

Book Reviews

Formations of the Secular

Talal Asad

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This most interesting and ground-breaking study presents a Foucauldian and Nietzschean genealogical tracing of the concept of the *secular*, working back from the present to the contingencies that have coalesced to produce current certainties. It asks what an “anthropology of secularism” might look like and examines the connection between the “secular” as an epistemic category and “secularism” as a political doctrine. Asad attempts to avoid the trap of making pronouncements about secularism’s virtues and vices, irrespective of its origin, and to proffer instead an anthropological formulation of its doctrine and practice.

According to the author, secularism is more than a mere separation of religious from secular institutions of government, for it presupposes new concepts of religion, ethics, and politics; as well as the new imperatives associated with them, and is closely linked to the emergence of the modern nation-state (pp. 1-2). In contrast to pre-modern mediations of non-transcended local identities, secularism is a redefining, transcending, and differentiating political medium (representation of citizenship) of the self, articulated through class, gender, and religion (p. 5).

Concomitantly, he questions the *secular*’s self-evident character even when admitting the reality of its “presence” (p. 16). His main premise is that “the secular” is conceptually prior to the political doctrine of secularism, the secular being that formation caused by a variety of concepts, practices, and sensibilities that have come together over time (p. 16). He concludes that the “secular” cannot be viewed as the “rational” successor to “religion,” but rather as a multilayered historical category related to the major premises of modernity, democracy, and human rights.

Within the above introductory framework, the book’s seven chapters are divided into three parts. The first part, comprising three chapters, explores the epistemic category of the *secular*. The following three chapters of part 2

examine the doctrinal aspects of *secularism*. Finally, chapter 7 investigates the legal and ethical *secularization* process during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Egypt. Chapter 1, which attempts to clarify what is involved in the anthropology of secularism, explores the secular's epistemological assumptions, focusing on the notion of a Christian and liberal "redemptive" myth that is so central to the modern idea of enchantment (pp. 16 and 25). His purpose here is to counter the impression that secular political practices simulate religious ones by arguing that the sacred and the secular depend upon each other, rather than one coming after the other (p. 26).

Chapters 2 and 3 discuss agency, pain, and cruelty in relation to embodiment, thereby addressing such questions as how attitudes to the human body, which incorporate dimensions of pain and enjoyment as well as structures of human senses, differ in various forms of life. Agency is designated as relevant because a better understanding may be offered as to how "the religious" and "the secular" are continuously formed and re-formed by knowing how, by whom, and in what context it is defined and used. (p. 99). Pain, connected to agency and the sense of passion, is associated with religious subjectivity (often regarded as adverse to reason) and with suffering, a condition that secular agency purports to eliminate universally (p. 67).

The agent, in the secular viewpoint, represents and asserts himself. He is empowered. Failing so, he becomes the victim of chance and cruelty – of pain (p. 79). This argument is extended into chapter 3, which reflects on pre-modern and modern understandings and conceptions of cruelty and torture, thus suggesting that the idea of cruelty in modern discourse has distinctive characteristics that can be described as aspects of the secular (p. 100). In fact the secular, despite its own distinct forms of cruelty, claims that both cruelty and torture are manifestations of inhumane and uncivilized behavior. This is why both tend to frequently take secretive deniable forms as opposed to pre-modern public spectacles of power projection.

This "secular," as the second part seeks to argue, claims to redeem the autonomous human subject through the legal and ethical structure of human rights. In this respect, the latter constitutes an aspect of secularism as a political doctrine. Yet there remain inherent contradictions in this secular doctrine based on the assumption of the "human," on which human rights stand: "Nothing essential to a person's human essence is violated if he or she suffers as a consequence of military action or of market manipulation from beyond his own state when that is permitted by international law." In other words, human suffering as a state's citizen is distinguished from the suffering he or she experiences as a human being (p. 129).

This is further reflected in chapter 5, which discusses the case of Muslim religious minorities in Europe. Asad argues that Muslims tend to fail to integrate into European societies not necessarily due to reasons intrinsic to their faith, as many do argue, but due to Europe's very self-conception. European notions of "culture," "civilization," and "the secular state," as well as "majority" and "minority," make it extremely difficult for Muslims to be represented satisfactorily (p. 159). This is particularly so when the modern nation-state, a European historical construction subsequently universalized, has come to make an enforced claim to the constitution of legitimate social identities and arenas (p. 200). From this, chapter 7 finally traces how the European secular experience came to be universalized as a process, through transformations undertaken in the arenas of state law and morality, the case of Egypt being a conspicuous example.

Asad's work, however, despite its profound depth, seems to fall a step short of sufficiently addressing the relationship between the religious and the secular. The continuous and fluid redefinitions of both over time tend to mystify concepts and categories away from the existence of essences. This is why he could state that the sharp separation between both categories goes hand-in-hand with the paradoxical claim that the secular continuously produces the religious (p. 193). Asad seems to ignore or reject outright any possibility of a universal definition or *essence* that could still underscore the relationship between both, for it cannot always simply be a matter of each category being made and re-made. There must be some essence that defines some unchanging relationship between the religious and the secular. Perhaps this *essence* is what is missing in Asad's work. Having said so, Asad's brilliant study remains a defining piece of intellectual and scholarly contribution for all of those interested in exploring the religious and the secular in the modern era.

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