



PORTRAIT: TALAL ASAD

Autobiographical Reflections on Anthropology and Religion

Talal Asad

It is not easy for me to think about the development of my ideas as an anthropologist, partly because it is rooted in a fractured biography, and partly because I am aware that the memory of old men is unreliable and their meandering discourse often self-indulgent. At any rate, since the failure or success of my anthropological ideas is rooted in my life, I begin with a memory of my early boyhood that has become inserted into my evolving outlook over the years.

My interest in anthropology developed slowly. I've been aware of and intrigued by social and cultural differences from my childhood. My father was an intellectual Austrian Jew, a correspondent of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, who converted to Islam in the 1920s and participated prominently in the religious life and reformist movements of Arab and Indian Muslims. My mother came from an Arabian tribe (Shammar) in Northern Nejd and had no formal schooling. But she often recited long, sad poems about exile in tribal Arabic that she had learned as a child; it is one of my great regrets that I never recorded them when she was alive.

Although I was born in Medina in 1932, my parents moved after about a year to what was then British India at the invitation of prominent Indian Muslims whom he had met at the annual pilgrimage in Mecca. At the outbreak of World War II, my father was imprisoned as 'an enemy alien' in a men-only concentration camp, and my mother was interned three years later in a family camp. It was there that my father eventually joined us for the remainder of the war. The camp's inmates were largely German speakers, with a sprinkling of Italians. But the labels used by the major division in the camp (whose oddness struck me only years later) were 'Aryans' and 'anti-Nazis'. Since our social circle belonged to the latter category (mostly assimilated Jews and a very few non-Jews opposed to the Nazi regime), I have no idea whether the former (i.e., Aryans) used the same categorization to describe themselves and 'the others'. But as a child, I regarded this Borgesian categorization of our world—on the one hand racial and on the other political—as quite natural. Later, I asked myself why the anti-Nazis didn't recognize themselves explicitly as 'Jews', despite the fact that most of them weren't religious. 'Jews', of course, is precisely how the Nazis would have described them, because for Nazis (and many other Europeans), human beings are essentially defined neither by language and religious belief nor by form of life but by race.¹

The point, of course, is that priority given to identity in terms of 'race' fails to pay adequate attention to beliefs, habits, and ways of life. Since the formation of modernity, the world has witnessed several situations in which social and political identity have been defined by 'race'—not only in Nazi Germany but also in innumerable colonial encounters where European rulers



or settlers dominated ‘inferior’ peoples. Hannah Arendt (1966) saw this very clearly when she argued in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that the European practice of racial distancing in overseas empires was eventually transplanted into Europe itself—at first in the discourse applied to Jews, and more recently in that applied to immigrants from Africa, the West Indies, and the larger Middle East. But I think a racialized world was presupposed in modern European society rather than being imported from abroad. Gil Anidjar (2008) has traced an aspect of this in his important book *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature*. At least since the nineteenth century, when the biological sciences acquired their disciplinary independence and prestige, and when philology emerged as the study at once of languages and of the ‘races’ that spoke them, the world was coming to be seen by many in Europe as a momentous racial confrontation between ‘Indo-European’ civilization and the civilization of its ‘spiritual opposite’ (as Ernest Renan once put it), ‘the Semitic’—including the Hebraic and Islamic. It is not without significance that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Europeans who were directly acquainted with peoples they dominated in Asia and the Middle East used the terms ‘nation’ and ‘race’ interchangeably.

At the time of the partition of British India in August 1947, I was living with my parents in a hill station in east Punjab (allocated by the British rulers to the new Republic of India). When violence broke out against Muslims living there, we were all rescued by a detachment of what had just become the Pakistan army, and taken by a convoy of cars and lorries to the border of what had become the new Republic of Pakistan. During this move, I witnessed some terrible events: brutal violence directed first against Muslims in east Punjab, and then later in Pakistan against Hindus, murdered by gangs of young Muslim men displaying frightening self-righteousness. The spiral of ruthless revenge killings stoked by wild rumors about ‘the enemy’s cruelty’ at the end of British rule in India has been labeled ‘religious’, but it is not clear what this familiar piece of secular reasoning about the essential character of these horrible actions is based on. It was certainly quite different from the cold, calculating genocide of the Jews and Roma by the Nazis and from the wholesale destruction of vast civilian populations by Allied aerial bombing during World War II, most notably of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—occasions of massive violence seen as secular and justified. At any rate, I would call the post-Partition massacres in India and Pakistan ‘national’ rather than ‘religious’ violence—the kind that is always a possibility and often a reality within modern nation-states.

Shortly after Partition, at the age of 16, I lost my faith, as the quaint phrase has it, although this had nothing to do with the violence I had lived through—or, for that matter, with an exposure to irrefutable arguments. Much later I realized that faith was not merely something one either did or did not have; faith and doubt were often better expressed in terms of degree, ranging from strong to weak. At any rate, that personal experience was extremely distressing, but when I confessed in tears to my father, I was surprised and relieved at his compassionate response: I would, he assured me, eventually find my own way to faith—evidently confident that that way would be Islam. (I never confessed to my mother because I decided she would not have understood.) It was also at that time that the elderly wife of an American lecturer at a missionary college in Lahore, who had befriended me, lent me a copy of Ruth Benedict’s (1935) *Patterns of Culture* and spoke to me about a discipline called anthropology. I found the book’s classification of cultures as Apollonian or Dionysian enormously attractive (Nietzsche was a great ‘hero’ of mine during my teenage years). It appeared to open up the possibility of seeing entire ways of life in terms of dominant cultural style. But it was my father who decided my future study for me: I should study architecture, and in spite of my recent lapse he concluded that I should go to England, a non-Muslim country, for training in that profession. Because I was eager to get to Europe where, so I believed, I would find freedom of thought and the practice of fairness (in a rational and compassionate modern society), I didn’t argue with him.

Arriving in 1950 in London from Pakistan to study at the Architectural Association School of Architecture, I was naturally strongly influenced by aspects of the intellectual and political culture there. The book that captured my imagination very early on was Alfred Jules Ayer's ([1936] 1953) *Language, Truth, and Logic* (I've kept my copy of the book from that time). It was attractive to a teenager for its enormous simplicity about language and the world and for its enunciation of a method for sorting out sense from nonsense. But the desire to disassociate myself from the narrow-mindedness of the public religious rhetoric I thought I had left behind was increasingly confounded by the doctrinaire secularism and subtle—and often, not so subtle—racism that I encountered in Britain (I wasn't yet familiar with France). But what I didn't yet understand was that even justified critique across cultures has to negotiate the notion of 'incommensurability'—that a given language is not simply a means of criticism and persuasion, but also articulates particular forms of life and overlaps in part with other forms. Later I learned from Wittgenstein that while incommensurability may be a barrier to persuasion, it is also an opening to the possibility of analogizing. Through the translation enabled by analogy, one is able to reach not only the other's desires but also one's own—including the self-deception in our desire to engage with the other.

It was my oldest English friend John Dixon, who had just graduated with a degree in English Language and Literature from Oxford, who introduced me in 1954 to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), although it was his *Blue and Brown Books* (1953) that I first read right through on the long train journey from Edinburgh to London in January 1959. (That book, too, I have kept since then.) It took me some time to begin to learn from this philosopher's writings. It was as an anthropology undergraduate at Edinburgh (1955–1959) that I began to read him seriously, although I didn't quite understand how I might integrate his philosophy into what I was being taught as an anthropologist.

At a wider level, the local version of modern civilization into which I was being unevenly assimilated began to appear to me highly problematic, particularly in light of internal and external political events. It was as a way of addressing this predicament that I turned to the writings of Marx, the great critic of modern capitalist civilization—its failures as well as its wonderful achievements. Reading Marx helped me gain a clearer view of the empirical and moral inadequacy of the dominant system of politics and economy that prevails in the world. My move from architecture to anthropology was, incidentally, partly motivated by my desire to acquaint myself directly with life in the Arabic-speaking world, the world from which my mother had come. But my initial criticism of the focus in anthropology on 'fieldwork' was motivated by a dissatisfaction with the notion that it was a direct and therefore reliable observational *method* (its empiricism). It was only later that I came to value it as an indispensable way of learning about and understanding what Wittgenstein called forms of life.

It was after doing my BLitt at Oxford in 1961 that I signed on to teach five years at the University of Khartoum, with the promise that I would get paid leave during that period to carry out ethnographic fieldwork. The Anthropology Department at Khartoum was led at the time by a British anthropologist, Ian Cunnison, who had received his DPhil from Oxford. In addition, two of my teachers at Oxford, E. E. Evans-Pritchard and Godfrey Lienhardt (both, incidentally, Catholic converts), had done fieldwork many years earlier in the Sudan—as had Cunnison. Although E-P, as he was affectionately known to his students, was my DPhil supervisor, it was Lienhardt's mind that I admired more. In my fieldwork among the Kababish nomads of northern Sudan, I focused on their economy, politics, and history, and on my return to England I wrote my doctoral thesis on those topics and not on religion.² This focus on *a priori* secular categories is why I now consider the book that emerged from my fieldwork to be a failure.

Although this was my Marxisant period, one that saw world events such as the 1967 Arab-Israeli war (in which a European settler-colonial state easily defeated the armies of several

corrupt and inefficient local regimes), I became increasingly dissatisfied with the classical Marxist concept of ‘ideology’. My frequent visits to Cairo during the late 1960s and the 1970s involved arguments with Egyptian Marxist friends about the role of religion in society. Typically, they would concede that it was necessary to take the religion of ordinary Egyptians seriously, because without a proper understanding of what moved ‘the masses’, one could never mobilize them in a secular, progressive direction. My criticism of this position was based, I think, on my experience as an anthropologist who had lived among and come to admire and respect people who lived on very limited material resources, most of whom could be described—in one way or another—as religious. I found myself arguing that this was not a matter of ‘taking religion seriously’ for strategic reasons, but of being prepared to learn something from other people’s lives that might be profoundly important for understanding one’s own.

But my fumbling in this direction (I wasn’t entirely clear what I wanted to say about anthropology or religion) began to be clarified by the very personal experience of my mother’s final illness. In 1975, while I was teaching at the University of Hull, I learned that my mother had advanced cancer. I decided to go to Saudi Arabia and stayed with her there until she died a year later. The political atmosphere and the social rigidity in a society awash with newfound wealth was very uncongenial, but the entire experience had a considerable impact on me and my ideas. I tried—unsuccessfully—to sort things out in my 1978 Malinowski Memorial Lecture (which I had been invited to give before my year in Saudi Arabia) in which I dealt with the definition of ideology, the classic Marxist theoretical term for false consciousness, as well as with the ‘authentic’ accounts of cultures studied by anthropologists. I tried to distinguish language *in* life from the language used by anthropologists *about* life, and to trace the slippery role of ‘meaning’ in anthropological accounts of other cultures. I tried to think in that presentation about matters that interested anthropologists of the time, as well as larger issues that had shaped my life up to that point.

Improbable though it may seem, my struggle to articulate my ideas and criticisms was largely prompted by my reflection on my mother’s religious life. My father spoke and wrote impressively about the religion to which he had converted. My mother, by contrast, lived as a Muslim without expounding the doctrines of Islam, without defending it from attack or trying to persuade others of its superior virtue. My point is not simply that she was a pious woman—that she performed her prescribed prayers regularly, read portions of the Qur’an aloud early every morning, and fasted during the month of Ramadan. It is that I now realized I had thought of her life in terms of *a lack* instead of trying to understand it in her own terms, as she had lived it. I began to see that, like so many non-intellectuals, her religious practices were embodied, and that her embodied religion did not offer itself to hermeneutic methods—to the deciphering by observers of the *real* meaning of what she did—although it obviously ‘meant’ much to her.

In a very fundamental sense, these ‘religious’ activities had been no different from the mundane part of her life because they *were* mundane and integral to her everyday life. And while I had seen her act in this way as far back as I could remember, it was only after her death—when I turned in a sustained way to Wittgenstein for an understanding of religion (although he himself was not ‘religious’)—that I began to see her life differently. I saw it now not as an attempt to deepen and aestheticize her experience (as it is fashionable in some quarters to say), but as a way of being. My mother didn’t intellectualize her religion, but by that I don’t wish to say that she was ‘a blind follower’. Her prayers, recitations, and fasting were intended neither for other people to decode nor for enhancing her own experience; they were addressed to her God. During her married life she had not been always receptive to my father’s enlightened arguments about changing some of her religious practices. Was this because she was irrational, incapable of responding to a rational argument, as I thought at the time? I have come to believe that I was

wrong in thinking so: she didn't abandon particular practices because she felt that the change wouldn't fit easily into the entirety of her life as a Muslim. The idea that her feelings of fear, reverence, love, and so forth were to be understood as 'emotions' and therefore as 'non-rational' had for long seemed to me an unsatisfactory way of thinking about devoutness. This became clearer over time as I learned to think of embodiment not as mechanization but as the articulation of a particular encounter—in my mother's case, of her relationship to her God.

At any rate, my learning from my mother's life is an instance of the fact that not *all* learning presupposes a process of *teaching*—and therefore of an authoritative teacher. Which is not to say that in life there is never a place for an experienced teacher or expert to whom one can turn; it is to say that *dialogue* in the course of our everyday lives is needed to decide which experts to turn to and how to use them. 'An expert', so one might say, is someone whose expertise (experience) one builds on. Looked at from the other end, a good teacher is one who learns through teaching. And because time is finite, learning in life—like the language in which one teaches—is never complete.³

But important though this step of learning from my mother's life was for me, it didn't directly address the typical classical Marxist understanding of 'religion' as a mode of false consciousness, on the one hand, and as a repressive instrument used by the ruling class that was destined to be cast into the 'dustbin of progressive history', on the other. I felt the need to try to sort out what I had to retain from Marxism, to try to think further about what was distinctive of how we deal with pain and sickness in our modern civilization—a question that has been at the center of 'religious' thought and practice for millennia. That is to say, I wanted to think again about the Marxist notion of dialectic as the natural motor of progressive history, and about the liberal claim to have resolved a major source of suffering and violence within and between states by redefining the place of 'religion.'

After encountering the writings of Foucault, who not only wrote illuminatingly about punishment but also insisted that to understand power one has to go beyond the sovereign state, I decided to turn to Hobbes on secular sovereignty and Locke on religious toleration. Rereading them together, these seventeenth-century writers helped me understand why the state's definition of the place of religion became so important. From Hobbes I learned not only about the state's concern to ensure a loyal citizenry, but that the state itself was being reconceived as an all-embracing structure conceptually independent of rulers and ruled and yet practically dependent on both of them for maintaining its power and purpose. (The medieval theology of the king's two bodies, one mortal and the other immortal, was important in this move to the refashioned modern state.) Locke's argument fits precisely into this view: the state has, and has to have, instruments of compulsion and punishment for its continuity. But these means can act only on the will and not on belief, and since belief is not subject to the will, attempts at religious compulsion must inevitably fail. Religious intolerance by the state is criticized by Locke not for its immorality but for its irrationality. The new emphasis on the centrality of 'belief' in religion (crucial to secular constitutionalism) articulates the liberal distinction between the politically efficient nation-state, on the one hand, and the morally autonomous individual, on the other. Because religion is now intrinsically seen from the perspective of and largely defined by the state, it also comes to stand in opposition to two other concepts: 'politics proper' and 'the secular'—the latter in the modern, not in the traditional Christian sense. Morality and belief are subject only to persuasion; the state, on the other hand, has the right *and* the means to punish and coerce.

This new usage of the term 'religion' as essentially a matter of 'belief' is also connected with the complex story of the gradual evolution of 'interest' from the indefinite range of human concerns and aspirations to the modern political economic concept central to capitalism (financial

interest, class interest, etc.), which simultaneously re-enforces the boundaries of the sovereign state and undermines them. The secular, it seems to me, now comes to be seen not simply as a way of living in the world, not simply as a set of sensibilities appropriate to it, but as the doctrine that belief in the existence of any world other than *this* one is a dangerous delusion, that the essential character of this ‘real world’ is legitimately described only by ‘rational thought’—by natural science (what *really* exists) and by human history (what *really* happened). But then natural science, as historians of science have shown, has incorporated history—that is, *temporality*—into its major explanatory systems, and the history of human societies often uses quantitative methods that are central to natural science. The spilling over of concepts like time from one discipline to another, the sharing of some methods, is only one aspect of the fact that defining the limits of ‘reality’ as the object of science and history—and therefore of how we are to live in it—is more problematic than it might appear.

In different ways, time is also of course at the center of religious tradition, not only because of the obvious fact that religious beliefs undergo change, but more importantly because a religious life requires time to learn and authorities in the past who can be invoked to justify how and why a particular form of life is worth living. And then there is the time of death. The end of all life and lifeless things. There is time as method, time as memory, and time as self-deceiving future—and the timelessness that is eternity into which we all disappear. This is what I try to think of as discursive tradition: the complex temporal moves and states by which one attempts to master language in life—language not only as thought and dialogue but also as attitude, action, and passion. As an anthropologist and as a Muslim, I try—now in my old age—to understand and embody my tradition in difficult times.

But following a religious tradition (by which I mean not only Islam, but also Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Taoism, and so forth) is made almost impossible in the accelerating temporalities of the modern nation-state, economy, and society, which are together central to our global capitalist civilization and the crises it has brought. In addition to the unstoppable ravages of climate change, there is now the global response to the rapid spread of the coronavirus. What the temporality of climate change, slow but inexorable, will eventually reveal is difficult to say with certainty. But the time of the COVID-19 pandemic is now, and its place is everywhere.

Anthropologist and epidemiologist Carlo Caduff (2020) has written and circulated an exceptionally thought-provoking article on the pandemic entitled “What Went Wrong: Corona and the World after the Full Stop.” In it, he argues that (a) with a badly underfunded health service it is impossible to determine how many of the deaths attributed to the virus are in fact partly due to ill-equipped and understaffed hospitals; (b) in the absence of systematic testing of the (more or less) entire population, credence can’t be given to the widely publicized case-fatality ratio figures, and so drastic policies for dealing with the crisis can’t be sensibly based on them; and (c) the policy of blanket lockdown and social distancing is not only extremely damaging to the economy and to society, but also leads to many deaths and much suffering in the poorer classes because of their overcrowded habitations and their practical inability to purchase food or seek medical help. Understanding the global temporalities of our crisis-ridden world calls for the kind of critical anthropology represented by Caduff.

The global crises humanity now faces are attributable neither to nature nor to God but to political and moral failure—more precisely to the greed and arrogance of the rich and powerful, who refuse to see that we all depend on one another and that our present form of life is based precisely on denying that fact.

■ **TALAL ASAD** was born in Saudi Arabia but grew up in India and Pakistan. At the age of 18, he went to London to learn to become an architect, but left a few years later for Edinburgh, where he studied anthropology as an undergraduate, and from there to Oxford to do a BLitt followed by a DPhil. He taught at various times in Sudan (where he also carried out his doctoral fieldwork), Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the US. He was at the University of Hull for many years before finally moving to New York. E-mail: talalasad@gmail.com

■ **NOTES**

An Arabic version of this essay, translated by Khaled Furani, will be published in 2020 as “Ta’amullat min As-Sirah adh-Dhatiyyah fi ad-Din wal Anthropolojya” in *Idafat: Arab Journal of Sociology* 49–50: 13–22.

1. My father’s father died in Theresienstadt, his sister and her fiancé in Auschwitz. When he read the letter from the Jewish Relief Association informing him of this at the end of the war, it was the only time I saw my stern father weep.
2. I kept in touch for many years with several of my Sudanese friends, nomadic and urban, who had befriended me.
3. I came across Walter Ong’s (1958) history of ideas, *Ramus, Method and the Decay of Dialogue*, in the 1980s, and found its sensibility close to Wittgenstein’s. Ong’s account of the spatialization and quantification of thought in early modernity as a means of university teaching was especially illuminating. He helped me see that the fundamental requirement for critique is not suspicion and attack but *conversation*. It began to affect the way I thought about the perils and promises of teaching and learning—and, more widely, of our form of life.

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For Talal

Jonathan Boyarin

“Where is the book set?”

“In the book.”

— Edmond Jabès, “At the Threshold of the Book”

I write in the back room of our place in Ithaca, while the books that I mention await me in my office up the hill, upon a deserted and lovely campus.

I recall an evening probably in the early 1990s. We had invited Talal and Tanya to our apartment on the Lower East Side, the closest I have ever come to a place I might call home. I had taken Talal’s (1973) landmark edited volume *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* out to show to Elissa, and left it on the coffee table. Upon arriving, Talal asked in genuine puzzlement, “Oh, why do you have that book out?”

Around the same time I received a very different question about that same book. This question came from a senior Israeli colleague, an excellent ethnographer of state building and rhetorics of national belonging. He agreed that the edited volume contained significant insights about the history of the discipline and its critique of current anthropological practice. Yet he wondered: “Yes, but tell me—what’s Asad going to do next?” The clear implication was that this critical focus on the discipline itself was all well and good, but that ultimately it was a blind alley, a diversion from the anthropological study of things *out there*.

Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter was published one year after Dell Hymes’s (1972) edited volume *Reinventing Anthropology*. From the latter collection, the essay I recall most vividly was Gerald Berreman’s “Bringing It All Back Home.” The frisson of borrowing a title from Bob Dylan for an article about how to do professional anthropology was itself enough to explain why Berreman’s article made such an impression on me. More important, the article’s substance—the notion that anthropology is always also about ‘home’ and must be conscientiously practiced that way—has done much to shape my orientation for nearly half a century. Hymes’s and Asad’s edited volumes both came out at a time that seems in retrospect simultaneously the height of post-war anti-colonialism, the high-water mark of post-war US dominance, and, concomitantly, the beginning of the retreat of well-funded area studies programs designed to supply expertise for the workings of liberal imperialism.

The bounds of the colonial and colonized worlds seemed much clearer then as well. Some of the critiques of reflexive anthropology that followed in the wake of works such as the Hymes and Asad volumes have reasserted a clear distinction between the culture that is proper to ‘them’ (that is, our objects of study) and the culture that is proper to ‘us’ (those who do the study and get paid, or at least aspire to get paid, for doing so). They shared with early attempts in reflexive

anthropology such as Berreman's the assumptions that 'we' anthropologists have a home, that we have just one, and that we know where it is. Now anthropology is much more thoroughly imbued with the sense that there is no single 'we', that homelessness is not exceptional, that home may be possible but may not be stable, and may only be experienced in fragments.

As I gather more from long and warm personal acquaintance than from Talal's writings per se, he is hardly a cosmopolitan in the sense of an intellectual who claims to have no shared group identity or to have no home, nor yet is he overly anxious to identify what his true 'home' is. This has been an invaluable encouragement to me over the past few decades, as I work to balance a profound sense of my own given Jewishness with awareness of that identity's contingent and constructed nature, and to use its nevertheless resilient and multifaceted resources for my own contribution to the critical analysis of what we persist in calling 'the West'. Far more than an 'interreligious dialogue', the ongoing conversations reflect, I believe, something of the heritage of Talal's great-grandfather, Rabbi Benjamin Weiss of Czernowitz in Romania, and of his father Muhammad Asad (né Leopold Weiss). I have speculated—as a very young scholar, it is true—that something of Karl Marx's weakness on the topics of religion and national identity might have had to do with an unacknowledged mortification at Marx's father's opportunistic conversion to Christianity in order to continue practicing law after the retreat of Napoleon's forces from the city of Trier. Could it be, conversely, that much of Talal Asad's ability to blend so adroitly careful scholarship and sharp critical insight draws precisely on his embrace of a personal heritage that makes it harder always to say for certain, "This one is a Jew, but *that* one is a Muslim"?

I cannot say. Even to make the suggestion seems hubris enough and more. On the other hand, it seems abundantly clear that Talal's (1993) *Genealogies of Religion* is informed throughout by the effort to undermine any stable litmus test by which we might confidently and consistently assert, "This is characteristically Christian, but *this* is, by contrast, Muslim."

Genealogies of Religion stands, one might say, as an extended response to the Israeli anthropologist's rhetorical question I cited above. Like other major recent scholarship that has profoundly influenced me, it seems to have been sparked, at least implicitly, by sweeping and influential scholarly claims that struck the respondent as somehow inherently wrong. This was, for example, the case with Herbert Gutman's (1977) *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*. Gutman wrote in response to a document from the mid-1960s titled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the author of that report and later a US senator, had argued that the putative pathologies of the African-American family were a legacy of the inability of enslaved male ancestors to take their proper role as heads of families. In response, Gutman and his associates documented how enslaved plantation populations synthesized and sustained powerful and effective rhetorics and bonds of kinship out of elements maintained from various African pasts. In similar fashion, *Genealogies of Religion* seems a response to Samuel Huntington's claim that the relationship between Christendom and the Islamic world was best characterized as a "clash of civilizations," and, more broadly, to a consensus that sees a dehistoricized Christianity as essentially a religion of inwardness, belief, and autonomy, contrasted to Islam as a religion of uncritical obedience. In response, Asad mounts, *inter alia*, a lucid and sympathetic account of the practices involved in shaping a humble medieval Christian monastic self. The result is a classic anthropological achievement, simultaneously defamiliarizing the given (in this case, what 'Christianity' is), de-exoticizing the distant (by making Islam less of a dichotomy to Christianity), and making it possible to reimagine past lives in an informed way.

I was by no means the only student of Jewish cultural studies to note how much these critical reformulations could help us think beyond the strict divides between medieval and modern,

between religion and ‘ethnicity’, between cosmopolitanism and exile. I was honored to arrange for Talal to come to Philadelphia one day in the 2003–2004 academic year as a guest of the Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, part of that year’s ongoing focus on the fruitful intersections of anthropology and history in Jewish studies. The volume that eventually came out of that year’s deliberations is titled *Jewish Studies at the Crossroads of Anthropology and History: Authority, Diaspora, Tradition* (Boustan et al. 2011). That book more than adequately documents the contributors’ debt to Asad, not only for having done so much to foster a discourse on religion as practice, but also for helping us understand the fraught relations between disciplinary scholarship and the disciplining of persons.

Formations of the Secular stands as both a sequel and an equivalent to *Genealogies of Religion*. It challenges simultaneously the common assumption that ‘religion’ is a transhistorical and transcultural facet of every human group, and the assumption that the realm of ‘the secular’ is defined in merely negative terms, as that realm of social life free of religion. In *Genealogies of Religion*, both Islam and Christianity retain their separate identities as grand historical formations. In *Formations of the Secular*, Asad (2003) notes both the particular way that the very category of religion is tied to Christianity and to Christian colonialism, and the co-production of the contrasted pair ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ in European modernity. In the course of my long and singular effort to make myself a Jew and find useful things to say about the dynamics of Jewish identity, it was immensely helpful to find in *Formations of the Secular* confirmation of my sense that I had grown up neither religious nor secular. To be sure, these categories are used by many and perhaps most Jews to characterize themselves. Yet I have long resisted the first as implying an identity ultimately grounded in some unquestioning ‘faith’, and I have resisted the latter as implying a successionist overcoming of that supposed faith. Asad’s patient archaeology of the concept of the secular has thus afforded me another way to approach, or perhaps to sidestep altogether, the contest for primacy between historical materialism and theology suggested in the first of Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History.”

Taken in sum, these are not merely various works of an anthropologist; they are an anthropology. They are grounded in a life history profoundly shaped by the workings of European colonialism, nationalism, and anti-Semitism, and nourished by the tools and language of metropolitan scholarship. The result is not only critique that is all the more devastating because of the classic voice and syntax of reason through which they are expressed. Departing from that critique, these works constitute various stages on an itinerary of anti-racist and anti-triumphalist investigations of the human. I never ‘studied with’ Talal Asad. But I am grateful to be able to count myself not only among his friends, but indeed among his students as well.

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On Anthropology as Translation

Nadia Fadil

In my view anthropology is more than a method, and it should not be equated—as it has popularly become—with the direction given to inquiry by the pseudoscientific notion of “fieldwork.”

— Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular*

In one intriguing sentence, Talal Asad articulates a view that challenges a prevailing understanding that considers ‘fieldwork’ as one of the signature methods of the discipline. Asad’s interrogations on fieldwork do not stand alone. In recent years, several critiques have appeared on the ostensible attempts to demarcate fieldwork as a quintessential hallmark of the discipline. Recently, Tim Ingold (2014: 383) famously argued that anthropology’s “obsession with ethnography” stood in the way of a more sustained understanding of anthropology’s most impactful mission, which is entailed in the practice of participant observation: “To practice participant observation is also to undergo an education” (ibid.: 388). And in the wake of the decolonization of anthropology, researchers have critiqued a parasitic way of doing fieldwork, proposing instead a research ethos that emphasizes collaboration and reciprocity toward research participants (Lassiter 2005). Asad’s critique, however, pertains not only to the ethics of doing fieldwork; it also covers a broader set of epistemological inquiries and orientations of the discipline. Like Ingold, he sees the focus on fieldwork and methods as carrying an inherent risk for the discipline—that of nullifying its *transformative* power. To Asad, this transformative power lies in the discipline’s ability to *translate*.

The question of translation is a central theme within the discipline, one that largely revolves around the classical view that anthropology studies ‘foreign’ cultures. Ranging from Beidelman’s (1971) classic *The Translation of Culture*, dedicated to the work and legacy of E. E. Evans-Pritchard, to Claude Lévi-Strauss’s (1966: 8–9) investigations on the therapeutic capacities of the woodpecker’s beak among the Siberian people, the central question undergirding this query has been the capacity to render distinct and faraway habits intelligible to the Western eye. This classical view on anthropology, which largely revolves around the paradigm of sameness and difference, has, however, been the object of quite a number of critiques. Centrally, authors have challenged how the focus on ‘difference’ obscures the way in which scholarship (including anthropology) has participated in producing it (Trouillot 2003). Authors have, furthermore, also taken issue with how this focus on difference has neglected the effects of globally shared processes such as capitalism (Marcus and Fischer 1999). Asad’s commitment to translation is not simply a resuscitation of a classical theme within anthropology. Rather, it entails a critical reinvestment in order to enable the discipline’s radical potential to unfold.

We find this, for instance, in his reflections on how the process of translation always occurs within a power structure. In one of his important essays, “The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology,” Asad (1993) takes issue with the neglect of the power inequality in much of the anthropological literature on cultural translation. The relationship between the West and the non-West, he notes, is not equal but marked and saturated by power asymmetries. This also extends to the way that the process of translation occurs, that is, the way that “foreign discourses” become “adjusted” into Western cultural contexts in the process of becoming legible (ibid.: 199). The question thus is not simply one of rendering other discourses and practices ‘intelligible,’ but also of critically reflecting upon the way in which the mechanism of translation equally entails a semantic reduction (the turning of culture into a text), fragmentation (of coherent structures into isolated practices), and co-optation (into culturally specific discursive frameworks). Two central issues for Asad are, first, how to render these power asymmetries visible and, second, how to enable a process of translation that does not simply co-opt alternative experiences into Western hegemonic discourses, but rather enables the permanent presence of a “discomforting—even scandalous—presence” (ibid.).

We find this, furthermore, in his critical interrogation of the neglect of the non-discursive components of the process of translation. Already in his early work, Asad (1993: 193) questions the mechanic view on translation as a transposition from one linguistic system to another. This, he suggests, reinforces a (specific) view on culture as a text and excludes other modes of cultural transfer. But more importantly, it equally mitigates the transformative power that such a movement could imply—that is, the possibility of exposing one’s senses and sensibilities to an alternative experience (as is generally achieved through the experience of participant observation) and to provincialize one’s own outlook on the world. This latter movement is more fully explored in Asad’s (2018) recent work, *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason*. In this collection of essays, he expands this question by explicitly unfolding the way translation implies “a challenge to expand the receiving language and way of life” (ibid.: 10). Translation, he stresses, is not a mere cognitive operation but implies first and foremost the retraining of the sensible body. Inhabiting a particular tradition also implies an incorporation of a set of senses and sensibilities: “it is also and primarily an implicit continuity embodied in habit, feeling, and behavior that one acquires as a member of a shared way of life that is translated from one time to another” (ibid.: 5). We quickly understand, thus, how Asad’s view on translation equally implies an unsettling of the anthropological subject, and through her, the epistemological realm wherein she is located. But whereas for someone like Ingold this transformation is achieved through an intersubjective relationship achieved in the process of participant observation, for Asad this critical potential is to be found in the genealogical method of investigation, reflected in his attention to how ‘embedded concepts’ become articulated and translated in distinct cultural contexts, as well as his continuous attempts to destabilize settled categories within Western cultural theory.

This is, for instance, to be found in his long-standing work on both the secular and religion, which centers less around an anthropology of ‘otherness,’ but rather is an ethnography of established concepts such as religion, pain, blasphemy, and the human. In *Formations of the Secular*, Asad (2003: 17) states: “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.”

Secularism, in Asad’s (2003: 16) understanding, should not be simply understood as a mode of governance, but should equally be apprehended as a “variety of concepts, practices, and sensibilities.” This perspective has enabled a body of work that has sought to carefully and critically

attend to the ways in which distinct interpretative accounts concur in the established relationship, and how the process of secularization implies—in many cases—a rearrangement of the relationship between object, form, concept, and sensibilities. Saba Mahmood's (2009) work on the Danish cartoon riots, for instance, demonstrates how the compulsion to accept the representations of the Prophet Muhammad as an iteration of free press draws on a constructivist semiotic ideology that assumes an arbitrary relationship between form (signifier) and concept (signified), while disregarding the morality of attachment (captured through the Aristotelian notion of *schesis*) that informs Muslims' relationship to the Prophet (ibid.: 847–848). It is a relationship of emulation, love, and incorporation that is distinct from the semiotic and representational mode that is central in the prevailing modern accounts depicted in cartoons and imagery. As such, the proposed method is one that seeks not only to critically unsettle established categories, but also to open up a space of intercultural civility—or, more precisely, to enlarge our shared imagination and sensibility on what it means to be human (Asad 2018: 12; see also Wynter 2003).

One interesting enigma, however, remains. Whereas Asad's work is dedicated to an enlargement of the 'humane' (rather than 'humanist') ethos that undergirds anthropology as a tradition,¹ his method remains largely centered on the textual and the tangible.² In *Secular Translations*, Asad (2018) opens a perspective that attends to the untranslatability of distinct experiences, such as the experience of the recitation of the Qur'an, which he conceptualizes as a "particular (physical-emotional-cognitive) attitude" that is accessible only through the cultivation of particular senses (ibid.: 60). What would it mean to push this question further? Indeed, what is generally described (by secular and modern accounts) as the more 'esoteric' components of religion, wherein the mystery of the revelation becomes articulated, remains largely underexplored in his work. Furthermore, 'religious texts' (i.e., the Qur'an or other religious scriptures) are rarely treated with the same symmetry as are literature, poetry, political commentary, or academic texts *sensu stricto*. Finally, how are we to consider this question of translation when the anthropological subject is neither Western nor secular, but, for instance, a committed Muslim? What kind of interruptions would then occur? And what kind of agents and imaginaries would accompany the writing process?

To the extent that anthropology—more than any other discipline—relies on the acknowledged subjectivity of the researcher, her/his secular attitude remains one of the shared vantage points from where anthropology speaks, thinks, and feels (Robbins 2003; Willerslev and Suhr 2018). What would anthropology look like if this were to change, and if the ethics and limits of participant observation would be informed by a concern with 'sinfulness' as much as by a concern with the relationship of trust established with one's research participants?³ And what would it mean to write an ethnography from the viewpoint of a conceptual realm that takes divination as an organic starting point and the absence thereof as in need of translation? Whereas such counter-hegemonic movements are to be identified in some experiments (see, e.g., Pandolfo 2018), they remain largely idiosyncratic gestures. But these are essential gestures if anthropology is to continue to enlarge the imaginative and sensible possibilities of what it means to be human.

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NOTES

1. I refer to anthropology as a tradition rather than a discipline, and I believe Asad's approach is consonant with this take. Tradition, as developed by Alisdair McIntyre and further employed and popularized by Asad (1986) in his seminal essay on Islam, relies primarily on a discursive and practical commitment to a particular set of questions and queries and a series of cultivated self-practices. Unlike discipline, which implies a necessity to join the ranks and settle on an 'order', the notion of tradition thrives on a continued disagreement about how to understand the shared interrogations and how to incorporate and inhabit them.
2. I am grateful for Azar Dakwar's insightful suggestion to distinguish 'humane' from 'humanist', with the latter referring to a culturally specific view on the human (as defined in the Western post-Enlightenment tradition) that is equally at the heart of Asad's genealogical investigation. I would like to thank Azar for his comments on an earlier draft of this essay.
3. See in this respect Amin El-Yousfi (2020), who raises these issues in the methodological note of his dissertation.

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Friendship and Time in the Work of Talal Asad

Hussein Ali Agrama

How does Talal Asad think with, and through, Islamic tradition? How does that thinking help him—and us—understand both the concept of tradition and Islam as a tradition? What critical vantage point does it provide us with that might not be had through a sole engagement with MacIntyre, Foucault, Wittgenstein, and other theorists identified with a Western European tradition of thought? And how might that vantage point help us see aspects of our present and its predicaments that might be otherwise obscured? Talal's work shows a continual and deepening engagement with Islamic tradition, not simply as an object of theory, but as a source of living thought—where Ibn Taymiyya, Al-Ghazali, and Muhammad Asad speak as acutely to our present as do MacIntyre, Wittgenstein, and Foucault. The consistency and growing depth of this engagement over time shows that it cannot be incidental to Talal's thinking. So how might we better understand the different ways that his thought is situated with respect to Islamic tradition, and the importance of that engagement in the development of his ideas?

Here I can only raise these questions for our consideration. However, it might be worth noting that some of his more extensive engagements with Islamic thought occur in a comparative vein, often as part of his reflections and reservations about the modern concepts and practices of critique—their implicit assumptions, ambiguities, possibilities and limits, and consequences upon people's lives. Critique would seem an integral aspect of scholarship today, as well as of any democratic form of life. Is critique the only reliable way to truth? Is the critical stance the cornerstone of an ethical disposition? We know, thanks in part to Talal's work, that modern secular critique is not a single seamless thing; it is a tangle of different strands, each with its own genealogy. But in today's world—with its rampant political and economic corruption, massive and growing inequality, intense and unrelenting racism, increasingly (normalized) repressive state tactics and surveillance, subtle social manipulation through disinformation and big data analytics, and atrocious (lack of) national leadership and global vision in the face of wicked problems such as the coronavirus pandemic and climate change—it would seem that critique of the modern variety is the only intelligible option we have to sustain our fragile hopes against crushing despair.

And yet it seems to me that Talal's reservations about modern practices of critique stem from his awareness of their having arisen from, and being deeply situated within, precisely this kind of world—one whose basic infrastructures were historically fashioned by and continue to facilitate colonial and imperial power. This has led to a concern not only about the suspicious powers of the modern state and the dangers of aspiring toward them, but also about the fine and often disappearing line between international solidarity and imperial subversion, especially as these are framed in the critical language of human rights and humanitarian intervention. We have also seen how, in the United States and especially in Europe, critique can be a form of

thinly veiled hatred for the Muslims who live there. So part of Talal's reservations derive from an awareness of how modern varieties of critique can perpetuate the practices of imperial subjugation and work to undermine the traditions and ways of life of minoritized peoples even in democratic polities. But they also arise out of an awareness that critique can undermine itself, and become an obstacle to its own goals, especially in a world that has become suffused with mutual suspicion, proliferating secrecy, and incessant disinformation, rendering the truth of everyone and everything increasingly obscure. We saw this in the aftermath of the Egyptian uprisings of 2011, where the unrelenting mutual suspicion and critique by all parties involved worked to undermine movement toward any collective goals, and helped pave the way for the coup of 2013. The atmosphere of mutual suspicion and distrust that we saw in Egypt now seems like a common condition in various countries of Europe and especially the United States. What dangers does critique portend in such situations? Yet to dispense with a critical stance especially at this time would also open oneself up to innumerable dangers.

That, it seems to me, is one of the predicaments of our times: we cannot intelligibly dispense with critique if we want to free ourselves from the violences and cruelties of our age, and yet critique today seems to undermine itself, paralyze intentional collective action, become an expression of the same violences and cruelties we ostensibly aspire to end, and doom us to the adversities that they presage. At one point in this discussion, Talal writes: "My query here is not epistemological but political. It is not the secular claim to truth that worries me, but what critique may do to relationships with friends and fellow citizens with whom one deeply disagrees. Critique is no less violent than the law—and no more free. In short, I am puzzled as to why one should want to isolate and privilege 'critique' as a way of apprehending the truth. What does this do to the way one is asked to—and actually—lives?" (Asad 2009: 140).

But Talal's engagement with Islamic thought seems aimed at more than helping show the limits, dangers, and predicaments of modern critique. It also works to sketch out an intelligible alternative to it through an exploration of Islamic practices like *nasiha* (advice-giving) and especially *al-amr b'il maruf* (the enjoining of the good). Key to these activities, which resituate the practices of criticism, is a principle of friendship. What does friendship mean here? That is a complicated question, but maybe it can be illustrated through an unorthodox example.

Elsewhere (Agrama 2018) I have told the story of Fatma, the Egyptian grandmother of a friend of mine, who began to undertake the Coptic fast of St. Mary, even though she was a devout Muslim. That practice of inter-religious fasting facilitated, over time, deepened and strengthened relationships and loyalties between herself, other Muslims, and members of the Coptic community in which she lived. In the process, she also became a respected neighborhood figure for both Muslims and Copts, with both often seeking her counsel. Her practice began to be taken up by her children and possibly other Muslims who knew about it, especially after she died. Hearing about Fatma led me to reflect upon other instances of interreligious fasting that I had learned about. It struck me that these might be examples of a kind of embodied friendship, rooted in a recognition of the bodily vulnerability that enables fasting to be such a widely practiced disciplinary form across traditions. In the case of Fatma, it was a practice of embodied friendship that had the outcome of fortifying relations between members of different traditions, and had an allure that drew others into the practice over time. Could this be a form of *al-amr b'il maruf*—the enjoining of the good? I cannot be sure; it would certainly need more exploration. But if it were, it would not be an enjoining of the good through an explicit articulation of what people should do, or an attempt to secure an agreement in opinions, but through living and learning to live in an exemplary way, one that drew others into an agreement, we might say, in a form of life. Or, to recruit some of Talal's words, we might say that "what is learnt is not a doctrine (rules) but a mode of being, not a thread one can pick up or drop whenever one

feels like it but a *capacity* for experiencing another in a way that can't be renounced" (Asad 2015: 167). This, I think, is one important aspect of the principle of friendship that he speaks of. It might also be an element of what he has elsewhere referred to as a democratic ethos in contrast to the powers of the sovereign liberal democratic state (Asad 2012).

It is both striking and curious that so little ethnography has been devoted to practices of fasting, their political possibilities and social outcomes, despite their well-acknowledged importance for many religious traditions. More attention has been paid to practices of hunger-striking and how they activate the bio-political apparatuses of the modern state. The kind of fasting that I am referring to in the story of Fatma, however, tends to subsist *below the threshold of bio-political capture*. At the same time, however, the effects that it fosters—the kinds of friendships it enables and sustains, the relationships it fortifies—might be *beyond the reach of our intentional collective agency*. Within much of mainstream political theory there is an unstained conviction that a democratic ethos can be intentionally engineered into society through a set of transcendent principles, legal-bureaucratic procedures, and policy prescriptions. But Fatma's fasting was not intended to foster the relationships that it did; it was a response to her enigmatic dreams of St. Mary in the midst of personal crises. The inadvertent friendships that developed not only took time but depended on *different* times—the time of shared practice, the time of embodiment, of individual lives situated within and between traditions and even across generations. They could never have been forced or engineered.

Perhaps the best that can be done is to allow heterogeneous spaces for such practices to flourish—a form of hopefulness that does not strive for guarantees. As Talal writes:

The idea of numerous nonhierarchical domains of normativity opens up the possibility of a very different kind of politics—and policies—that would always have to address numerous overlapping bodies and territories ... But the differences would not take the form of a legal distinction between "citizen" and "alien," or between Muslim and non-Muslim. The tradition of *amr bi-l-ma'rūf* could form an orientation of mutual care of the self, based on the principle of friendship (and therefore of responsibility to and between friends) not on the legal principle of citizenship. This sharing would be the outcome of continuous *work* between friends or lovers, not an expression of accomplished cultural fact. (Asad 2015: 212)

What then, could a practice and politics of criticism look like if they were situated within the ongoing work of friendship rather than constant mutual suspicion? What spaces might be found to sustain this work of friendship? What temporalities should we embrace—or eschew—to allow this work to proceed? These are some of the questions that Talal's thinking through Islamic tradition helps to open up.

So what I appreciate about Talal's thought is not just that he happens to theorize Al-Ghazali, Ibn-Taymiyya, and Muhammad Asad along with MacIntyre, Wittgenstein, and Foucault. It is that his thought demonstrates how Islamic tradition provides resources that cast light upon the predicament that it and we all are in. Islamic tradition today is, as we know, under tremendous pressure, continually called upon to justify itself ethically and to assure others that it is not the existential threat it is often represented to be. Under such pressure, it is unsurprising that scholarship on and around Islam has so often taken up a defensive posture. But the idea that Islamic thought can help us more deeply understand aspects of the modern present and its predicaments is something that Talal's scholarship makes powerfully available to us. It takes the idea of an anthropology of Islam to a new level. We might say, then, that Talal's continual engagement with Islamic tradition over time articulates an ongoing, deepening friendship with it. In so doing, it also demonstrates how the principle of friendship is inseparable from the work of time, within and between traditions.

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Talal Asad's Challenge to Religious Studies

Donovan O. Schaefer

It's a rare thing when thinkers not only transform their own fields of study, but also have a deep impact on neighboring disciplines. Yet this is, without question, the achievement of Talal Asad. I could write here about the defining effect Asad has had on my own work and that of many other religious studies scholars, shaping our collective approach to secularism, religion, and embodiment. But I would rather tell the story of how Asad has reshaped the entire field of religious studies. I can't imagine that the scholarship I now find exciting would have been possible without Talal Asad.

There was no watershed moment marking the arrival of Asad's scholarship in religious studies. A quick survey of citations in the flagship *Journal of the American Academy of Religions* shows that his work began to seep into our conversations in the mid-1990s. Many of these early articles cited Asad's (1983) criticisms of Clifford Geertz that appeared in *Man*, which came to wider attention when republished as part of *Genealogies of Religion* (see LaMothe 2008; McCutcheon 1997; Schilbrack 2005). Asad's challenge to Geertz questioned the way that cultural anthropologists took religion to be a semiotic operation—the 'thick description' of symbols and their associated haloes of meaning in context (Asad 1983; see also Asad 1993). For Asad, this semiotic fixation not only produced a Protestantized sense of religion as primarily cognitive, it also created a universalist definition that would only ever awkwardly translate to contexts external to the Euro-modern context. Asad (1993: 35) notes that in the opposing view, represented by figures like Augustine, "it is not mere symbols that implant true Christian dispositions, but power—ranging all the way from laws (imperial and ecclesiastical) and other sanctions (hellfire, death, salvation, good repute, peace) to the disciplinary activities of social institutions (family, school, city, church) and of human bodies (fasting, prayer, obedience, penance)."

Religious studies is and always has been a hybrid discipline. To the extent that it has any core integrity as a field, you could call it a collection of reflections on the term 'religion' itself. From Tylor to James to Durkheim to Otto to Eliade, the early history of religious studies as a field probed for a binding organizational definition of religion. But since at least the 1970s, the emphasis of religious studies has increasingly been on locating 'religion' not as a unity at all, but as a fragmentary, holographic projection devised within a particular historical context—the European conversations around states and sects, colonization and conquest—and then aggressively imposed on people, places, and times in which it had no organic coordinates of emergence. And this, reciprocally, illuminated the bumpy, uneven history of 'religion' even within its native, Euro-modern context (Orsi 2004).

In the US, the eminent historian Jonathan Z. Smith arguably created the modern discipline of religious studies through his focused criticisms of the powerful History of Religions School

of the mid-twentieth century. Smith's ([1978] 1993) orchestrated pushback on this group took a number of forms, including questioning the integrity of the category of 'religion' itself, just as Asad (1993) would a few years later in *Genealogies of Religion*. In *Imagining Religion*, Smith (1982: xi) famously wrote that religion "is solely the creation of the scholar's study" and that it "has no independent existence apart from the academy." Mirroring Asad's 1993 intervention (although seemingly unaware of it), Smith (2004) later suggested that the insoluble association of religion with a particular standard of 'belief' was forged by the Protestant paradigm, with its fixation on individual testimony, conversion, and belief at the expense of community, ritual, and action. "Terms such as 'reverence,' 'service,' 'adore,' and 'worship,'" he noted, "have been all but evacuated of ritual connotations, and seem more to denote a state of mind, a transition begun by Reformation figures such as Zwingli and Calvin who understood 'religion' primarily as 'piety'" (ibid.: 182).

Asad and Smith were clearly on the same page as far as the ontology of religion was concerned. But built into Smith's approach were liabilities that ramified into a broader set of issues within religious studies. Most significantly, he was motivated by a profoundly intellectualist approach to the nature of objects of knowledge. Thoughts and ideas, for Smith, existed in what seems to be an autonomous sphere of hermetic interaction. As Kathryn Lofton (2014: 536) writes, "there is something dazzlingly absurd" about Smith's claim that 'religion' as a category is created entirely by academic observation. But this supreme confidence in the capacity of writers and thinkers to create a world-straddling concept was a by-product of following the linguistic turn all the way to its still center.

This is where Asad's unique significance for religious studies comes into the foreground. By the mid-2000s, Asad was firmly established as part of the religious studies conversation, due not only to *Genealogies* but to his pathbreaking *Formations of the Secular*. In *Formations*, Asad (2003) demonstrated that not only religion but also the variety of iterations of the secular are woven together with bodies. "Modern projects," he noted, "do not hang together as an integrated totality, but they account for distinctive sensibilities, aesthetics, moralities ... Modernity is not primarily a matter of cognizing the real but of living-in-the-world" (ibid.: 14). This is why Asad proposes an "anthropology of secularism" (ibid.: 17), a reckoning with the weave of sensibilities, dispositions, practices, and discourses that produce secularism's plural formations (see also Asad 2009, 2018).

Asad's work arrived in religious studies as both a consolidation of the successes of the field and as a challenge to press further. Like Smith, Asad challenged the implicitly Protestant envelope of the category of 'religion'. But some of Asad's criticisms of Geertz could also be applied to Smith. Geertz and Smith share significant overlaps in the way they understand culture as an assemblage of symbols. "The concept of culture I espouse," Geertz (1973: 5) wrote in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, "is essentially a semiotic one ... [M]an is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun." Similarly, in *Relating Religion*, Smith (2004: 31) writes that religion is "the relentlessly human activity of thinking through a 'situation.'" (This is why, as Smith writes later in the same book, the "'conquest of America,' for all its frightful human costs, was primarily a linguistic event" [ibid.: 274]). Both scholars cast the fields of religion and culture as a continuous landscape fashioned entirely from signs and symbols, a bookworld in which the primary academic operation is interpretation and decipherment.

What Asad contributed to the conversation in religious studies, then, was his demonstration that what gets called 'religion' is not just a carousel of thoughts and beliefs, but a dynamic of *concepts and bodies* in reciprocal symphonic composition. This has been the path of Asad's uptake by scholars of religion over the past 15 years. For instance, Amy Hollywood (2006: 253) links Asad with earlier scholars like Marcel Mauss and Pierre Bourdieu who have collectively analyzed "ritual acts and bodily practices," such as "modes of walking, standing and sitting,

sleeping and eating, giving birth, nursing, healing,” and so forth. In her essay “Body, Society, and Subjectivity in Religious Studies,” Constance Furey (2012: 16) identifies Asad’s contribution as a call for scholars to “leave aside the quest to understand symbols and meaning, and instead analyze authoritative discourses and the materiality of the body.” And Manuel Vásquez (2011: 221) characterizes Asad’s method as attending to “the material conditions, both bodily and sociopolitical, that make representations and certain forms of subjectivity (with emotions tied to them) possible in the first place.”

Vásquez’s comment directs us, finally, to the current of Asad’s thought that attends not just to the somewhat blank intervention of ‘the body’, but to the more specific, minute processes of affect. This is partly an epiphenomenon of Asad’s long engagement with affect scholars like William Connolly, but it is also Asad’s (1993: 88) own innovative extrapolation of the latent attention to affect in Foucault’s thought. Consciousness, Asad (*ibid.*: 15) writes,

in the everyday psychological sense (awareness, intent, and the giving of meaning to experiences) is inadequate to account for agency. One does not have to subscribe to a full-blown Freudianism to see that instinctive reaction, the docile body, and the unconscious work, in their different ways, more pervasively and continuously than consciousness does. This is part of the reason why an agent’s act is more (and less) than her consciousness of it.

This elaboration of a broad template for thinking about domains of motivation, action, and power outside of consciousness have helped to steer religious studies toward a more capacious encounter with the history of emotions, emotion science, and affect theory.¹ It’s not enough to talk about ‘the body’. We need a focused attention on the colliding currents of feeling that make bodies move. This is the threshold toward which Asad draws us.

Religious studies will always be an interdisciplinary field, a nexus of history, anthropology, psychology, classics, philosophy, and any number of other disciplines and subfields. As difficult as it is to measure the relative contributions of these fields over the years, it would be hard to overstate the role that anthropology—especially the approach to anthropology developed by Asad—has had on shaping the contemporary conversation in religious studies. The gravitational field of Asad’s influence has emanated far from his home discipline and reshaped the landscape of other humanistic disciplines around him. Religious studies has been one of the prime beneficiaries of this extraordinary surge of intellectual energy, allowing for a greater focus on discipline and power in the play of bodies and beliefs.

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■ **NOTE**

1. For an overview of this work, see the chapter titled “Religion, Language, and Affect” in Schaefer (2015).

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Finding Talal Asad in and beyond Buddhist Studies

Agency and Race in Modern Pasts

Ananda Abeysekara

Talal Asad's challenging work on religion and power (particularly *Genealogies of Religion*) first came my way during my graduate studies in the mid-1990s while I was reading David Scott's (1994) *Formations of Ritual*, which was itself a critique of colonial and anthropological representations of the tradition of the healing ritual *yaktovil* in Sri Lanka.¹ To be more precise, then, my introduction to Asad's work came by way of my attempt to think about a particular context of post-colonial Buddhism, politics, and debate in a South Asian country. The study of Sri Lankan Buddhism, like the studies of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism in general, is largely dominated by white scholars and remains mired within the empiricist protocols of area studies.² But Scott's work, unprecedented for its time, demonstrated that the anthropology of Buddhism that had explained Buddhist practices like *yaktovil* in terms of symbolic expressions had ignored the relation between power and authority. Because of its inattention to power, Scott argued, anthropology had failed to think about Buddhism as a 'discursive tradition', a landmark concept that Asad had introduced in his early work.

Foregrounding as it did Asad's thinking about power, authority, and tradition, Scott's *Formations* had implications for wresting the study of Buddhism from the problems of area studies. But regrettably Scott's (and by extension Asad's) work was ignored by both Theravada and Mahayana scholars of Buddhism, who instead turned Buddhist studies into a quest for local 'agency', thereby reproducing more than just an area studies problem.³ Charles Hallisey's (1995: 32) call for writing agency into Buddhist histories (to avoid "denying any voice to 'Orientals'") set a standard that a score of scholars of Theravada would follow for a quarter of a century.⁴ Even prominent scholars of Mahayana Buddhism would go on to seek out agency among Asians. In *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, Donald Lopez ([1998] 2018: 11), who wrote about the history of the Western fascination with Tibetan Buddhism, claimed that "to allow Tibet to circulate in a system of fantastic opposites ... is to deny Tibet its history, to exclude it from a real world of which it has always been a part, and to deny Tibetans their agency in the creation of a contested quotidian reality."

Such calls for agency would persist within the studies of South and East Asian Buddhism up to the present. In his keynote lecture on the new directions in Buddhist studies, the distinguished scholar of Buddhism Gregory Schopen (2012) claimed that just as "Buddhist nuns in pre-modern Japan were people, people who had their own ideas and were not and did not have to be just monks with breasts [in order] to have a religious life, and ... were able to manage their own affairs," so, too, nuns in ancient India "had their own importance and were not inferior copies of a male ideal." In particular, Schopen read a canonical account by a male monk about a wealthy nun named Sthulananda who had helped a poor woman set up a liquor shop and who had stood up to the king's men trying to stop her business. Later, the Buddha, who heard

about it from the monks, condemned the nun's behavior. According to Schopen, the story has two views about the nun, read with and "against the grain." They "both, however—and *this is startling*—present a picture of a religious woman in early India who had independent agency, independent means, the right to own and dispose of both real and movable property" (emphasis added). Schopen claims to be startled not only that Sthulananda actually had the gumption to help another woman, but also that she had the financial means to do so. He is startled by her independence, despite noting that ultimately the Buddha "rather *predictably* said, 'Sthulananda has done much that is unseemly; therefore a nun must not act as a liquor seller. If she sells it, she comes to be guilty of an offense'" (ibid.; emphasis added).

In his rush to attribute 'independent agency' to a pre-modern nun, while ignoring what the Buddha did 'predictably', Schopen (2012) never bothers to ask the question about power and authority: Sthulananda was *independent from whom?* The nun was already enmeshed in a network of power relationships within the larger community where the monks (sometimes kings, but laywomen and laymen as well) could complain to the Buddha, who, in response, would pronounce Sthulananda's act an offense. Schopen apparently forgets that she was a nun and therefore already embedded within a mesh of obligations and expectations that would not have applied to her friend. After all, this was not a case of the Buddha judging the sale of liquor for all human beings. Schopen is confusing the ability to start up a liquor business with the ability to live a religious life as *authorized* by the Buddha's *vinaya* (discipline) in the account under discussion. What is truly startling is that Schopen finds an Indian woman being able to run a business 'startling'—so startling that he finds it necessary to label it as 'independent agency'. Would anyone be 'startled' to find a white woman buying a liquor store on her own? Certainly not the *vinaya* authors, and neither should we.

Jason Ānanda Josephson (2012: 3) claims that his book, *The Invention of Religion in Japan*, will "recover the voices of the non-Western cultures" as he uncritically repeats a banal complaint about scholarship's supposed "narrative that understands modernity to be simply the product of Euro-American culture exported to an imitative and passive 'Asia.'" He says that "a side effect of this scholarship has often been to deny agency to [the] very colonial subjects it was trying to empower" (ibid.). And in his work on the history of medieval Pali literature in Sri Lanka, Alastair Gornall (2020: 11) criticizes the notion of "a culture playing a role in structuring agency" only to state that "we can view the ideas of Pali texts, where suitable, either as cultural structures—part of the system—or as part of 'socio-cultural life', that is, as a key expression of agency in history that allowed *individuals to actively and purposefully change and reshape their already existing circumstances*" (emphasis added).

It is surprising that scholars of Buddhism still remain oblivious to Asad's critiques of the idea of agency, by whose 'cultural logic' or 'the nature of consciousness', as anthropologists like Marshall Sahlins, Sherry Ortner, Jean and John Comaroff, and others have claimed, local people are not 'passive objects of their histories' but are 'making their own history', even in the face of a 'force' like capitalism or colonialism. Against this kind of rhetoric, Asad (1993: 4) argues memorably that "even the inmates of a concentration camp are able, in this sense, to live by their own cultural logic. But one may be forgiven for doubting that they are *therefore* 'making their own history'" (see also Asad 1994, 1996a, 1996b, 2003).

The turn to agency in Buddhist studies misses out on many of Asad's distinct insights on the relation between power and tradition, and the connected notion of community. Even cursory attention to this relation would have allowed scholars to go beyond the confines of area studies and think more critically about the question of modernity and the state itself. No scholar, in my view, can ignore this because writing about Buddhism in any period involves wrestling with the question of power. Let me begin with power and agency. For Asad, thinking about the relation

between power and religion does not involve a question of universal agency but a particular kind of ‘capacity’. For Asad, power as the *ability* to act in circumstances in particular ways, and not in others, is made possible by a ‘form of life’ lived within a tradition, embodied but discursive. The connection between power and ability, which scholars may mistakenly identify as agency, does not exist naturally in human beings; it is obtained instead through temporal practices such as discipline and humility in the medieval monastic community or modern Islamic practices of *nasiha* (giving advice). Asad’s thinking about the question of power has far-reaching implications.

Crucially, when scholars of Buddhism laud the supposed agency and creativity of (individual) Buddhists, they fail to think about the subtle implication that when we impute agency to someone, we thereby assign to them responsibility for their plight. They fail to see that agency as a genealogical concept has a troubling relation to the modern notion of ‘responsibility’. Asad (1996a: 271) argues that “‘agency’ operates through a particular network of concepts within which the historical possibilities and limits of responsibility are defined.” But the uncritical narratives of agency fail to ask the following sorts of questions that Asad suggests we ask: “What are the culturally specific properties that define agency? How much agency do particular categories of person possess? For what and to whom are agents responsible? When and where can attributions of agency be successfully disowned?” (ibid.: 272). Scholars of Buddhism miss the point when they simplistically equate agency with ‘independence’.

To think about what Asad’s questions demand, consider how the modern state and capitalism, not to mention the history of racism in the West, remain invested in the supposed universal relation between agency and responsibility with troubling implications for questions about what it means to live a modern life. Some examples of the complex relation between agency and responsibility can be found in the ascriptions of universalized *individual responsibility* to particular practices regardless of their social-political conditions. In the United States, such ascriptions include the language of personal responsibility and self-reliance in terms of “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps,” itself centering around notions of ‘hard work’ and ‘work ethic’, with racialized political effects when used to speak about the socio-economic conditions of minorities. In her 2018 book *Becoming*, even Michelle Obama, as one critic has charged, underwrites the idea that through personal responsibility and hard work “*individuals alone can change their circumstance*” (Taylor 2019; emphasis added).⁵ Individual responsibility is also touted by the neoliberal policies of ‘development’ aimed at combating not global ‘inequality’ but ‘poverty’—a goal that is reflected in the World Bank’s 2015 *World Development Report* titled “Mind, Society, and Behavior.” Seen through a lens that views self-responsibility as a cure for poverty, the individuals become ‘employable’ (McMichael 2017).

The weight accorded to individual responsibility is also enshrined in the choice of one’s health care plan. The 2009 Patient’s Choice Act, proposed by former Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, echoed the widespread Republican claim that “personal responsibility will serve as a salve to the wounds of the American healthcare system” (Hoffman 2017). Ryan’s proposal cast personal responsibility for one’s health in the most universal terms, “asserting that a ‘large percentage of heart disease, stroke, and type 2 diabetes, as well as many cancers, could be prevented if Americans would stop smoking, start eating better, and start exercising.’ The goal of health reform, according to Ryan, “should be to encourage ‘individuals to adopt healthy lifestyles and behaviors’” (ibid.). One can think of more recent instances of the connection between agency and responsibility vis-à-vis the state. When former Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen disowned (and thereby absolved the state of) any responsibility for the Guatemalan child Jakelin Caan, who died in 2018 in the custody of US Customs and Border Protection, claiming that the child’s “family chose to cross [the border] illegally,” that too was a way of imputing agency and responsibility to a person.

Another instance followed in the wake of the coronavirus shutdown in March 2020, when the Trump administration was contemplating opening up certain parts of the country for business. When asked how the states should handle the problem of travel by individuals from a high-risk county to a low-risk county, the coordinator of the White House coronavirus response, Dr. Deborah Birx, emphasized individual responsibility: “Part of this will be the need to have highly responsible behavior between counties ... *And I think the American people can understand that, that they will understand where the virus is ... and where it isn’t, and make sure that they’re taking appropriate precautions*” (emphasis added). Questions were asked at the press briefing about what to do when individuals who might have the virus do not show symptoms, but Dr. Birx provided no clear answers. So personal responsibility is billed as the natural bulwark even against a virus designated by the state as an ‘invisible enemy’. What each of these statements obscures is that to attribute agency to, say, modern US citizens during the coronavirus or to a nineteenth-century Sri Lankan Buddhist is to implicitly absolve the state or colonialism of any responsibility. One can of course cite numerous other historical examples, such as colonialism, Orientalism, and missionary practices of conversion, in which agency became tied to responsibility.⁶

I mention all this to suggest that Buddhist studies scholars cannot easily disassociate their appeal to agency from its genealogy and receive an autonomous sense of it, a point Nietzsche taught us a long time ago. And if the scholars had noted Asad’s questions about how ascribing agency involves imputing or disowning (legal/moral) responsibility, they might have thought carefully about subjectivity and power without trying to identify individual agency across history.

One of the demands of Asad’s work, then, is that thinking about forms of ‘religious’ life *necessarily* involves an engagement with questions of modern forms of life and power connected within ideas like agency, responsibility, secularism, state, and so forth. The work of modern and pre-modern forms of power cannot be elucidated with the continuing claims that “we have never been disenchanting” (Josephson-Storm 2017: 3), that secularism never abandoned its fascination with the supernatural. For Asad (2003, 2011, 2018), that thesis does not help us understand how power delimits what does and does not constitute ‘secular’, enabling and limiting particular capacities and sensibilities in shifting moments of time. At stake is the question of the temporality of secular sensibilities and the modern institutions that authorize them. So, in my view, to think with Asad’s concepts of community and tradition in the medieval and modern religious practices we find in *Genealogies* and elsewhere is to think about the temporalities of community, authority, and subjectivity supposed by the modern state (Asad 2015).

Asad’s notion of tradition connected to living a form of life in a community—with particular ‘programs’ of discipline and habituation, techniques of mutual observance, and the formation of a common ‘monastic body’—involves a question of the temporality of the subjectivities and the forms of knowledge that constitute them. For Asad, the abilities to be Christian or Muslim are historically formed, with the assistance of others. Asad’s thinking with figures like St. Augustine—who said, “Hands off yourself. Try to build up yourself, and you build a ruin”—is not an attempt to reproduce a Christian or Muslim tradition for our present. A tradition for him is not in itself authentic or correct just because it is a tradition, and a tradition can and does change precisely because it is discursive (Asad 2012). (This should not be hard to believe at a time when Dr. Anthony Fauci called for an end to the practice of handshaking even after the coronavirus epidemic has ended.) But the subjectivity formed within a tradition requires coherence, even though that coherence is embodied through debate.

So understood, the questions about forms of subjectivity and community presupposed by the modern state can hardly be separated from the scholars’ histories of Buddhism. The challenge of Asad’s work for Buddhist studies is how its custodians who write about, say, the agency of the composers of the new Pali literature in medieval Sri Lanka may think about—to give an extreme

example—the problem of overseas generic drug manufacturing for the US market, without being charged with not doing Buddhist studies. What sorts of subjects (citizens), communities (nations), and security (health) are at stake within a practice where the state agencies (the FDA) cannot *regularly* and sufficiently monitor the quality of the drug production monopolized by corporations (pharmaceutical companies) and other non-state institutions (insurance companies)?⁷

Surely the scholars cannot think about this sort of modern subjectivity in relation to the state by celebrating human agency because the subject of the market (‘consumer’) itself is assumed to be a self-responsible agent. If scholars of Buddhism think that this is outside their purview, they should know that their revered practice of ascribing agency to Buddhists already takes them outside their area studies. It is beyond the scope of my remarks to discuss the implications of the relentless effort by largely white scholars of Buddhism to assign agency to the non-white subjects of their studies. Given the heavily problematic implications of the facile understanding of agency, why would scholars of Buddhism think that an idea with such a troubling history is worth being applied to pre-modern or modern Buddhists?

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■ NOTES

1. My first book, *Colors of the Robe* (Abeysekara 2002), was indebted to Scott’s work.
2. I have taken up this question of area studies of Buddhism in my review essay on Joseph Walser’s (2018) *Genealogies of Mahāyāna Buddhism* (see Abeysekara 2019b).
3. For a discussion of this turn, see “Protestant Buddhism and ‘Influence’” (Abeysekara 2019a).
4. My critique of Hallisey is in “Protestant Buddhism and ‘Influence’” (Abeysekara 2019a).
5. In a critical review of Obama’s book, Taylor (2019) argues: “Obama concocts a kind of hybrid of middle-class feminism—with its focus on self-actualization, empowerment, and personal fulfillment—with wisps of J. D. Vance-style bootstrap uplift, which centers on hard work, education, and personal responsibility.” In this vision, Taylor says, policy solutions are shunned, as racism itself is no longer seen to be an institutional problem, but an “unfortunate residue from the past.”
6. I have noted some of these instances in “Protestant Buddhism and ‘Influence’” (Abeysekara 2019a).
7. On the problem of generic drug manufacturing overseas, see Katherine Eban’s (2019) *Bottle of Lies*.

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Talal Asad

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