governing assumptions of western “knowledge” of the non-western world. In fact, his itinerate career marks the parameters of a dynamic and crucial period in western academia. It is Asad’s undermining of British social anthropology in the late 1960s and ethnographic functionalism in general that anticipates the postcolonial theories that would emerge many years later. More than being a simple icon of a generation that challenged the conventions of Orientalism, it is Asad’s essential (if often unacknowledged) contribution to our current self-critical engagement with the larger world that makes this book so valuable.

At the heart of this book is an invaluable exercise of productive engagement and dialogue arranged by the editors. The clever manner in which Asad's most complex and often misunderstood interventions on power, the West, and the study of the non-western world is put into action in a unique way. By bringing together nine quite different scholars who invest considerable energy in their papers, we are treated to an honest exploration of Asad's contribution to a wide range of disciplines. Well-known sociologist of religion Jose Casanova; anthropologists Steve Caton, Veena Das, and Partha Chatterjee; and renowned political scientists William E. Connolly and Hent de Vries all clearly took their task seriously. Perhaps the most fruitful outcome of this exercise is the intimacy of the engagement. In many ways, this book reads as if the readers are listening to a round-table session that proves crucial to understanding Asad's influence on how all of these scholars of religion have reframed their work over the years.

The most noteworthy contribution is the book's format, for it allows Asad to respond directly at the end of the collection. This novel and all-too-often neglected forum of public exchange invigorates the importance of his contribution to how we study religion today and intensifies the value of each contributor's essay. Asad's responses, at times energetic, hint at far more than mere theoretical nitpicking. There is a real debate going on that will prove enriching for a wide range of readers.

Illustrative of this volume's utility is how the essays gravitate around Asad's major theoretical and methodological/polemical contributions to the study of religion. Casanova and Caton, for example, are clearly at odds with his interventions on how western notions of secularism and symbolism play out in the study of spirituality in the modern world. Instructively, Asad's response to these challenges (pp. 206-16) further elaborate the otherwise complex and often obscure nuances of his underlying arguments made in *Genealogies of Religion* (The Johns Hopkins University Press: 1993) and *Formation of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford University Press: 2003).

Such introspection goes beyond the confinements of discipline as well. Asad's contribution obviously transcends anthropology in some illuminating ways. Historian Jon Wilson offers a challenging revisionist reading of the interconnections of Bengali peasants and their landlords through Asad's exploration of how we can productively rethink the actions and passions of individuals vis-à-vis their relationship to other humans, a god, a spirit, and their unconscious (pp. 180-205). Furthermore, as Scott's challenge to Asad on his apparent contradictory reliance on Alasdair MacIntyre's engagement

with tradition and Michel Foucault's genealogy reveals, this exercise also provides new insight for Asad himself as he goes about responding to much welcome criticism.

This extraordinary exercise helps to summarize and intensify our reading of Asad's entire body of work, which investigates the meanings of spirituality, power, and the embodiment of faith inside the human body. This collection thus functions as an ideal summary text to instruct novices about Asad's rather sophisticated and often elusive interventions into how we can engage religion more creatively in our analysis of the modern world. Again, illustrative of this potentially instructive aspect, several essays openly apply Asad's most recent insights, found in his *Formations of the Secular*, to offer important insight into studying how individuals experience religion. As in his earlier inquiries into how traditions are informed as much by domestic/internal influences (e.g., pain, aging, and childbirth) that are immune to the generalizing techniques taught in western anthropological traditions, *Formations of the Secular* exposes how modern power orientates the kinds of questions that we now constructively (but nevertheless problematically) ask in regard to both secularism and Islam. As political theorist William Connolly and anthropologist Veena Das reveal, exploring how modern western morality has evolved to regulate and selectively ascribe judgments about forms of personal and collective pain and suffering ultimately denigrate our ability to engage with other peoples' faith, spirituality, and consciousness that may remain outside the parameters of the western state.

In the end, the dialogue that follows as Asad responds to Das, Connolly, and the other contributors proves to be most exciting to the study of Islam from within western academia. As exemplified by the manner in which Connolly interweaves Asad's unique and path-breaking explanation of how human beings, through their existential (bodily) conditions (often experienced in pain), adjust to the modern world, the application of his ideas are far-reaching and profoundly important to our current state of confusion over how to respond to a self-declared "war on terrorism." In identifying this ideal mechanism for opening Asad's work to a larger audience and shedding light on its relevance to our current malaise, Hirschkind, Scott, and the nine essays in this powerful book offer students and mentors alike a window into a theoretical and practical arena that is all too regularly ignored today by pundits and exploitative "studies" on Islam and religion in general.

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