JAMES K.A. SMITH
Calvin College

SECULARITY, RELIGION, AND THE POLITICS OF AMBIGUITY

A Review of Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003. ISBN: 0-804-74768-7. $19.95.

O FFERING WHAT HE DESCRIBES as an "anthropology of secularism"[1] akin to an anthropology of religion, Talal Asad (CUNY) grapples with some of the most important questions in domestic politics: *viz.*, if the "doctrine" of secularism that has governed public discourse in modern democracies rests upon Enlightenment principles that are rightly jettisoned, how should we reconfigure the space for religion in the public sphere? If secularism operates on the basis of a flawed epistemological notion of autonomous, universal rationality, then is it even possible to have a "public" discourse? Would we be left with only the cacophony of tribalisms? Or is there a way of retaining secularity without secularism?[2] Is it a matter of being post-secular, or rather post-secular*ist*?

While Asad offers this as a coherent "book," it is more properly a collection of somewhat related essays disguised as a monograph. Some essays, particularly in Part Two, bear only a tangential relationship to the topic—and that only after Asad has added prefatory links to a previously published essay. However, this does not downgrade the value of this collection; it only affects what to expect from it. The (previously unpublished) Introduction sketches Asad's project, which he then organizes in three parts (which, to be honest, seem a bit arbitrary):

---

[1] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 21-66. Subsequent references will be in parentheses in the text.

[2] In this respect, I think *Formations of the Secular* is helpfully read alongside Jeffrey Stout's important contribution, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). While Stout is focused on questions in American domestic policy, both Asad and Stout are engaging the same issues. We would also find some overlap with someone like Graham Ward—a "new traditionalist" (according to Stout)—who, though he advocates "a return to tradition-based forms of reasoning," does not endorse "outright condemnations of secularism or modernity or liberalism." Rather, he concedes that "in certain countries in the world a good dose of secularism would break the repressive holds certain state-ratified religions have over people's lives." See Graham Ward, *True Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), ix, 1.

Secular (chapters 1-3), Secularism (chapters 4-6), and Secularization (chapter 7). The Introduction and chapter 1 sketch the more thematic issues and questions; chapters 2-5 are then loosely related case studies which try to concretize the "emergence" of secular modernity and thus investigate the secular indirectly. Chapter 6, on "Secularism, Nation-State, Religion" comes back to the heart of the matter, and then the book concludes with a long chapter that takes up Egypt in the 19th and 20th centuries as a case study in secularization. The forays in chapters 2-5, while interesting in their own right, tend to take us off the track of the title's promised themes.

The lexicon of this discussion—the "sacred," the "secular," "secularism," "secularization," even "religion"—is hotly contested, and Asad's introduction and first chapter attempt to map this terrain and spell out at least a convention for employing these terms. We can most easily deal with—and dispense with— the "secularization thesis" à la Comte: "If anything is agreed upon, it is that a straightforward narrative progress from the religious to the secular is no longer acceptable" (1). However, this does not mean jettisoning the notions of the secular or even secularism. Asad considers the former "an epistemic category" and the latter "a political doctrine." According to a more traditional model as outlined by Rawls or Charles Taylor, there is a close link between the two and their emergence alongside of (or as the condition of) the modern nation-state: the secular denotes a mode of knowing which is neutral with respect to religious commitments or "visions of the good" and thus open and common to all. The state, emerging out of the conflict of religious wars, finds in the secular a kind of "lowest common denominator" and thus establishes "a political ethic independent of religious convictions altogether" (2). Secular*ism* is the doctrine that mandates that public discourse be conducted according to the neutral, non-religious standards of "secular" reason. So "'the secular' is conceptually prior to the political doctrine of 'secularism'" (16); epistemology precedes (perhaps even entails) a distinct Enlightenment politics that continues to govern Europe.[3] It is only on these terms that Muslims, for instance, can be European: working from an Enlightenment principle of disembodied abstraction, "Muslims, as members of the abstract category 'humans,' can be assimilated or (as some recent theorists have put it) 'translated' into a global ('European') civilization once they have divested themselves of what many of them regard (mistakenly) as essential to themselves" (169).[4] But it is just this reductionism that Asad wants to call into

---

[3] I have argued for a similar axiom, though going one step further back, suggesting that a politics is rooted in an epistemology, which is in turn rooted in an ontology. See James K.A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), ch. 3 and *passim*. Asad hints at the same: "The question of how secularism as a political doctrine is related to the secular as an ontology and an epistemology is evidently at stake here" (21).

[4] This is now crystallized in discussions regarding Turkey's admission to the EU.

question, suggesting that there will be an inherent tension between secular, liberal democracies and the possibility of representing tradition-based communities: "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" (173).[5]

Thus Asad rejects not only the naïvete of the secularization thesis but also this common liberal account of the connection between a secular epistemology and a secularist politics—not because he rejects secularism as a doctrine, but because he rejects the notion of a neutral epistemology assumed by the secular. So we might say that Asad wants a secularism without the secular; that is, he is clearly concerned about the consequences of theocracy (particularly given his experience in the Muslim world), and is thus a staunch defender of secularism and a certain de-theologization of political discourse and procedures. However, he (rightly) questions the notion of a neutral secular reason that has traditionally undergirded secularism as a political doctrine.[6] Like William Connolly, he wants to oppose the quasi-theocracy of the supposed neutrality of the secular reigning over and colonizing the space of public discourse; unlike Connolly, however, Asad will continue to advocate for secularism, but one understood, to use Connolly's phrase, as a "decentered pluralism" (177).[7]

But at this point I find a frustrating ambiguity in Asad's constructive proposal. On the one hand, his secularism without the secular seems to proceed by a kind of remythologizing of the secular: an appreciation of the way that secularity is its own confessional tradition that lives off faith in certain orienting "secular myths" (61). On the other hand, Asad clearly rejects the notion that the secular is

---

[5] Another comparison with Stout is illuminating: insofar as Asad tends to equate secularity and democracy, and is critical of the exclusionary principles of secular democratic discourse, particularly vis-à-vis a religious community, his sensibilities here (especially concerning religious "minorities" [180]) are very close to those that Stout describes as "new traditionalists" (esp. Milbank and Hauerwas). Stout, on the other hand, does not believe that democracy is essentially secular.

[6] Asad also rightly rejects the modern myth that secularism secures peace (6-8). As he wryly notes, "Experts on 'Islam,' 'the modern world,' and 'political philosophy' have lectured the Muslim world yet again on its failure to embrace secularism and enter modernity and on its inability to break off from its violent roots. Now some reflection would show that violence does not *need* to be justifyied by the Qur'an," noting the massacres and violence perpetrated by Syria's secular president Hafez al-Assad, Saddam Hussein, and Ariel Sharon (10). He makes the same point with respect to cruelty and torture: "an equation of institutional religion with violence will not do" (100). In fact, torture could be seen as integral to the modern *secular* state (103-105).

[7] In this same context Asad endorses John Milbank's notion of "complex space" as "a fruitful way of thinking about the intersecting boundaries and heterogeneous activities of individuals as well as groups related to traditions" (179).

religious: "I do not claim that if one stripped appearances one would see that some apparently secular institutions were *really* religious. I assume, on the contrary, that there is nothing *essentially* religious" (25).[8] He wants to "get away from the idea that the secular is a mask for religion, that secular political practices often simulate religious ones" (26; cp. 189). In rejecting this, Asad must reject two currents in contemporary theory: (a) the line of folks like John Milbank, William Connolly and others who argue that the doctrines and practices of the secular—particularly the secular state—are, in fact, grounded in theologies and habituated by liturgies which are religious in nature.[9] If Asad suggests that *nothing* is essentially religious, Milbank might say that *everything* is religious, or at least undergirded by religious commitments—which is *not* to say, of course, that everything is Christian.[10] But in addition to the critical "secular-*is*-religion" line, Asad must also reject (b) the proposals of Jeff Stout and others which construe liberalism *as* a kind of quasi-religion (or even a "redemptive myth" [26]), or at least as a distinct *tradition* with its own narratives, doctrines, and practices which are not simply secured by some neutral reason.[11]

It is in his rejection of (b) that we can see a simplicity that besets his account, undermining his rejection of (a). Asad offers an exposition of Margaret Canovan as a representative of the "liberalism *as* myth" school—those political theorists who argue that "a secular, liberal state depends crucially for its public virtues (equality, tolerance, liberty) on political myth" (56). As Canovan argues, the "central principles of liberalism" are not simply self-evident or just there to be

---

[8] In this respect Asad's account of religion resembles that of Daniel Dubuisson in *The Western Construction of Religion*, trans. William Sayers (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003). Offering a genealogy of the "history of religions" movement, Dubuisson is particularly concerned that the very category "religion" is an invention of the Christian West, covertly theological and imperialistically imposed upon global phenomena. In place of the Western concept of "religion," he suggests that the category of "cosmographic formations" can better do justice to global phenomena. However, I think this only displaces the issue by a semantic shift, since we would then simply ask whether the secular, for instance, is a "cosmographic formation."

[9] The catch here, as we'll note below, is just what it would mean to say that doctrines or practices are "religious in nature."

[10] I'm not sure that Asad appreciates this distinction: in the same breath that he protests against the claim that the secular is "in reality religious," he also protests against the notion that secular "redemptive" myths are "essentially Christian" (61). In other words, I think he tends to collapse the two. But one could certainly argue that secular myths and practices are essentially religious without arguing that they are, at bottom, Christian.

[11] On democracy *as* tradition (and therefore as at least a kind of quasi-religion, whose priests are Emerson and Dewey), see Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 3. As he later puts it, "pragmatism is democratic traditionalism." If Asad wants a secularism without the secular, Stout wants democracy without secularism: "modern democracy is not essentially an expression of secularism" (p. 11). As an aside, I would note that Stout seems to misdiagnose why "new traditionalists" like Milbank, McIntyre, and Hauerwas are opposed to modern, liberal democracy: it is not because liberal democracy is not a "tradition," but precisely because it *is* a tradition whose formative practices create agents whose *telos* is antithetical to the *telos* of the *polis* which is the *ekklesia*. (I hope to expand this elsewhere.)

perceived by neutral, dispassionate observers; rather, they grow out of an orienting narrative, a distinct *tradition* of thought which fosters a particular set of practices. Thus "Canovan believes that liberalism can be defended only by recognizing and drawing openly on its great myth" (58)—which is its own myth of redemption (61). One could find a very similar strategy at work in Stout's *Democracy and Tradition*. But Asad resists the language of myth here, or at least wants to carefully distinguish myth and religion on this score. As he puts it, "the similarity of these projects to the Christian idea of redemption should not, I submit, lead us to think of them as simple restatements of sacred myth, as projects that are only *apparently* secular but in reality *religious*. For although the New Testament myth may have assisted in the formation of these secular projects it does not follow that the latter are essentially *Christian*" (61, emphases added).[12] But again, I think Asad misses the nuance of the point: to describe liberal myth as religious is *not* to say that it is covertly Christian, but rather to say something about the epistemic status of liberal discourse and practice and about its articulation of a unique orienting *telos*.

Related to this lack of nuance in his account is the simplistic opposition between "secular" and "sacred" that seems to be operational in his account. For instance, he still seems to suggest that the secular is "worldly," linked to "this world," and concerned about "the here and now," whereas religion is otherworldly and looking for the hereafter (24, 68, 193, 207). He even perpetuates the mistaken story that suggests the "secular" was the product of the Creator/creature distinction (27). While in some forms of gnostic fundamentalism this is true, it is certainly not true of confessional traditions *simpliciter*. Rather, one could suggest that the secular is a kind of religion that passes itself off as "rational" and therefore ir-religious, making its religious colonization of the public sphere submerged yet powerful. Indeed, we might say that this notion of the secular is a theocracy without god.

But if one can see that liberalism, as an orienting ideology, is grounded in myths which have a religious epistemic status, then it seems to me that one could legitimately describe liberalism—and its attendant doctrines, such as secularism—as *religious*. And if one can appreciate that, then other suspicions that Asad articulates begin to make more sense. For instance, he appreciates the way in which liberal secularism transgresses communal identity, truncating the self by restrictive requirements for admission to the public sphere. But as he notes, "for many Muslim minorities (though by no means all) being Muslim is

---

[12] Asad goes on to rightly note that the fundamental difference between Christian redemptive myth and "secular redemptive politics" is a matter of *grace*, or lack thereof. Liberalism's redemptive myth operates on the basis of an immanent self-sufficiency: "the human redeemer, as an inhabitant of *this world*, must first redeem himself" (62).

more than simply belonging to an individual faith whose private integrity needs to be publicly respected by force of law, and being able to participate in the public domain as equal citizens. It is more, certainly, than a cultural identity recognized by the liberal democratic state" (180). And so the key question—paralleled, I think, in Hauerwas' concerns about the *ekklesia* in American democracy—is: "What kind of conditions can be developed in secular Europe—and beyond—in which *everyone* may live as a minority among minorities" (180)? He also recognizes that the state poses a threat to such communities (200), but seems not to recognize that this threat stems from that state's status as a kind of *religious* institution which demands allegiance. So, instead of asserting a non-secularist account of how religious communities can participate in public discourse, Asad seems to end up asserting in the end what he rejected in the beginning, *viz.*, the requirement that religion can play a role in the public sphere only if it agrees to accept the rules of the game laid down by liberalism, the official religion of the modern state: "Only religions that have accepted the assumptions of liberal discourse are being commended" (183).[13]

If Asad's position seems ambiguous, he seems to think this stems from the things themselves, since he seems to not get beyond "the ambiguous connections between the secular and modern politics" (66). I would suggest, however, that the ambiguity arises not from the things themselves, but from a still simplistic account which resists recognizing the religious status of secularism.

JAMES K. A. SMITH is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, MI. He is the author *of Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Baker Academic, 2004) and co-editor, with Henry Venema, *of The Hermeneutics of Charity: Interpretation, Selfhood, and Postmodern Faith* (Brazos, 2004). His next book, *Jacques Derrida: Live Theory,* will appear from Continuum in September.

---

[13] So also: "If [religion] seeks to undermine civil society (as in Egypt) or individual liberties (as in Iran) then political religion is indeed a rebellion against modernity and the universal values of the Enlightenment" (182).