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Book Review

Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason

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Secular Translations:

Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason

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For almost half a century, Talal Asad has made a significant contribution to cultural anthropology, secularization discourse, postcolonialism, and Islamic studies. In his two renowned monographs, *Genealogies of Religion*, and *Formations of the Secular*, Asad problematizes the Western notion of modernity and reveals the mechanism of invisible imposition upon both Western and non-Western society. *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason,* a published version of Ruth Benedict Lectures delivered at Columbia University, Department of Anthropology in 2017, is a continuation of his lifelong examination on the controversial aspects of Western modernity.

The translation of religious language into the secular public sphere has been a substantial democratic issue for political liberals in the European West. Jürgen Habermas claimed that religious citizens in a democratic state should translate their religious images and terms into generally accessible terms that resonate with the rest of the people that society. In *Secular Translations*, Asad casts doubt the rigid secular/religious distinction that is based on an *a priori* secular history and anthropology (Asad, 147). He argues that secular translation is not merely a translation of an abstract concept, but a "transformation of embodied cognitive experience and its classification in the language" (6). To underpin this point, Asad challenges the foundational concepts of political liberalism, such as the notions of free agency, equality, and the nation-state, with ample philosophical, philological, and anthropological evidence.

In the first lecture, Asad examines the origins of the tenets of freedom and equality within political liberalism through a thorough historical study of two closely linked modern notions: secularism and liberalism. Asad argues that political liberalism cannot secure an equal, free space for non-Westerners—such as Muslims—because it is an exclusive boundary that discriminates against people who cannot resonate with the language of Western modernity. Language is not a neutral carrier of information, but a way we inhabit the world (50). While Habermasian thinkers believe that religious discourse can and should be translated and verified by secular public reason, Asad refutes this position, arguing that it is neither necessary for addressing injustice in the public sphere, nor adequate for understanding the problem of agency (54), because the public/private distinction is a "modern construction" (51). In this uneven playing field, according to Asad, Muslims are not eligible to fully participate in a liberal democratic society because they cannot develop the quality of abstraction necessary for modern knowledge, universal morality, and a truly cosmopolitan order (49).

Asad then elucidates the difficulty of translating between Islamic tradition and a Western modernity rooted in Judeo-Christianity through an analysis of Abu Hamid al Ghazali, the Muslim jurist, theologian, and mystic. Asad presents the failure of modernity to interpret the traditional Muslim position. The full understanding of religious languages and concepts cannot be separated from the contemplation of their practice and larger structures, because religious language is a product of "ritualization" that encompasses the whole religious experience (77). It is problematic to regard religious language as a purely abstract notion without considering the process and structure of this ritualization. The Qu'ran's hermeneutics and Muslim prayer are distinctively different from Western equivalents and therefore cultivate dissimilar forms of logic, virtue, and politics. When one does not consider this difference and tries to "translate" the will and intention of a Muslim through the modern lens, it is possible to wrongfully label Sayfullo Saipov, a Manhattan truck attacker, as a religiously-inspired terrorist, while regarding Las Vegas shooter Stephen Paddock as merely a lunatic. Asad asserts that this mistake arises from a lack of understanding about the limitations of the modern concept of secular translation.

The final essay offers an examination of the suspicion and paranoia lurking in the modern nation-state, and of how they are utilized and manipulated by the government through the "language of numbers" (99). Asad claims that "what we have here is a different conception of (attitude toward) morality" (106). The religious reformation and modernity have created a separation between the private self and public persona. This modern model of a self that is free from conventional morality emerged and became a problem because it separated the "true self from its action, behavior, way of living" (111); when a person does something in favor of public interest or national security, she or he thereby bypasses any moral and legal responsibilities. This type of masking of moral agency results in a soldier who pushes the button of a machine-gun drone without feeling any guilt for doing it. Another dangerous rupture between nation and state compounds the problem. Even though "nation" and "state" are often regarded as synonyms, "nation" indicates the people of a nation-state, while "state" refers to its territory and governmental body. This gap arouses political uncertainty that necessitates surveillance and profiling of the nation-state's citizens. Due to this self-contradictory characteristic, modern nation-states, from Israel to the United States, try to secure a "clear and permanent demographic majority" of those who know that the state belongs to them (143). "Betrayal," as Asad puts it, "once had religious meaning," and "translated into modern secular society, that gives it a passionate moral charge" (116). Therefore, the modern liberal democratic society craves, and is defined by, acts of legal, emotional exclusion that necessitate a process of enemy-making.

Asad's way of engagement with Western modernity also has limitations. His analysis exclusively focuses on the Christian roots of Western modernity, and while it is undoubtable that the Reformation and Christianity had a significant role in shaping Western modernity and identity, it seems likely that he has neglected other factors that tremendously influenced their development. Since he hardly ever considers other economic, social, and political causes that played a part in the creation of the Western modernity when he criticizes it, while he enumerates other factors when he advocates Islam tradition through his notion of ritualizaiton, his criticism of the Christian roots of Western

modernity seems not only inadequate at times but also frequently biased. For instance, Asad's insight in the third lecture is brilliant in indicating the problem of growing influence of statistical and mathematical calculation on policy making and law enforcement that discriminate numerical minorities. However, his assertion Western concepts of personhood and self are mostly to blame seems questionable, since the problem of the dominance of the "language of numbers" (99) happens other non-Western societies—such as South Korea and Japan. This is because Asad neglects economic factors that tremendously shapes and intensifies what he calls the prevalence of the language of numbers, the rule of mathematical language globally.

Asad's cross-disciplinary analysis of Western modernity is a timely contribution to the scholarly conversation that gives insight into the challenges that democratic nation-states are facing today in issues surrounding immigration, discrimination, and moral agency. Asad's in-depth analysis of the European Western modernity elucidates the kernel of immigration problems. Throughout the whole book, Asad asserts that the source of difficulty in modern nation-states is neither a specific group of people, nor a particular way of thought, but an ignorance of major problems that are inherent in Western modernity and liberalism. Asad's examination accurately diagnoses the structural issues in Western politics. Second, Asad's extensive discussion engages various disciplines and opens up several further possible avenues of further discussion. Throughout his work, Asad engages leading scholars of numerous areas to be his interlocutors, such as Jürgen Habermas, political philosopher Larry Siedentop, theologian Lamin Sanneh, and anthropologist Maurice Bloch. Asad's choice of conversation partners makes his wide-ranging examination more thorough and compelling. For this reason, Asad's book is a convincing foundation for many different disciplines that want to engage in critical evaluation of Western modernity and its ideological descendants such as political liberalism, economic neo-liberalism, and conventional secularization theory. Asad's vast knowledge on the topic, exhaustive research on histories of two religions, and active participation in current issues make this work an irreplaceable resource not only for anthropologists but also for jurists, political philosophers, and theologians.

This work is highly recommendable to those who seek to understand the limitations and problems of modern democratic societies and their political systems.

Sanghyun Park is a theologian, Methodist pastor, and father of a newborn baby. He is interested in theological ethics, political ethics, and decolonialism. He is currently a doctoral student in the Theology and Ethics Department at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA.