

# The Study of Religion as Passionate Engagement: The Visionary Sensibility of Talal Asad

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## Abstract

As interpreted by this essay, Asad locates the key features of the secular perspective as residing in representation, quantification and the autonomy of the individual. These features are inscribed in the way the secular, and a religious studies implicated by this secular, approaches religion. But in analyzing these features, Asad uncovers alternate ways of approaching religion, ways that do not categorize religion within a broader secular project, but engage its manifestations as sense-driven, passionate, transforming forms of life. These ways, we believe, have implications for the notions of ‘theory’ and ‘method’ in religious studies.

**Keywords:** Talal Asad, secular, representation, quantification, autonomy, sense-driven religion, transformative engagement

## Introduction

Talal Asad’s work has been described by David Scott as having ‘tragic sensibility.’ For Scott, Asad is a thinker

responsive to the tragic in human life, to the antagonism between our determined will and the varied contingencies that often thwart and sometimes reverse it, our propensity to the sorts of moral conflict that lead toward disappointment, suffering and even catastrophe. A rueful gray colours his mind’s activity. Asad’s thinking about history and human action , and of human action as our mode of being *in* history,

is alert to the frailties and opacities that make us less than the self-sufficient reasoners we suppose ourselves to be, and that expose us to aspects of ourselves and our world over which we have little or no rational control (Scott 2006:134).

I am not sure here if Scott has made an adequate distinction between Asad's own sensibility and the sensibility of the secular outlook the latter describes. Because, as discussed by Asad, it is the secular that, in large part, shaped will and history as we now know them, and - by extension - the moral conflicts and suffering noted by Scott. And so the sensibility associated with this secular outlook may indeed be called 'tragic'. Yet, the very elements that construct this sensibility are paradoxically the same ones that are suggestive of a renewed way of thinking about the reality which we inhabit. After all, a central argument of Asad's is that secularism does not represent a break with religion, nor should it be regarded as of a piece with religion, that is, a new kind of sacred. Rather, concepts that were 'religious' were imbued over time with new meanings, making them secular<sup>1</sup>. There was a change in the 'grammar' of these concepts to reflect different sensibilities about the world and reality (Asad 2003:22). A fundamental object of his work is to trace the genealogy of this change. But in undertaking his task he reflexively projects alternative approaches to these concepts, alternative engagements of reality, alternative ways of living in the world. Asad's is not so much a tragic sensibility as a visionary one.

The critique of the secular that he develops has profound implications for the study of religion. The secular, in carving out an outlook that breaks with religion, redefines the latter<sup>2</sup>. 'Religion' becomes a 'site' within a funda-

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<sup>1</sup> In this regard, Asad disagrees with those such as Michael Taussig, who see secular institutions such as the modern-day state as really 'religious' and not truly secular. Such a view still assumes the secular to be the *real* ground of being (Asad 2003:22-23).

<sup>2</sup> Asad's argument often appears to be misread at this point. As Aseybekara points out, Asad is not saying that religion cannot be defined because it does not have an 'essence' (Abeyssekera 2011:259). We do have an intuitive and socially developed sense of what religion 'is'. But this sense has to be distinguished from the 'essentialization' of religion by secular power, where religion is constituted as a category within its broader project.

mental secular reality. It becomes a matter of private belief and individual conscience that can influence, but is distinct from, the public sphere (Asad 1993:45). The study of religion, in as much as it maintains this distinction between the private and public, is implicated by this critique. Yet the alternative vision implicit in his critique suggests new ways of approaching the field.

This essay seeks firstly to present what it sees as the results Asad's exploration of secular outlook. It then reflects on how this very exploration presents an alternate vision and living of reality. It concludes by drawing out implications of this exploration for the notions of 'theory' and 'method' in religious studies.

### **The Texture of the Secular: Asad's Forensic Engagement**

What are the elements that underpin the secular outlook? Asad's aim is to call into question the triumphalist history of the secular and so he is sceptical of its self-narrative in this regard. He proceeds to question the assumptions of this narrative, seeking to show that the secular, rather than representing the victory of reason, common-sense and the 'real world' over myth, superstition and an 'imaginary world', was and is in fact imbued with the characteristics from which it sought emancipation, though in a new 'grammar' (Asad 2003: Chapter 1).

His argument for his position is complicated, proceeding not so much in a straightforwardly analytical fashion as in an invitation to his reader to explore the genealogical contours of the secular and to ponder the questions he asks of the triumphal narrative. His methodology is shaped by what he calls the elusive nature of the secular - a nature which is paradoxically elusive precisely because it has become so enmeshed with modern sensibilities. For Asad this requires that we grasp the secular by its 'shadows' (Asad 2003:16). As necessary as this is, it does complicate the task of presenting his ideas in a linear fashion. In what follows, then, I will extract certain themes in Asad's work, particularly from his 'Formations of the secular', which I believe he constitutes as fundamental elements of the secular outlook. These themes do not appear in Asad's work in the way presented; rather, ours is a reading of his work around these themes. And so it is inevitably an interpretation. The themes extracted are: representation, the autonomy of the individual, and

quantification. It will readily be seen that these elements are closely connected to one another.

In my reading, a cardinal issue for Asad in his meditation on the secular is that of *representation*: as the secular forms and morphs itself it is in the continuous process of re-siting religion in a specific way. *In other words, in seeking to represent its own reality, the secular outlook has to represent the reality claimed by religion in specific ways. This is an interactive process.* In the unfolding of its variations, the secular must necessarily shift the boundaries of religion. And so any discipline that seeks to understand 'religion' also needs to understand the secular. In studying religion we are implicated by the secular since they are both closely linked in thought as well as in the way they have emerged historically. And the triumph of the secular since the Enlightenment has meant that it has been able to construct the category of 'religion' as we now know it in modernity: as a matter primarily of individual conscience and a space among other spaces in a presumed secular ground of being (Asad 2003:23).

This presumed secular ground of being, of course, was a modern development. It resulted from increasing disaffection with the Christian view of reality and the ability of those so disaffected to put into place an alternate ground of being. This alternate ground of being found a crucial concrete expression in the modern nation state which put into place the moral and legal disciplines by which the secular sensibility could not only be safeguarded, but indeed be prescriptive. In a similar way, the dominant religious sensibility that was characteristic of pre-Enlightenment Europe was protected by the Church's legal and moral disciplines. But what is characteristic of the modern state is that it strives to make citizenship the transcendent principle of identity. This identity has to transcend those that are based on class, gender and religion. For Asad, this transcendent mediation *is* secularism:

Secularism is not simply an intellectual answer to a question about enduring social peace and toleration. It is an enactment by which a *political medium* (representation of citizenship) redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender and religion. In contrast, the process of mediation enacted in 'premodern' societies includes ways in which the state mediates local identities without aiming at transcendence (Asad 2003:16).

How was this new sensibility constituted? According to Asad, myth was crucial to the formation of the secular outlook. The use of myth by those with secular sensibilities became a way of representing the 'real' situation. For example, its use became a way to attack the clergy without attracting the charge of blasphemy. It also became a way of representing contemporary events in fictional mode (Asad 2003:29).

Such utilitarian usage, though, was symptomatic of the deeper penetration of myth into the very structure of the secular. Myth fed into a number of binaries that pervade secular discourse such as belief and knowledge, reason and imagination, history and fiction, symbol and allegory, natural and supernatural, and sacred and profane.

To illustrate: in the Enlightenment myths were not discarded but were devoured in a new way. They may not have been believed but were crucial to the sphere of the 'imagination' as distinct from reason. Asad quotes Fontenelle as follows:

there is no better proof that imagination and reason have little commerce with each other, and that things with which reason has first disillusioned lose none of their attractiveness to the imagination (Asad 2003:29).

Myth now becomes part of the 'other', and in so doing passively helps construct the sphere of this 'other' as well as, by implication, the rational 'us.' But it is still reason that actively defines, assesses and regulates the human imagination to which 'myth' was attributed. That is, the science of myth (the 'rational' exploration of myth),

indicts all figures of otherness. Mythology is on the side of the primitive, the inferior races, the peoples of nature, the language of origins, childhood, savagery, madness - always the other as the excluded figure (Asad 2003, quoting Detienne 30).

Reason does not break with myth, but uses the latter in constructing its self-narrative and its view of reality.

It is not only reason that uses myth to represent its own terrain as well as the terrain of the other. There was also a morphing in the meaning of

‘sacred’ to ultimately represent new forms of the sacred consistent with the emerging secular sensibility.

The word ‘sacred’ was relatively rare in medieval times, referring in a local sense to persons, vessels, institutions etc. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, the word is employed in a transcendent manner to refer to all things ‘religious’. Such employment became established through the emerging disciplines of comparative religion and anthropology. In France it became salient at the time of the Revolution and ‘acquires intimidating resonances of secular power’. It becomes part of a discourse ‘integral to the functions and aspirations of the modern secular state in which sacralisation of individual citizen and collective people expresses a form of naturalized power (Asad 2003:32-33).

In this new transcendental sense, a sacrament is seen as an institution designed to invest life-cycle crises with supernatural authority. i.e. to make them sacred. This is in contrast to medieval Christianity where a sacrament is the engagement of the Christian subject with what his eyes see as the embodiment of divine grace. This representation of grace is learned through the proper disciplines. That is, the Christian representation, as opposed to the secular’s, is something internally imbibed not externally imposed on a phenomenon (Asad 2003:34).

What facilitated this essentialization of the sacred as an external sacred power? This goes back to the role of reason and the way it constitutes myth and the ‘other’ in general. Reason, says Asad, requires that false things either be proscribed or re-sited as objects to be seen, heard and touched by the properly educated secular senses (senses cultivated by new, Enlightenment derived disciplines of learning):

By unmasking pretended power (profaning it) universal reason displays its own status as legitimate power. By empowering new things [that is, sanctifying them] this status is further confirmed (Asad 2003:36).

So the ‘sacred right’ to property was made universal after church estates and common land was freed. ‘Sanctity of conscience’ was constituted as opposition to ecclesiastical authority. Asad writes:

At the very moment of becoming secular, these claims were tran-

scandalized, and they set in motion legal and moral disciplines to protect themselves (with violence where necessary) as universal (Asad 2003:36).

The key question then for Asad is not the ‘sacred’ as an object of experience but how a ‘heterogeneous landscape of power (moral, political, economic) is constituted and the individual and collective disciplines that are necessary to it’ (Asad 2003:36). This is because the question of the ‘sacred’ as an object of experience only follows after the landscape that constitutes it as transcendent has been formed.

If we accept Asad’s argument, then it is clear that these binaries imbued the secular with a theological sensibility- that is, a sensibility presupposed on a specific view of reality, of time, space and causality. The secular constituted itself not by rational argument, but by employing myth to assert its view of reality as against other views. Reason then, in this scenario, becomes an instrument by which to define (secular) belief rather than representing a common, objective ground by which differences can be settled. Reason, in other words, takes on the characteristics of myth. A study of religion which unreflectively builds on the assumptions of the secular self-narrative, or which instrumentally employs ‘theory’ (sociological, psychological etc.) developed in a secular substrate, is in effect a type of theological discourse. There is nothing wrong in this *per se*; the difficulty arises precisely because such study often claims to be distinct from theology.

The secular theological sensibility contained in these binaries found formal expression in the disciplines which they helped initiate. These binaries, in our reading of Asad’s argument, were crucial to the invention and shaping of ethnology, literature, history and politics as we now know them. It is the last two that are our concern here as they have particular implications for the study of religion. In the case of history, it is how this invention shapes the historical-critical approach to Religious Studies; in the case of politics it has implication for the role of religion and religious education in a modern liberal democratic state.

As to history: modern history is a product of different sensibilities about the materiality of scripture and the location of ‘language’ than those which prevailed in medieval Christianity. The disjuncture between modern history and more traditional sensibilities created fertile ground for the privileging of secular time as the measure of all time. It also led to the secular

mythicization of this history as ‘progress’.

His argument for this point runs as follows: in medieval Christianity, the ability to hear divinity speak depended on disciplining the senses (hearing, speech and sight.) This meant that it was intimately connected to practice. So in order to be correctly heard, scripture had to be *materially* engaged by the whole self. This approach to the scripture was facilitated by the view that ‘revelation’ was a *passion* to be undergone (naturally requiring full engagement of the senses) within a neo-Platonic hierarchy linking divinity to all creatures. Language was a medium that facilitated the union of divine and human but the reality felt went beyond language. Under the impetus of the Enlightenment,

Higher Biblical Criticism rendered the materiality of scriptural sounds into a *spiritual* poem whose effect was generated inside the subject as believer independent of his senses (Asad 2003:38).

Scripture became disembodied, something to be appreciated and cogitated over by the mind. This new approach in turn was facilitated by a view of revelation as a statement from a supernatural being that required *mental* assent on the part of the believer<sup>3</sup>.

These changes also implied a change in the way language was viewed. Already with the Reformation, of course, scripture was believed to disclose divinity at once rather than this divinity having to be mediated. But this step did mean that language became ‘extra-real’ - not just a facilitator anymore - ‘capable of representing and reflecting the real and by implication also unmasking the real’. That is, language is an ‘abstraction’ from the actual or real - something in addition to the real or actual and starts *representing* the real<sup>4</sup>. In contrast, in medieval period language was a crucial element in *living* reality rather than representing it<sup>5</sup>. But in the post medieval period, whatever is described by language, namely phenomena, is taken as the reality posited that needs to be confirmed or denied by experiment and research. The

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<sup>3</sup> Incidentally, we also have here the development of a mind-body binary.

<sup>4</sup> We may say, analogously, that language captures the real as in a picture and it is up to us to judge whether the picture created by language indeed matches reality.

<sup>5</sup> It is the difference between a picture and living in a picture.

experiment verified (or not) the reality represented by language. With this development, faith, like the experiment, became a way of knowing objects. In the case of faith it became a way of knowing supernatural objects, parallel to the way reason and observation provided knowledge of nature<sup>6</sup>. Faith, in other words, was not so much a virtue as in medieval times but now acquired an epistemological sense. It becomes a way finding out about reality which in turn assumes that this reality was in its nature not present. The reality is unknown and needs to be 'found out'. This assumed absenteeism of the divine is of course a secular sensibility. This finding out and 'testing' is also a sensibility - a theological method - cultivated by modernity (Asad 2003:38).

Asad writes that Protestant historians, in a bid to prove that the historical accounts of Jesus were 'reliable' - that is, they tally with the events represented by language - established the modern notion of history as a collective, singular subject. This new view of history and the historian secularized revealed religion, that is, located it in the homogenous time and homogenous space of history. But privileging secular's homogenous time and space in this way also sacralised the profane events of history - these events represented what was *really* happening in the world. In an associated way, modern history became *mythicized* as progress. Asad quotes Starobinski to the effect that while the Enlightenment made claims for reason which previously belonged to the divine logos, it also endowed myth - such as history as progress - with a meaning as full and profound as that found in revealed truth (Asad 2003:41).

The modern historical approach to the study of religion then necessarily takes place within a metaphysic. Certain, more expendable elements of this metaphysic, such as history as progress and secular time as the measure of all time, are easy to recognize and consequently to qualify. However, as we have seen, Asad's work also suggests that embedded in the very structure of the historical approach is the study of representations of the real, rather than the lived reality itself. This proves a more serious limitation in applying this approach to religious phenomena<sup>7</sup>. This applies even more so to 'critical' approaches to the study of religion<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> This feeds into another binary, the natural and the supernatural.

<sup>7</sup> Abeysekara confirms our reading of Asad in this way when he says: And, in this translation and theorization of religious practice, life itself becomes something that can be historicized, a task that remains central to the very

It is not only modern history, though, that manifests quasi-theological tendencies. Certain arguments for liberalism self-consciously argue on such a basis. Asad notes in this regard Margaret Canovan for whom liberalism can only be defended by drawing on its great myth: as a project to be realized. Asad quotes Canovan as follows:

The essence of the myth of liberalism-its imaginary construction - is to assert human rights precisely because they are not built into the structure of the universe. Liberalism is not a matter of clearing away a few accidental obstacles and allowing humanity to unfold its natural essence. It is more like making a garden in a jungle that is continually encroaching. The world is a dark place that needs redemption by the light of a myth (Asad 2003:58-59).

For Asad this approach explains the violence that lies at the heart of liberalism - a doctrine that has disavowed violence in principle. The violence of the state is an expression of the law, the violence required against the dark jungle which for its part represents the violence of transgression against that law (Asad 2003:60). Asad also notes that

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discipline that goes by that name: history of religions. Asad's argument that life is essentially itself is a counterpoint to the presumption that life can be historicized, since historicization is a way of thinking of life as something that translates and changes within history (Abeysekera 2011:259).

<sup>8</sup> Critical approaches, whether 'scientific' or structuralist (Marxism, feminism), are more obviously theological, proceeding as they do from expressly *outside* religion and making a *judgment* (critique) on the latter on the basis of epistemological criteria informed ultimately by secular conceptions of time and space. (This applies in a certain measure to criticism from within religion itself which often draws its impetus from sensibilities, currents and developments that are occurring in 'secular' society.) Asad, in fact suggests that the 'critical attitude' is the 'essence of secular heroism', in that it regards itself as 'confronting the forces of repression, being reflectively open to its own failings, as well as seeing itself as *the* foundation for understanding' (Asad 2009:46-55).

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(P)olitical and legal disciplines that forcefully protect sacred things (individual conscience, property, liberty, experience) against whatever violates them is thus underwritten by this myth (Asad 2003:60).

A liberal democratic state (or any other state that accepts the secular as the real ground of being) necessarily situates religion within its *Weltanschauung*. Public discussion and policy around religion will inevitably be framed around the secular moral discourse of the state<sup>9</sup> (religion and human rights, tolerance, equality of religions and so forth) and the mythic ideal that underpins this discourse. In other words (and this is a key idea in Asad's work) religion as a category is defined and located - we may say represented - by the secular state. The living out of individual religions in such a state is thoroughly enmeshed (in complicated ways)<sup>10</sup> with this representation and its associated violence<sup>11</sup>.

What were the conditions that led to the emergence of this secular theology and its representations of both itself and of the other? For Asad, these secular sensibilities were shaped by a new conception of the human being, the self-owning human, one endowed with autonomous will. This is an inevitable outcome of the increasing removal of the divine from human activity. And it has profound implications for the notion of causation. Human beings are now seen as the makers of history, the captains of their destiny.

The notion of an autonomous individual fed into the notion of natural rights, the precursor of human rights. Natural rights are closely correlated with an active view of rights, namely, that rights inhere in an individual irrespective of his or her social relationship<sup>12</sup>. It stood in contrast to passive

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<sup>9</sup> In his final chapter of his 'Formations', Asad shows how such secular moral discourse shaped the category of religion in colonial Egypt.

<sup>10</sup> Asad notes that the relationship between religion and the state operates differently in France, Britain and the United Kingdom-all 'secular' countries.

<sup>11</sup> By the violence of the state is meant the punitive measures that it institutes such as jailing, for example.

<sup>12</sup> Asad notes the following paradox in human rights, which ironically follows from regarding the human being as a sovereign self rather than defined by a network of relations: 'Nothing of a person's human essence is violated if he

rights which defined themselves precisely in terms of these relationships, as a reciprocal system of duties. Asad notes that the notion of 'liberty' is central to theories that employ an active conception of rights and that the essence of the human being is conceived rather differently in the two systems: as sovereign and possessing rights intrinsically independent of social and political

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suffers as a consequence of military or economic action from beyond his own state. Human rights are concerned with his suffering as a human being , not as a citizen of the individual state that was attacked militarily or economically'. However, this creates a paradox: 'yet the identification and application of human rights law has no meaning independent of the judicial institutions that belong to individual nation states (or to several states bound by treaty) and the remedies that these institutions supply - and therefore of the individual civil status as a political subject' (Asad 2003:129). In an interview, Asad puts this paradox in the following way: There is another important aspect to this human rights issue, one that has international dimensions. Many of the conditions of disenfranchisement in the Third World are due not only to brutal dictators but also to the way in which these societies are connected to the global system. The point is that conditions inside a country are not thought of as being anybody's responsibility but that of the national government. The trouble with the way human rights violations are conceived is that they invest the sovereign state with legal responsibility for all the sufferings of its people. There is some reason for this, historical as well as political, but increasingly around the world this notion makes nonsense of the way in which the violation of people's rights should be understood. The notion that lack of education, poverty and misery of various kinds has only to do with those countries themselves is absurd. Of course (it is grandly conceded) we in the West have an obligation to give aid and they in the Third World have an obligation to follow the sound policies urged on by the IMF and the World Bank that lend them money. But beyond that each Third World country is responsible for its own miseries - and its own human rights abuses. In other words the responsibility cannot lie here with Western countries as far as any human rights violations in the Third World are concerned. So it is that as well. There are really a number of different things that contribute to people thinking in particular ways about human rights violations, and therefore to more violations 'there' than 'here' (Asad 2003).

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institutions on the one hand (active); and as dependent on these institutions on the other (passive).

The active conception of rights saw the emergence of a more quantitative attitude in socio-political life. This conception of rights facilitated the later Middle Ages view that a property right was any right 'that could be held against all other men and that could be freely transferred by its possessor' (Asad 2003:130)<sup>13</sup>. For those who held on to this conception, liberty itself could be seen as property and hence could be transferred by its owner. This, of course, could sanction practices such as slavery. 'It is no accident', notes Asad, 'that the beginning of modern rights theories are to be found in Portugal and the Netherlands, the main centres of the slave trade at that time' (Asad 2003:131).

Quantification is built into the very notion of history as progress. Progress is seen as a linear progress through calendrical time. Baldly put, as human beings 'accumulate' time they will see the error of their previous ways. A metaphysical quality is imputed to the progression of moments. Consequently, religion as a category is not only positioned by secular sensibility, it is consistently in the process of being *re-positioned* with the march of time. Asad (2003:201) writes:

The historical elements of what come to be conceptualized as religion have disparate trajectories. On the one hand the nation-state requires clearly demarcated spaces that it can classify and regulate: religion, education, health, leisure, work, income, justice, and war. The space that religion may properly occupy in society has to be continually redefined by the law because the reproduction of secular life within and beyond the nation-state continually affects the discursive clarity of that space. The unceasing pursuit of the new in productive effort, aesthetic experience and claims to knowledge as well as the unending

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<sup>13</sup> In time this right became more pronounced. European history 'becomes history of continuously productive actions where notion of property (as essence of person) becomes central' (Asad 2003:168). This is European civilization which aspires to be universal, distinctive and quantitatively the most advanced (Asad 2003:166).

struggle to extend individual self-creation, undermines the stability of the established boundaries<sup>14</sup>.

There are important implications here for how religion is studied in *society*. The very formulation ‘religion in society’ accedes to the view that sees the secular as the *real* ground of being and the need for religion to find a location within that ground. Religion does not define reality; but, and even though this argument is normally implicit, it needs to be defined by that reality. The secular, as we have argued following Asad, is really a *theology* that defines itself *against* other theologies. It is not an *argument* for reason *over* theology.

Asad’s statement also has implications for the notion of ‘relevance’. In the modern state, religion has to be made relevant to a continuously changing secular self-fashioning. In this way the concept of ‘relevance’ itself is in thrall to this self-fashioning and becomes a means by which the secular is able to assert its power over other sensibilities. It becomes, in other words, part of the disciplinary complex through which the secular perpetuates itself.

The quantitative assumption also underlies modern attitudes towards pain and pleasure, namely, the need to *decrease* the former and *increase* the latter. This, of course, was not a self-evident attitude in pre-modernity where pain was often a form of cleansing and unchecked indulgence was considered an obstacle to spiritual - that is, *real* - progress. By extension, agency, in the modern *imaginaire*, is conceived of conscious as action by a self-owning subject to increase his or her pleasure and decrease their pain or, what

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<sup>14</sup> In the nation-state, says Asad, loyalty is to the nation, even if ‘under God’, since the nation has its being in this world. Men and women of each national society make and own their history. And they fashion their individuality in the freedom regulated by the nation-state. In the nation-state ‘the complex times and spaces of medieval Christianity (Judgment, Creator, heaven, hell) is broken down by the modern doctrine of secularism into a duality: a world of self-authenticating things in we *really* live as social beings and a religious world that exists only in our imagination’. Asad says further: ‘All social activity requires consent of law and thus of the modern state. The modern state seeks to regulate all aspects of individual life-even the most intimate such as birth and death’ (Asad 2003:194,199).

amounts to the same thing, resistance to forces that impede this realization<sup>15</sup>. Asad suggests, as well, that this quantitative bias, inscribed as it is in the secular project, also informs penal law<sup>16</sup>, the modern theory of war<sup>17</sup>, liberal democracy<sup>18</sup> and human rights<sup>19</sup>. In general, writes Asad, a ‘utilitarian

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<sup>15</sup> Asad writes: ‘The tendency to romanticize resistance comes from a metaphysical question to which the notion of ‘agency’ is a response. Given the essential freedom, or the natural sovereignty, of the human subject, and given, too, its own desires and interests, what should human beings do to realize their freedom, empower themselves and choose pleasure? The assumption here is that power – and so too pain – is external too and repressive of the agent, that it ‘subjects’ him or her, that nevertheless the agent as ‘active subject’ has both the desire and the responsibility to become more powerful so that disempowerment-suffering-can be overcome. I shall argue against this assumption. But to the extent that the task of confronting power is taken to be more than an individual one, it also defines a historical project whose aim is the increasing triumph of individual autonomy’, (Asad 2003:71).

<sup>16</sup> Asad notes that ‘This idea of calculus has facilitated the comparative judgment of what would otherwise remain incommensurable qualities’ (Asad 2003:109). Asad here speaks of the way torture and imprisonment were compared by Enlightenment inspired penal reformers.

<sup>17</sup> Asad notes that modern warfare inflicts calculated cruelty via its weaponry. So how, he asks, can this be reconciled with modern sensibilities regarding pain? He answers: ‘Precisely by treating pain as a quantifiable essence. The degree of cruelty used is justified as a means to an end’.

<sup>18</sup> Asad says: ‘...the ideology of political representation in liberal democracies makes it difficult if not impossible to represent Muslims as Muslims’. Why? Because in theory the citizens who constitute a democratic state belong to a class that is defined only by what is common to all its members and its members only. What is common is the abstract equality of individual citizens to one another, so that each counts as one. In principle, then, in Europe nothing should distinguish the non-Muslims from Muslims, except the latter’s fewer numbers (Asad 2003:173-174).

<sup>19</sup> Asad writes that human rights are concerned with both state cruelty as well as customs of ordinary people that are deemed objectionable: ‘This requires us to analyze human rights law as a mode of converting and regulating

calculus of pleasure and pain has come to be central to cross-cultural judgments in modern thought and practice' (Asad 2003:109).

## **Towards an Alternative Vision**

For Asad, the notion of an autonomous will is problematic. He writes:

My concern is that because the human body has a changing life largely inaccessible to itself, because behaviour depends on unconscious routine and habit, because emotions render the ownership of actions a matter of conflicting description, because body and mind decay with age and chronic illness, we should not assume that every act is the act of a competent agent with a clear intention (Asad 2003:72).

In fact, suggests, Asad, there are various other ways of acting - ways that are shaped by 'unconscious routine and habit' and by actions that are not consciously owned. And so agency (the capacity to act) does not only apply purely to wilful, intentional acts - it also applies to passive ones as well (Asad 2003:88). Agency, says, Asad,

is a complex process whose senses emerge within semantic and institutional networks that define and make possible particular ways of relating to people, things and oneself (Asad 2003:78).

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people, making them at once free and more governable *in this world*'. He further says we should be looking at the political and economic practices by which attempts are made to regulate 'desirable conduct' since human rights looks not only at state cruelty but also traditional customs which they find intolerable. Asad suggests link between human rights and neoliberalism. The cost benefit analysis derived from neoliberalism allows human rights to measure freedom quantitatively i.e. as a consuming subject of rights in terms of behavior. This may be instructively compared to the 'measurement' of human rights used by Amnesty and Human Rights Watch (Asad 2003:157).

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In other words, these semantic and institutional networks - or 'traditions'<sup>20</sup> - constitute various ways of living in the world. These ways of living, and the metaphysical and social logic that underpins them, determine how phenomena such as pain are not merely seen, but *inhabited*. For Asad it is not simply a matter of how pain is physically and culturally mediated, it is how experiences termed pain in these traditions '*are themselves modes of living in a relationship*'. He charges that,

the progressive model of agency diverts our attention away from our trying to understand how this is done in different traditions, because of the assumptions that the agent always seeks to overcome pain conceived as object and as state of passivity (Asad 2003:84).

For example, Christian martyrs suffering Roman persecution actively sought to live their pain rather than shunning it. For them it was an opportunity to personally inhabit in some measure what they believed to be Christ's suffering on the cross. Seemingly acted upon-from the perspective of the Roman imperium as well as modern sensibilities-they were actively participating in the reality of *their* life-world, the reality that mattered to them. But the Christian embrace of suffering also resulted in another form of agency. It led to a greater concern with the suffering of the poor and the diseased in general, leading to new kinds of Christian activity in adapting Galenic medicine. And so a passive, personalized living of pain had considerable social reverberations (Asad 2003:86-87).

The notion of passive agency must be understood in tandem with the concept of *habitus*. *Habitus* refers to the embodied, developable capacity for acquiring the virtues defined by a tradition. These virtues are acquired

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<sup>20</sup> Asad's definition of tradition is as follows: 'A tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history. These discourses relate conceptually to a past (when the practice was instituted, and from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance has been transmitted) and a future (how the point of that practice can best be secured in the short or long term, or why it should be modified or abandoned), through a present (how it is linked to other practices, institutions, and social conditions)' (Asad 1986:14).

through cultivated routine and habit. A way of life does not seek to actualize the autonomy of the self; rather, its participants have been trained to act in accordance with the virtues designated by their tradition<sup>21</sup>. Virtues should follow naturally from their being, as central to their way of life. Asad writes: 'Habitus, in contrast to [the] political model of ethics, is not something one accepts or rejects, it is part of what one essentially is and must do'<sup>22</sup>.

In habitus, the 'individual' and the 'social' are of the same category. The individual has to realize the virtues of his social universe. But it is precisely a universe that focuses on the individual realization of those virtues. And so it is the individual's biographical trajectory, rather than the history of his social universe - that becomes the cardinal point of reference. This biography does not end at death: in a typical tradition morality is primarily cultivated as a preparation for a journey that is beyond this world. In the biographical, *each* individual has a particular relationship to and location in reality:

If religious behaviour [in Islam] is to be defined in terms of responsibility, then we have here a case of behaviour that acquires its sense not from a historical teleology but from a biographical one in which the individual seeks to acquire the capacities and sensibilities internal to a religious tradition that is oriented by an eschatology by which he or she stands alone on the Day of Judgment to account for his or her life (Asad 2003:91).

This biographical focus of tradition neutralizes the quantitative bias of history - that is, its penchant for the history of the 'great', those who have actualized their autonomy, those who have 'made' history as well the general

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<sup>21</sup> This is also the extent of their *responsibility* That is, wherever they are in society be it mother, father, neighbour etc. - they are responsible in terms of their duties in that capacity. Unlike modernity, they are not responsible for the 'false consciousness' of having believed in religion.

<sup>22</sup> Oedipus story shows, in Asad's opinion, that intention, responsibility and punishment are not necessary to the notion of agency as cultivated in secular ethics. Oedipus's self-inflicted pain should be thought of 'as itself the passionate performance of an embodied ethical sensibility. Oedipus suffers not because he is guilty but because he is virtuous' (Asad 2003:95).

anonymity it typically affords to those who were passive agents<sup>23</sup>. The crucial question from within such a tradition is not ‘What happened in the past (to individuals as whole)’? Rather, that question is: ‘Where is *each* individual now (in the reality espoused by that tradition and which it necessarily believes to be universal)?’ Or to put it another way, while history unfolds itself in a homogenous conception of time (linear) and space (physical), the development of the individual in tradition embraces complex conceptions of the same (multiple worlds, an orientation to a time that is seen to be beyond linear time). The secular can dismiss the latter of course, but its needs to be aware that this dismissal proceeds from a *theology* that defines reality solely in terms of homogenous time and space<sup>24</sup>.

Forms of living in the complex times and spaces of traditions require the full engagement of the self, that is, engagement with the passions and the senses. Asad, as we, have seen, describes ‘revelation’ in medieval Christianity as a passion to be undergone. Christianity had to be lived through

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<sup>23</sup> Postcolonial theory appears to reinscribe the same modern historical sensibilities, even in challenging Western hegemony. The fact that the colonized subject may exist ‘beyond history’, and so beyond needing to be constantly defined in relation to colonial power, is hardly broached. The postcolonial critique, in effect, leads to a sort of essentialization of colonialism.

<sup>24</sup> But the majority also sees itself as a group with a particular narrative. In France, the narrative is tied to the emergence of the French nation. And so, as the majority, it can logically ask those who are in France to accept and imbibe this narrative if they are to remain in France as citizens. For Asad the solution is not to make state co-terminous with nation but to see minorities as minorities among minorities. This also means embracing complex notions of time and space. This complex space and time will allow multiple ways of life to flourish - instead of the homogenizing time and space of national politics. For many Muslim minorities, for example, being Muslim is more than simply belonging to an individual faith whose private integrity needs to be publicly respected by the force of law, and being able to participate in the public domain as equal citizens. It is more than a cultural identity recognized by the liberal democratic state. It is being able to live as autonomous individuals in a collective life that extends beyond national borders (Asad 2003:177-180).

the senses to be truly cognized. A 'mental' approach to the study of religion (a concern with its historical reliability, confining it to an issue of belief, a view of its revelation as a spiritual poem in line with secular art and literature) is itself the product of an emerging secular sensibility that seeks to represent religion in particular ways and so is fundamentally misplaced. To be understood, religion needs to be lived. This invites what I call a transformative approach to the study of religion.

A transformative study goes beyond phenomenology, although the latter is its essential starting point. Bracketing one's own assumptions and an empathetic entering into the other's worldview certainly helps neutralize the theological suppositions that inform historical and critical approaches to the study of religion. But profound appreciation is not sufficient. There should also be a willingness to be transformed by what one encounters.

In his 'Genealogies' Asad, in making the following observation regarding ethnographic representation, alludes to being open to such transformation:

Indeed, it could be argued that translating an alien form of life, another culture, is not always best done through the representational discourse of ethnography - that under certain conditions a dramatic performance, the execution of a dance, or the playing of a piece of music might be more apt. These would all be productions of the original and not mere interpretations: transformed instances of the original, not authoritative textual representations of it ...*As such they would become part of our living heritage*, not mere social science (Asad 1993).

## **Conclusion**

In our reading of Asad, the secular has to be seen as a theological project. It operates on a particular notion of reality as this-worldly and, consequently, views time and space in a homogenous manner, that is, to be considered solely in terms of their physical reality. In other words, it is engaged in *representing* a particular view of reality - a view that privileges quantification and the autonomy of the individual.

To put it another way, the secular need not concern itself with other

purported realities, with other purported dimensions of time and space. And since, for practical purposes, there is no other reality, no other views of time and space that should consequentially shape the way we view linear time and physical space, this reality tends to be assessed in quantitative terms and the autonomous, self-owning individual emerges to take the place vacated by the divine - an individual that now 'causes' history as distinct from divine causality.

All this, of course, is not problematic. There is nothing wrong in operating upon theological presuppositions. In fact, there is no other way: we all necessarily operate from particular starting points on the nature of reality, of causality, of time and space. Even an agnostic, Asad has observed, is certain about his uncertainty. (Asad, Interview by Martin, 2014). But what is problematic is the secular's largely unconscious attempt to mask these presuppositions. The secular represents itself as natural and self-evident. But as Asad's analysis shows us, it is a representation that is typically oblivious of its historical nature, of its deep grounding in myth, of its naturalized assumptions of language and history - these last two as we have seen being pivotal to its theology. It is this colonizing and naturalization of the domains of language (with its representation of reality as propositional) and history (with its representation of time and space in a homogenous manner) that impedes, I believe, the secular's ability to truly be transformed by other life-worlds, by other ways of envisioning and acting in reality. These views of language and history have become so embedded in common thinking that it appears natural that other views should be subsumed under them.

To the extent that theories and methods in religious studies mask their own presuppositions, they also become problematic. The emergence of theory and method, as Asad has intimated, is historically tied to developments that have made language 'extra-real': as a representation of reality itself, not simply as an instrument to aid this reality. As such the concept of theory and method is profoundly implicated by the historical move to a secular sensibility. This is not to even speak of theories and methods generated by the various academic disciplines which, as Asad has indicated, were themselves products of an emerging secular outlook. This, of course, does not impair the value of the very notion of theory and method, nor the value of theories and methods developed. But it does compel us, I believe, to continually link these theories and methods to their metaphysical presuppositions. They need 'to come clean' about their theological

underpinnings. And in relating it to these underpinnings, Asad's analysis generates a study of religion as a continuous self-reflective exercise. The study of religion is not only a reflection on an object of study and, reflexively, the theories and methods employed in studying that object; it is simultaneously a continuous and necessary reflection on the *presuppositions* underlying those theories and methods - presuppositions often masked by the naturalized assumptions of the secular. Such reflection can potentially allow us to see through the secular, to penetrate its masks, to lay ourselves open to alternate presuppositions. And unlike the presuppositions of a secular modernity whose dualism (reason versus imagination, history versus fiction and so forth) foster a disembodied engagement with religion as an element among elements in a fundamentally secular reality, these alternate presuppositions-premised as they are on modes of living in a relationship which engage the whole self - can cultivate a passionate, transformative engagement with religious reality.

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