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Sindre Bangstad
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Contesting secularism/s

Secularism and Islam in the work of Talal Asad

Sindre Bangstad
Oslo University College, Norway

Abstract
This essay deals with the influential anthropological work of Prof. Talal Asad on Islam, secularism and the secular. I argue that the binary 'Western–non-Western' which is constitutive for Asad, the relative absence of ethnography in Asad’s work, and the state-centred nature of Asad’s approach to secularism and the secular has contributed to an anthropological impasse whereby the complex engagement of Muslims living in secular and liberal ‘Western’ contexts with the secular has become difficult to conceptualize. I argue in favour of the conceptualizations in a nascent body of works which transcend some of these binaries, most notably those of Marsden and Soares and Otayek, and in favour of investigating the secular as a vernacular practice.

Key Words
Talal Asad • Islam • Islamic discursive traditions • Saba Mahmood • Muslims • secularism

In recent years, there has been a flourishing of literature in various fields exploring the historical, philosophical and anthropological lineages of secularisms, both in European and non-European contexts. In anthropology, no other author on secularisms has been more influential than Talal Asad. Asad’s seminal contributions to this field of study in a number of essays and books have had a profound impact on how contemporary anthropologists conceptualize secularisms in theory and practice. That it has become commonplace in anthropological studies to regard the secular and the religious as implicated in one another, to emphasize that secularisms are as much about embodied practices as they are about political doctrines, and to assert the problematic nature of the pretensions towards universality inherent in modern forms of secularisms speak volumes about the professional influence of Asad’s work. If, as Varisco (2007: 9) claims, it became a kind of initiatory bismillah to cite Edward Said in literary texts about colonial discourse, the same can be said with regard to citing Asad in anthropological texts on secularism – or, for that matter, in anthropological texts on Islam. And it is not only anthropologists who have paid attention to Asad’s reflections on secularisms – references
to Asad abound in works of historians, religious studies scholars, philosophers and so forth. This article forms part of an ongoing personal engagement with Asad's oeuvre. It is written in acknowledgement of the immense importance of the challenging questions about modern forms of secularism which Asad raises. It is intended less as a critique than as an attempt to reflect upon some of the silences and inconsistencies in Asad's work on secularism in order to be able to contribute to an ongoing discussion in anthropological circles about the study of secularism. There are certainly numerous personal and political stakes involved in debates over secularism in contemporary academia (Bakhle, 2008: 256). Nevertheless, I would like to resist the ‘temptation to think that one must either “defend secularism” or “attack civil religion”’ (Asad, 2006b: 526) – or for that matter engage in ‘blanket declarations about secularism one way or another’ (Bakhle, 2008: 258). For as Bakhle reminds us, critiques of secularism are not only found among partisans of the Left but are also commonly among partisans of the Right.

I argue that some of the silences and inconsistencies in Asad's work on secularism relate to the status of binaries such as 'non-Western' and 'Western', and to the absence of ethnography in Asad's oeuvre. I furthermore argue that the current impasse in anthropological studies of secularisms in European contexts is related precisely to the difficulties of transcending these ontological and epistemological binaries, and to the absence of ethnographic studies describing precisely in what ways secularisms are defined, appropriated and contested by our anthropological informants.

**WHAT IS SECULARISM AND THE SECULAR?**

'In my view the secular is neither singular in origin nor stable in its historical identity, although it works through a series of particular oppositions', notes Asad in *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (2003: 25). 'The “religious” and the “secular” are not essentially fixed categories', he continues (p. 25). The genealogy of secularism that Asad offers in this and later works is nevertheless in many respects quite conventional. ‘Secularism as a political doctrine arose in modern Euro-America’ (p. 1). Secularism may have ‘many origins’, but for Asad, as for the philosopher Charles Taylor (1999), the most ‘useful’ story of secularism begins with the 16th-century wars of religion (Asad, 2006b: 497), in the aftermath of which Western Christendom adopted the ‘*cuius regio, eius religio* principle’ in an attempt to solve the political problems of Western Christian society in early modernity (Asad, 2003: 2). 4 This genealogy of secularism, which sees Christendom as a pre-cursor to the development of modern forms of secularism, has become even more commonplace in the years after the publication of Asad's book. Taylor's seminal volume *A Secular Age* (2007) has performed a Christian act of appropriation of and reconciliation with secularism by to a large extent leaving out the internal contestation over the status of the secular within European Christianity and obscuring the role of non-religious freethinkers in its development. Taylor's reading of secularism stands in the tradition of Marcel Gauchet (1997), in the sense that both regard Christianity as the *sine qua non* of secularism. Efforts similar to Blumenberg's (1983) and Löwith's (1949) attempts to 'disentangle secularism from Christianity' (Viswanathan, 2008: 170) have as an indirect result now become virtually unimaginable. It is a necessary reminder when Asad claims that 'in European Christendom, it was only gradually, through continuous conflict, that many inequalities were
eliminated and that secular authority replaced one that was ecclesiastical’ (2008: 582), and asks whether ‘we are to understand that the ideological roots of modern secularism lie in Christian universalism’ (2006b: 516).

The European wars of religion, the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment are all historical events commonly referred to in studies of the emergence of modern forms of secularism. Asad notes, however, that contrary to popular assumptions, examples of the separation of religious from secular institutions of government can be found in medieval Christendom as well as in the Islamic empires (Asad, 2003: 1, cf. also Asad, 2006b: 499). But the separation of religion from power must for Asad ultimately be ‘a modern Western norm, the product of a unique post-Reformation history’ (Asad, 1993a: 28). For Asad, ‘the secular’ is conceptually prior to the doctrine of secularism (Asad, 2003: 16). The secular, in Asad’s rendering, refers to ‘a variety of concepts, practices and sensibilities’ which over time have come together ‘to form “the secular”’ (p. 16). ‘The secular’ for Asad ‘is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it’, ‘nor a simple break from it’; it is ‘a concept that brings together certain behaviours, knowledges and sensibilities in modern life’ (p. 25). Changes in concepts reflect changes in practices (p. 25) Religion and the secular are closely linked in thought and in the way that they have emerged historically (p. 22). For Asad, there is a clear distinction between the epistemological category of the secular and the political doctrine of secularism (Asad, 2006a: 228).

The designation ‘secularism’ was introduced by the utilitarian free-thinker George Jacob Holyoake c.1851. Secularism as a political and governmental doctrine has its origins in 19th-century liberal Europe, and was introduced by Holyoake and other free-thinkers in order to avoid the charge of being atheists in a ‘still largely Christian society’ (Asad, 2003: 23). For Asad, secularism ‘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’ (Asad, 2003: 5, emphasis in original). Secularism presupposes a particular construction of religion based on Protestant Christian understandings of religion as disembodied and individual faith (cf. Asad, 1993a: 45), inner states rather than outward practice, and a particular distribution of pain which tries to curb the ‘inhuman excesses of what it identifies as “religion”’ (Asad, 2006b: 508). Asad takes issue with the republican view of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (in Taylor, 1999) to the effect that secularism is applicable to non-Christian societies everywhere that have become modern (Asad, 2003: 2). Taylor’s view may be described as republican because it is based on a conviction to the effect that a functioning democratic society requires some commonly recognized definition of ‘the good life’ (cf. Taylor, 1995: 181–203), and it may be described as deterministic in defining secularism as ‘inescapable’ by virtue of its flowing ‘from the nature of the modern state’ (Taylor, 1999: 38). For Taylor, ‘equidistance’ and ‘inclusion’ represent ‘the essence’ of secularism (p. 52). A secularism of Rawlsian ‘overlapping consensus’ diverging from the historical ‘common ground strategy’ and ‘secularism as an independent ethic’ (pp. 33–6) ‘is the only form of secularism available to us in the diverse societies of today’ (pp. 52, 53). Asad will have none of this. For Asad’s conceptualization of the European nation-state, as well as of its secularism, at the very outset differs markedly from that of Taylor. ‘Religious toleration was’, in Asad’s terms, ‘a political means to the formation of strong state power that emerged from the sectarian wars of
the 16th and 17th century rather than the gift of a benign intention to defend pluralism’ (Asad, 1993a: 206). For Asad, pace Taylor, the distinctive feature of modern liberal governance with which modern secularism is linked is ‘neither compulsion (force) nor negotiation (consent) but the statecraft that uses “self-discipline” and “participation,” “law” and “economy” as elements of a political strategy’ (Asad, 2003: 3, emphasis in original). ‘The origins of the modern [secular] state are connected to the concern for agreement among “reasonable” men and thus the creation of a margin to which “religion” (and other forms of uncertain belief) properly belong’ (Asad, 2004: 285). In secular societies, secular modes of reasoning and argumentation are seen as the embodiment of a universal reason, and religious believers are expected to wear their beliefs lightly (cf. Asad, 2006b: 515). Secularism is not so much about a differentiation between religious and secular spheres or about the generation of toleration as it is about the sovereign power of the modern nation-state (cf. p. 508). There are strong echoes of Michel Foucault’s interpretation of modern ‘governmentality’ here. The modern nation-state requires particular subjects of law, geared towards a modern autonomous life and enmeshed in a market economy (Asad, 2003: 253). The identity of this subject is made up of ‘layers of educated emotions’ (Asad, 2006b: 514). The secular state forms secular citizens who are, alas, not necessarily ‘irreligious’ (p. 514). Violence is ‘embedded’ in the very concept of liberty ‘at the heart of liberal doctrine’, and in a liberal secular society ‘the morally autonomous individual has the right to choose his own life, and the sovereign state has the right to use violence in defence of the conditions for the good life’ (Asad, 2007: 59). Asad is keenly attuned to the mechanisms of exclusion and to the structures of inequality in modern nation-states and finds problematic Taylor’s and other republicans’ positing of the nation as a community of sentiment rather than the state as a structure of law (Asad, 2006b: 495). The call for “unity” and “integration” may be seen as part of the problem of centralized state control (p. 496). Asad is not alone in this criticism. It is a crucial criticism to make, for if the nation’s ‘unity’ is seen as an affective one, than those who do not share this affective bond are bound to be seen as outsiders to the nation (Chipkin, 2007: 210). In a contemporary world of ‘multiple belongings’ and ‘porous boundaries’, secularism as a political doctrine of the state ‘devised for the purpose of dealing with state unity’ faces problems in acknowledging the fact that people may identify with victims in other countries as ‘their own’ (Asad, 2006b: 511). And it is of course Islam which in contemporary Europe has become ‘the stranger within’ (p. 495) or the ‘other of secularism’ (Hurd, 2008: 8). In other words, where secularism for Taylor represents the largely benevolent result of reforms within Latin Christendom, to which Christians and secular humanists are both inheritors (Taylor, 2007: 675), and has the potential of offering a required minimal common denominator between the religious and the non-religious alike, for Asad secularism is part of a modern project pursued by people in power (Asad, 2003: 13) and of the historical ‘European wish to make the world in its own image’ (Asad, 1993a: 12). It is precisely the asymmetry of power between the secular state and what it defines as ‘religion’ that articulates the sovereign power of the state (cf. Asad, 2006b: 505). Asad has noted that ‘the sovereign state cannot (never could) contain all the practices, relations, and loyalties of its citizens’ (Asad, 2003: 179). Casanova (2006: 21) has nevertheless alleged that Asad all too easily assigns to the secular the power to circumscribe the social and political space within which the religious may operate.
Asad has, however, been careful to point out that he regards secularism as being in need of ‘refashioning, not elimination’ and wants to ‘preserve secularism’s virtues without clinging to its vices’ (Asad, 2001: 147). In other words, there are limits to Asad’s attempt to un-think secularism and the secular. But this beggs the question as to precisely how Asad wants to preserve secularism’s virtues, when any attempts at locating commonalities and possible points of convergence between Islamic and non-Islamic traditions in his own work ultimately seem to dissolve into assertions of identitarian and religious difference (Brittain, 2005: 154).

THE PLACE OF EUROPE

Asad’s empirical material on secularism is by virtue of his own admission drawn almost exclusively from West European history. Except for one essay on ‘Reconfiguration of Law and Ethics in Colonial Egypt’ in Formations of the Secular, Asad’s case material concerning secularism and the secular is exclusively European. It is therefore somewhat paradoxical that Asad should have faulted Michel Foucault for displaying a lack of interest in ‘the history of the non-Western world’ and ‘the West’s encounter with that heterogeneous world’ (Asad in Mahmood, 1996: 3). One may think of several reasons for this. For Asad, Europe, or its extension, ‘Euro-America’, is the privileged site for the exploration of non-European experiences with secularism. The reason for this is, in Asad’s own words, that European history has had profound consequences for the ways in which ‘the doctrine of secularism has been conceived and implemented in the rest of the modernizing world’ (Asad, 2003: 25). It is, as Asad noted in Genealogies of Religion, through European pasts that ‘universal history has been constructed’ – so much so that non-Westerners who ‘seek to understand their local histories must also inquire into Europe’s past’ (Asad, 1993a: 200). For Western political, economic, and ideological power ‘unleashed in Enlightenment Europe’ ‘continues to restructure the lives of non-European peoples, often through the agency of non-Europeans themselves’ (p. 229). The binary between the ‘West’ and the ‘non-West’ is of course central to much post-colonial theorizing, and Asad is no exception in this regard. In his introduction to the edited volume Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter (1975), Asad refers to the ‘unequal power encounter which goes back to the emergence of bourgeois Europe’, an encounter which ‘gives the West access to cultural and historical information about the societies it has progressively dominated, and thus not only generates a certain kind of universal understanding, but also re-enforces the inequalities in capacity between the European and non-European worlds (and derivatively, between the Europeanized elites and the “traditional” masses in the Third World)’ (1975: 16). Knowledge and power is, in other words, intimately linked in the domination of non-Western peoples by Western peoples – a contention which demonstrates the profound interconnections between the thought of, for instance, Asad, Frantz Fanon, Edward Said and Michel Foucault. Asad’s genealogy of secularism is nonetheless open to the charge that it has ‘a restricted notion of context’ (Das, 2006: 101), and the ways in which specific societal and political contexts impinged on the formulations of secularism in practice in the colonial encounter. Social anthropologist Veena Das finds fault in Asad’s rendering of the genealogy of secularism in that the German Begriffgeschichte School on which he relies in part has a restricted notion of context, leading to a picture of the secular as a unitary system or a notionally complete totality of legal rules. The binary schemata involving the
West/non-West, the European/non-European world and Westernized/Europeanized elites versus ‘traditional masses’ is one which reappears with regularity in Asad’s later work. In an essay on Islamic public argument in Saudi Arabia in the 1990s, for instance, Asad (1993a) explores the discursive tradition of nasiba (advice) that Saudi ulama (religious leaders) regularly offer to the ruling Saudi family, and distinguishes this tradition from the discursive tradition of criticism of religious (and political) authorities derived from Kant and the Enlightenment in Europe. He also distinguishes this tradition from that exercised by ‘Westernized Saudis’ (Asad, 1993a: 232). The legitimacy of nasiba in the eyes of the rulers, as well as those who resort to it among the ulama, is that it claims to be based explicitly on the shari’a, to which both parties claim to adhere. If Asad had been content to assert that some understandings of Islamic discursive traditions are more valued than others due to their identification with certain carriers and groups (Eickelman, 1987: 20), he could not be faulted for it. But the term ‘Westernized’ which Asad invokes is is not a neutral term in the intellectual lineage of post-colonialism and post-structuralism in which Asad stands. It suggests that there is an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’ to particular traditions, and that what is for analytical purposes defined as being on the inside carries greater ‘legitimacy’ and/or ‘authenticity’.

Asad's usage of this designation would appear to be problematic, in so far as it seems to presuppose that there are ‘authentic’ Saudis who adhere to modes of public argumentation that are legitimate according to ‘traditional’ discursive traditions, and ‘Westernized’ Saudis who do not. It is a surprising turn from an anthropologist who in 1979 had taken fellow anthropologists to task for failing to problematize ‘the whole business of looking for and reproducing the essential meanings of another society’s discourse (its “authentic culture”)’ (Asad, 1979: 623). One would perhaps think that Saudis who do not adhere to the mode of public argumentation required by the tradition of nasiba are for the purposes of anthropological theorizing no less ‘Saudi’ than those who do. The case for such a reading of Asad is further strengthened by his reference to French Muslims who support the French version of secularism (laïcité) as ‘assimilated Muslims’ (Asad, 2006b: 505). For if the figure of an ‘assimilated Muslim’ is to make sense at all, it presupposes the existence of a binary between an ‘assimilated’ and a ‘non-assimilated’ Muslim. If an assimilated Muslim is a European Muslim convinced of the ‘virtues’ of secularism, then the existence of such Muslims outside the context of such binary framings seems problematic.

In an erudite and trenchant critique of the Indian Marxist critic Aijaz Ahmad’s In Theory (1992), published in a special edition of the post-colonial studies journal Public Culture in 1993, Asad argued that ‘the conceptual contrast between a West and a non-West is essential for understanding the account of global transformations’ (Asad, 1993b). Ahmad’s In Theory was a rebuttal of Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978) from a Marxist point of view, and occasioned what Varisco refers to as ‘a post-colonial dressing-down of Ahmad for daring to criticize Said’ (2007: 177). Ahmad argued strongly against the binaries between ‘the West’ and the ‘Third World’ which characterized Said’s work. The problems with Ahmad’s book for Asad related to Ahmad’s retention of classical Marxist concepts such as ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’ in accounting for changes in literary and cultural theories since the late 1960s. Against Ahmad’s classical Marxist conceptualization, Asad argues that a serious understanding of modern capitalist production...
required ‘systematic reference to legislation, litigation, accountancy, insurance, advertising, and taxation’ or, in other words, ‘signifying practices’ (Asad, 1993b: 32). Asad continues with the assertion that

the European project requires not the production of a uniform culture throughout the world but certain shared modalities of legal-moral behaviour, forms of national-political structuration, and rhythms of progressive historicity. It invites or seeks to coerce everyone to become the West – to express their particularities through ‘the West’ as the measure of universality. (Asad, 1993b: 36)

In spite of the many criticisms of the analytical value of such binaries in much post-colonial academic literature,15 the binary of ‘the West’ and ‘the non-West’ has a constitutive status in the work of Asad. To the extent that real people living real lives intrude in his work, it is often as instances illustrating the continued force of this binary. In spite of the stated equivocation with regard to the origins of secularism in Asad’s Formations of the Secular (2003: 25), secularism in Asad’s reading seems to form part of an historical script pertaining to the West, and to the extent that it has been appropriated by the ‘non-West’ it is seen as forming part of ‘Western’ dominance through ‘Westernized’ elites and as constituting a script written by ‘Westerners’. The notion of ‘Westernized elites’ would then seem to account for the development of theories and practices of secularism in, for instance, modern Turkey.16 As in much post-colonial academic literature, non-Western agency ‘dissolves before the terms of colonial power’ (Chipkin, 2007: 37).17

There are (at least) three further charges that may be made with regard to the analytical usage of this binary. Firstly, one may doubt whether European dominance decades after decolonization continues to hold this much explanatory value. Secondly, one may argue that the fact that a phenomenon originates somewhere tells us virtually nothing about how it is appropriated, elaborated and transformed in particular contexts (Chipkin, 2007: 45). Thirdly, one may ask whether globalization and a world which is by virtue of Asad’s (2007: 14) own admission more densely interconnected than ever before has not rendered such macro-level binaries unworkable from an analytical point of view. This is not to argue for the naturalization of structures of inequality implied and constructed in and through globalization (cf. Ferguson, 2006: 47) – only a call for coming to analytical terms with a world in which power and influences are much more complex than it would appear from looking at the world through the prism of European colonialism and its aftermath.

There is a further paradox in Asad’s usage of this binary. For it was Asad who faulted his erstwhile anthropological colleague and ideological nemesis at Oxford, Ernest Gellner, for writing anthropological texts with a lack of Islamic actors who ‘speak and think, rather than behave’ (Asad, 1986: 8). Asad undertook his last ethnographic fieldwork among the Kababish of the Sudan in 1961–6 (Scott, 2006: 248 – published as Asad, 1970) and has largely concentrated on anthropological theory rather than ethnographic practice ever since. Whilst Asad is right to note that the positing of an equivalence between the craft of anthropology and the practice of fieldwork is problematic, and that ethnographic fieldwork can be ‘pseudo-scientific’ (Asad, 2003: 17), there is certainly a case to be made about the lacunae the absence of empirical data generated through ethnographic fieldwork creates in Asad’s own work. For if, in the words of
Sherry B. Ortner, an ethnographic stance implies a commitment to ‘producing understanding through richness, texture and detail, rather than parsimony, refinement, and . . . elegance’, and such a stance is required in order to ‘know and speak and write of the lived worlds inhabited by those who resist (or do not, as the case may be)’ (Ortner, 1995: 188, my emphases), then fulfilling the requirements of a commitment to such a stance may seem to require more actual immersion into the daily lives of ‘Westerners’ and ‘non-Westerners’ than what is on offer in Asad’s work. This does not imply, however, that I think that ‘understanding the place of the secular today’ does not ‘require more than ethnographic fieldwork’ (Asad, 2003: 206). But I would argue that the ‘systematic inquiry into cultural concepts’ (p. 17) or the ‘careful analysis . . . of culturally distinctive concepts and their articulation with one another’ (p. 206) recommended by Asad for the study of the secular is insufficient. If it is the case that ‘one must work through the concepts the people concerned actually use’ (Asad, 2007: 44), then explorations of historical texts by Islamic reformers such as Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida (Asad, 2003), or for that matter Saudi Salafis such as Safar al-Hawali or Al Za‘ayr (Asad, 1993a), will not do in and of themselves, because their concepts are obviously not necessarily the concepts of all ‘the people concerned’. Firstly, the very selection of cases reflects the pre-supposition that one is dealing with ‘culturally distinctive concepts’ of secularism. Secondly, if one retains the notion of the existence of ‘culturally distinctive concepts’ of secularism, one is also forced to enquire about precisely where cultural distinctiveness begins and ends. For instance, how are we to understand ‘the culturally distinctive concept of secularism’ in, say, a young Saudi Muslim female educated at universities in the USA, or for that matter, a young European Muslim male educated at a European university? It would be hard to tell, but their concepts of secularism are likely to be made up from multiple strands, none of which necessarily reflects cultural distinctiveness. To argue for the existence of culturally distinctive concepts of secularism in such a case would be akin to placing people into cultural compartments. Furthermore, such an approach does not open the vistas towards an understanding of the place of the secular in the lives of ordinary people in ‘Western’ as well as ‘non-Western’ worlds – nor towards the complexities, contingencies and contradictions involved. This epistemological problem becomes particularly acute with regard to the anthropological (or other) study of peoples whose lives transcend the boundaries erected by the invocation of binaries such as ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’, ‘religious and secular’ and so forth. One could not think of better illustrations of this than contemporary European Muslims, whose very lives often turn upon a series of practical and pragmatic accommodations with the secular.

**TRADITIONS**

Asad’s work has been an important inspiration for recent ethnographic studies on ethical formations among Muslims, such as those of Mahmood (2005) and Hirschkind (2006). As Silverstein (2003: 499) argues, these studies form part of a critique of models of agency and selfhood derived from liberalism – models that are apparently inapplicable to Islamic contexts. Silverstein contends, however, that these critiques come at the cost of equivocating on the degree of alterity to be ascribed to ‘non-Western’ traditions, including Islamic traditions, and at the cost of construing ethical Muslim selves as being constituted prior to articulation with practices and discourses that are not specifically
Islamic. For Silverstein, it is clear that part of the problem lies in ‘the analytical primacy accorded to the notion of continuity’ in Islamic traditions. Silverstein provides interesting examples from late Ottoman history in order to argue that ‘Westernization’ is an inadequate concept for understanding the reforms that took place in the Ottoman Empire in the relevant period. But since Asad was responsible for introducing the notion of Islamic discursive traditions in the so-called anthropology of Islam, I want to return to the article in which he first outlines how Islamic discursive traditions are to be understood, namely ‘The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam’ (Asad, 1986), and explore how Asad defined the alterity of that tradition vis-à-vis non-Islamic traditions in this and subsequent work.

In this seminal essay, Asad argued that ‘if one wants to write an anthropology of Islam one should begin, as Muslims do, from the concept of a discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Qur’an and the ahadith’ (Asad, 1986: 14). Furthermore, Asad defined an Islamic discursive tradition as ‘simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present’ (p. 14). Central to Asad’s conceptualization of Islamic discursive traditions is ‘orthodoxy’. Orthodoxy in Asad’s usage refers to the centrality of the notion of “the correct model” to which an instituted practice – including ritual – ought to conform, a model conveyed in authoritative formulas in Islamic traditions as in others (Asad, 1986: 15). And orthodoxy ‘is not a mere body of opinion but a distinctive relationship – a relationship of power. Wherever Muslims have the power to regulate, uphold, require, or adjust correct practices, and to condemn, exclude, undermine, or replace incorrect ones, there is the domain of orthodoxy’ (p. 15). An Islamic discursive tradition is ‘a mode of discursive engagement with sacred texts’ (Mahmood, 2005: 115). Asad appears sceptical towards any inclination to working with substantial definitions of religion. However, he does not argue for a completely relativistic definition of Islamic discursive traditions. The centrality accorded to foundational Islamic texts such as the Qur’an and the ahadith, as well as the reference to orthodoxy, is designed to distance Asad’s concept from nominalistic and universalistic understandings of Islam. For Asad, it is clear that ‘not everything Muslims say and do belong to an Islamic discursive tradition’ (Asad, 1986: 14). For in actual fact, one of the targets of Asad’s criticism in the article in question was the anthropologist Abdul Hamid El Zein, who in Asad’s view had suggested that there were diverse forms of Islam which were all ‘equally real’ and that they were all ‘ultimately expressions of underlying unconscious logic’ (Asad, 1986: 2). This suggests that there must be an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’ to any Islamic discursive tradition. Asad’s concept of an Islamic discursive tradition draws heavily upon the work of Alisdair MacIntyre on tradition, and of Michel Foucault on discourse. But where Foucault’s notion of discursive formations focused on contradictions and discontinuities, Asad’s concept of a discursive tradition is essentially about continuity. This is borne out by Asad’s formulation to the effect that

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)

A central problem is how to account for change and rupture in terms of the Asadian concept of an Islamic discursive tradition (cf. Schielke, 2006: 243). For even though Asad in later writings has made it clear that he does not refer to tradition in the sense of ‘the passing on of an unchanging substance in homogeneous time’ and that in tradition ‘the “present” is always at the centre’ (2003: 222), Asad does not offer any clear guidelines towards understanding how change and rupture occur within Islamic discursive traditions, and what affects it. It is therefore understandable that Asad should have profound misgivings about the emphasis on recovering the agency of colonial subjects in the subaltern studies school in the 1990s (cf. Mahmood, 1995, where he refers to the contemporary ‘intoxication with agency’ in social science as a mere ‘product of liberal individualism’). For agency and its linkage with rupture and change poses a problem to Asad’s model of a discursive tradition which, to my mind, remains unresolved. Furthermore, Peter (2006: 110) has argued that Asad’s concept of an Islamic discursive tradition does not say anything about the specific ways in which Islamic discursive traditions are tied to certain forms of religious authority. In Asad’s 1986 essay, he chides the anthropologist Michael J. Fischer (1980) for not going beyond ‘drawing parallels’ and attempting a ‘systematic exploration of differences’ between Islamic and non-Islamic traditions (Asad, 1986: 4). This interest in the difference or alterity (Keesing, 1989) of Islamic discursive traditions is a recurrent theme in Asad’s oeuvre. In his essay on Islamic public argument in Saudi Arabia in Genealogies of Religion, Asad calls upon anthropologists to ‘consider each tradition in [on?] its own terms’ (Asad, 1993a: 200); in an interview with Nermeen Shaikh in 2002, he declares that Islamic traditions ought to lead us to question some of the liberal categories in themselves (cf. Shaikh, 2002); and in his essay on legal reform in colonial Egypt in Formations of the Secular he takes an Egyptian legal scholar to task for his apparent ‘denial of difference’ (Asad, 2003: 213–14) in suggesting that Egyptian law was not merely a colonial import. The problem here is not so much the usage to which the underlying notions of alterity and incommensurability may be put,21 but the very particular directions that this may encourage anthropological research to take, and what it does to the required focus on the many Muslims and non-Muslim informants who inhabit the interstices between such traditions. Social anthropologists have a responsibility to explore both difference and similarity – but if we are only to seek difference, then difference is certainly what we shall find.

THE VIOLENCE OF THE SECULAR

Asad has remarked that he sees ‘nothing [as] less plausible than the claim that secularism is an essential means of avoiding destructive conflict and establishing peace in the modern world’ (Asad, 2006b: 509). Asad has also written that ‘it should not be forgotten that we owe the most terrible examples of coercion in modern times to secular totalitarian regimes – Nazism and Stalinism . . . it must be said that the ruthlessness of secular practice yields nothing to the ferocity of the religious’ (Asad, 1993: 236). There are certainly shifting registers in Asad’s style of writing, from the coolly analytical to the temperamentally polemical. The statements in question ought to be read as polemical
statements. But to what extent, and under which analytic pre-conditions, do they actually accord with the historical record?

First, however, we should note that the assertions that Asad here makes depend on a relatively clear-cut analytical distinction between the ‘secular’ and the ‘religious’, which stands in an ambiguous relationship with the assertion of the ‘secular’ and the ‘religious’ as being historically contingent and overlapping with one another found elsewhere in his work (cf. Asad, 2003: 25). Contrary to common descriptions, Asad asserts that the sacred is not only an essential part of ‘religion’ but also of ‘the secular’. This also means that liberalism has its own secular redemptive myths, which are not to be confused with the redemptive myth of Christianity (p. 26). Asad sees, for instance, human rights as an expression of such secular redemptive myths (pp. 127–58). Modern human rights are inflections of a specifically ‘Judeo-Christian’ claim to universality (Asad, 2000: 2), which privileges the state’s norm-producing function and enables the modern state to ‘use human rights against its citizens’ (Asad, 2003: 6–7).22 Central to human rights is a restriction on the distribution of pain effected by secular agency.

Secular agency is confronted with having to change a particular distribution of pain, and while in that capacity it tries to curb the inhuman excesses of what it identifies as ‘religion’, it allows other cruelties that can be justified by a secular utility and a secular dream of happiness. It replaces patterns of pre-modern pain and punishment with those that are peculiarly its own. (Asad, 2006b: 508, emphasis in original)

As a case in point, Asad refers to the ‘abhorrence’ with which ‘Euro-Americans’ regard, for instance, female circumcision.23 This abhorrence, Asad argues, is causally linked to ‘Western’ conceptualizations of bodily integrity, and the view that individuals – and women in particular – have a right to sexual pleasure as part of their rights as humans (Asad, 2003: 149).24 In a footnote to an essay on the French Stasi Commission report and its approach to the issue of what it deemed to be religious symbols in French public schools, Asad writes the following:

The Stasi report cites various international court judgements in support of its argument that the right to religious expression is always subject to certain conditions. . . . My point here is not that this right – or any other – should be absolute and unlimited; it is simply that a right cannot be inalienable if it is subject (for whatever reason) to the superior power of the state’s legal institutions to define and to limit. To take away a right in part or in whole on the grounds of utility (including public order) or morality means that it is alienable. (Asad, 2006b: 765, ftn. 24)

The preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR, 1948) as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1975) both refer to the ‘inalienable rights of all members of the human family’. Freedom of religion undoubtedly forms part of the ‘inalienable rights’ to which UNDHR and ICCPR refer. But the framework which gives meaning to the concept of ‘inalienable rights’ implies that these are rights that individuals have vis-à-vis states. In principle, then, these are ‘inalienable rights’ only to the extent that the individuals in question belong to states that have signed and ratified these declarations and conventions. It is therefore, pace
Asad, in the very nature of these ‘inalienable rights’ that they are ‘subject to the state’s legal definitions to define and limit’. And there is, of course, virtually no state in existence in the world which does not in some way or another define and limit the exercise of freedom of religion.  

Asad asserts that he wants to ‘get away from the idea that the secular is a mask for religion, that secular political practices often simulate religious ones’ (2003: 26). This is a crucial point on which the credulity of Asad’s assessment of secularism’s historical record in promoting peace and avoiding violence hinges. For here, Asad goes against the grain of much theorizing about the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. Philosopher John Gray introduces his book *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (2007) with the assertion that ‘modern politics is a chapter in the history of religion’ (p. 1), and goes on to assert that modern political religions such as Nazism and Soviet Bolshevism (p. 6) are modern and secular articulations of early Christian apocalyptic and millenarian beliefs in redemption of history through the actions of God in the first version and through actions of humans in the second version. This notion has a fairly long lineage in 20th-century post-Second World War European intellectual thought and has been articulated by, for instance, Karl Löwith with regard to Nazism (Löwith, 1949) and Leszek Kolakowski with regard to Marxism (Kolakowski, 2005). Hans Blumenberg distinguished between various forms of transpositions of ideas from a religious to a secular context (which Gray does not), but can also be read as belonging to the same intellectual lineage of thought as Löwith and Kolakowski.  

Few anthropologists would consider themselves sufficiently competent to settle the issue as to whether modern totalitarian movements in 20th-century Europe were an expression of ‘secular’ or ‘religious’ practice, or both. There can be little doubt that modern utopian ‘Western’ totalitarian experiments with social and political reform unleashed violence on a terrifying scale in the 20th century. But an historian might perhaps want to know whether it is ‘the secular’ as such which explains its alleged ‘ferocity’, or the specific social and political contexts and the nature of the totalitarian regimes in which ‘secular’ visions have been imposed. More so, since Asad takes issue with the attribution of violence to religious motives by positing that in order ‘to identify a (religious) motive for violence one must have a theory of motives that deals with concepts of character and dispositions, inwardness and visibility, the thought and the unthought’ (Asad, 2003: 11). But then, equally, the same must in fact be the case for the violence that Asad attributes to ‘secular’ motives. Does this depend on the existence of a ‘secular subject’ (Warner, 2008), and what does this mean, given that Asad later asserted that it was ‘European Christians’ who perpetrated the genocide against the Jews in the period between 1933 and 1945 (Asad, 2007: 24)? It is not a matter of great dispute that modern totalitarian regimes in 20th-century Europe, such as Nazism and Bolshevism, drew heavily and consistently on imaginaries and symbols of a quasi-religious nature, and were implemented in social and political contexts in which the population it mobilized were by all accounts quite religious. In other words, to trace the brutalities of the Shoah back to the Enlightenment, as has been commonplace after Zygmunt Bauman’s seminal study (Bauman, 1989), risks ignoring the significance of German Romanticism (‘a formidable Counter-Enlightenment in itself’, according to Appiah, 2005: 119) in German Nazism. Finally, for a balanced assessment of secularism’s claim to being an essential means of avoiding destructive conflict and establishing peace in the
modern world, one must go beyond citing the examples of Nazism and Bolshevism as being somehow representative of the secular’s potential for violence and coercion. European secularism after the Second World War, as embodied in the legal transnationalism of the European Union (EU), has for all its shortcomings by many accounts in fact contributed to the relative absence of wars involving European democracies. The USA, one of many embodiments of modern secularism, has not seen war or large-scale conflicts on its own territory since the Civil War in the 1860s. Post-colonial democracies such as South Africa and India adopted their own varieties of secularism in the aftermath of horrendous civil strife: 20,000 South Africans are estimated to have been killed in political violence between ANC and Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) supporters in the period 1990 to 1994, and thousands were killed in the course of the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1980s. Except for the fact that the apartheid state, its laws and policies, was often inspired by particular readings of Dutch Reformed Christianity, the violence unleashed under and in the aftermath of it had little to do with religious fractures, but it would be difficult to argue that there has been more destructive conflict under a liberal and secular post-apartheid regime in South Africa, and lesser freedoms for religious minorities, than under apartheid. Violence during the partition of India resulted in the uprooting of some 12.5 million (Metcalf and Metcalf, 2002: 219), and the killing of an estimated 500,000 to 1 million people. It is of course impossible to tell what the implications of South African and Indian post-colonial states without secularism might have been, since this is to engage in counter-factual history, but it may be noted that secularism has strong defenders among Muslims in both countries, who see the principles embodied in it as the only possible guarantee against domination and curtailment of religious freedom by non-Muslim majorities. Chatterjee (2006) notes, for instance, that there has been an absence of communal strife under the rule of the Left Front in West Bengal, India, for 25 years, and this in a province with a large Muslim population and with a long history of communal conflict up to the 1960s (Chatterjee, 2006: 67). In West Bengal, the (secular) Left has consistently won the greater part of the Muslim vote. In developments in West Bengal, Chatterjee sees the potential, if not the actuality, of a ‘different modality of secular politics’ in spite of not having any notion of an ‘innate secularism’ among Bengalis, whether Muslim or Hindu (p. 74). The historical record of secularisms as regards violence is certainly mixed, but so is it as far as the alternatives are concerned. Might it be that categories such as the ‘secular’ and the ‘religious’ have a limited explanatory potential with regard to violence in and of themselves, that there are no ‘totally convincing answers to these questions, which we face in common, whatever our metaphysical or religious beliefs’ (Taylor, 2007: 691)?

THE ALTERNATIVES

One of many reasons for the highly charged debate on secularism and secularization in the ‘Muslim’ world is the global asymmetries of power with which the concept is commonly associated (cf. Tayob, 2005), and the positing of secularism as an articulation of ‘Western’ ‘irreligiosity’ in modern Islamist thought (cf. Masud, 2005).

A nascent body of work in anthropology exploring the lives of Muslims in different social and political contexts has attempted to transcend some of the binaries of ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’, ‘Muslim’ and ‘non-Muslim’, ‘the secular’ and ‘the religious’ on which Asad’s thought depends. A case in point is the work of anthropologist Magnus Marsden,
whose intriguing exploration of the everyday lives of Muslims in the Chitral region of Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) attempts to challenge 'any lingering notion in the anthropological study of Muslim societies that the daily thought and actions of Muslims is best understood in terms of what falls within the domain of the Islamic and what lies in the realm of “practical reason”' (Marsden, 2005: 53), and the contention that 'revivalist' Islam is the most powerful dimension of Muslim thought and identity in the modern world' (p. 9).32 Both within and beyond anthropological circles, the ‘Muslim world’ ‘is still measured by the “exceptionalist” yardstick of which religiocentrism is the core’ (Bayat, 2007: 3). But what, then, of Muslims whose dreams and aspirations are ‘neither religious nor secular’ (Dabashi, 2007: 246)? Anthropologist Benjamin Soares has, in collaboration with René Otayek, introduced the concept of an ‘islam mondain’, referring to ‘ways of being Muslim that exist in secular societies and spheres, without necessarily being secular’ (Soares and Otayek, 2007: 17). There is in these attempts to think through the implications of Muslim lives in contexts that are neither describable in terms of nor reducible to ‘Western’ or ‘non-Western’, ‘religious’ or ‘secular’, a potential to effect a rupture with understandings of what the anthropology of Islam and the ethnography of Muslim lives in secular contexts is and ought to be about which has dominated anthropological thought for a number of years. It is a rupture to be welcomed. But it is also a reflection of the importance of the work of Talal Asad that such a rupture cannot avoid engagement with his seminal texts concerning the anthropology of Islam and secularism.

One of the greatest challenges for anthropology in the years to come is to conceptualize the transformations that Muslims living in ‘Western’ secular contexts are experiencing. This requires a profound re-thinking of the categories and habits of thought which surround the ethnographic study of Muslims living in these contexts. For these are not necessarily Muslims who inhabit and embody the cultural and religious compartments to which they are so often assigned. There are multiple ways of being Muslim in a modern and secular world, and most of these Muslims, particularly the young among them, inhabit the interstices between the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’ and engage in practical and pragmatic acts of accommodation to, contestation of, or resistance to the secular worlds and frameworks in the contexts in which they live. Whilst the term ‘cognitive contamination’ (Berger, 2006: 14) may not represent an accurate description of what transpires in these Muslims’ engagement with the secular (for it suggests, again, that there is a pure and un-adulterated way of being Muslim), it has the value of capturing the fact that these Muslims are affected by the social and political worlds in which they live in profound ways. They are ‘entangled in the secular logic of the state’ (Tripp, 2006: 8), but it would amount to traducing the ways in which they are entangled in it to suggest that this entanglement reflects a mere ‘assimilation’ or ‘inauthenticity’. The Asadian approach is in many respects quite state-centric, rests on a ‘Western’–‘non-Western’ binary, and may therefore blind us to the agency at work in many European Muslims’ engagement with the secular. An anthropology of the secular as a vernacular practice has to explore and understand the concepts and practices of secularism and the secular that these Muslims bring to the table – whether these concepts are based on notions of convergence or incommensurability between what is defined as ‘Islamic’, the secular and secularism. The secular is an analogue, rather than a digital concept: societies – and individuals for that matter – may be more
or less secular, but cannot be either ‘secular’ or ‘religious’. It is only in this manner that anthropology can contribute to contemporary Muslims being seen as something more than secularism’s ‘other’.

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Notes
1 For some contributions see Bakhle (2008); Berlinerblau (2005); Bhargava (1999); Bilgrami (1999, 2004); Connolly (1999); Habermas (2008); Jakobsen and Pellegrini (2008); Needham and Rajan (2007); Norris and Inglehart (2004); Masud (2005); Mufti (1995); Roy (2007); Salvatore (2005, 2006); Taylor (1999, 2007); Téjani (2007); Yared (2002); and Zubaida (2005).
3 I follow Jakobsen and Pellegrini (2008: 7) in referring to secularisms in the plural and in order to underline that formulations of secularism vary greatly in and between societal and cultural contexts. Whilst Asad is very clear about the existence of different and variegated forms of secularism (cf. for example Asad, 2006b: 507), he nonetheless retains the established convention of referring to the phenomenon in the singular. For Asad, national differences in the way secularism is understood in Europe articulate ‘family differences’ (cf. Asad, 2003: 208).
4 I suggest, therefore, that Wilson’s conclusion to the effect that ‘to say [with reference to Asad] that secularism originates in the history of Western Europe is nonsensical’ (Wilson, 2006: 199) is problematic.
5 In the work of Asad’s former student and close associate Saba Mahmood, this is taken one step further: secular liberalism for her ‘defines, in effect, something like a form of life’ (Mahmood, 2005: 191). It needs to be noted here that though secularism and liberalism are connected in ‘Western’ imaginaries, ‘neither is entirely reducible to the other’ (cf. Connolly, 1999: 10), and that ‘secularism is not dependent on liberalism, since there can be perfectly illiberal forms of secularism’ (Bilgrami, 2004: 173).
7 Wendy Brown has taken this claim one step further, and argues that ‘secularism is an instrument of empire’ (Brown, 2007). This begs the question as to whether secularism was and is by virtue of historical necessity, or contingency, an instrument of empire. Post-Ottoman Turkey’s decreed imitation of Western secularism under Atatürk was not the result of Western imperialism (cf. Pamuk, 2008), nor did this appear to be the case in the context of post-colonial India (cf. Sen, 2005). But Brown’s notion of imperialism appears to refer primarily to contemporary neoliberalism (‘one of the key imperial forces of our time’) rather than to specific historical instances of imperialism. Whilst concurring in principle with Brown, Gourgouris argues that the challenge is to understand how ‘secularism can work against empire’ (Gourgouris, 2008: 439).
8 This is in actual fact a verbatim but unattributed citation from William Connolly’s *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Connolly, 1999). Connolly writes in Chapter 1 of his book that ‘Secularism needs refashioning, not elimination’ (1999: 19).


10 In an article from 1985, Said mentioned Asad’s work on anthropology and colonialism as a pre-cursor for his own work on Orientalism. Asad (1980) offered a laudatory review of Said’s *Orientalism*.

11 For Asad’s response to this particular critique, cf. Asad (2006).

12 As noted by Aziz al-Azmeh, the notion of an Islamic authenticity is also central to Islamist discourse, and leads to an historiographic practice which classifies every historical event according to categories such as ‘internal’ and ‘external’, ‘authentic’ and ‘imported’ (Al-Azmeh, 1993: 83).

13 I thank Dr Frank W. Peter, from whose unpublished paper on Asad I have drawn this point.


15 Cf. Varisco (2007) for a particularly insightful critique of the binaries characterizing the late Edward Said’s work on Orientalism.


17 Chipkin, writing about post-colonial South Africa, directs his criticism at two prominent post-colonial African academics, namely Mahmood Mamdani (1996 in particular) and Achille Mbembe (2001 in particular). But the critique is to my mind no less relevant in this case.

18 Varisco (2005: 146–7) has suggested that Asad here misreads El-Zein, and that there is less disagreement between the two of them than what Asad implied.

19 As noted by Mahmood (2005: 115).

20 In ‘The Archaeology of Knowledge’ (Foucault, 1972: 155–60).

21 Pecora contends that Asad in the end ‘must implicitly accept some of the most unyielding and reductive accounts of the difference between a secularized West and a religious non-West, despite his claim to keep these boundaries open’ (Pecora, 2006: 42). Reductive intellectual accounts of alleged (and real) differences between ‘Islamic’ and ‘Western’ traditions have of course been central to right-wing political movements in both Europe and the USA in the last decades.

22 From a human rights perspective, one could be forgiven for thinking that states simply ignoring the human rights obligations which flow from human rights treaties and conventions is a much greater problem than states using them against their own citizens, but this is a moot point. Asad’s critique is directed against the power assigned to modern states by human rights.

23 Female circumcision is the term generally preferred by anthropologists. UN agencies and some NGOs prefer the much more normatively loaded term female genital mutilation or cutting (FGM/C).

24 Like Pecora (2006: 43), I find Asad’s positing of this as peculiar to ‘Western’ conceptions of bodily integrity unconvincing.
I would like to thank Prof. Njål Høstmælingen and Assoc. Prof. Tore Lindholm at the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights in Oslo, Norway, for useful clarifications on this point.

An important impetus for this interpretation was provided by the British historian Norman Cohn's study of revolutionary millenarians and mystical anarchists of the middle ages, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957).

In a review of a re-issue of Leszek Kołakowski's *Main Currents of Marxism* (2005), historian Tony Judt (2006) similarly argued that ‘political Marxism was above all a secular religion’.

See Bull (2007) for a critical review of Gray's ideas on this.

In the context of analysing Muslim suicide bombing, Asad rightly notes that ‘the open-endedness of motive inevitably leaves considerable scope for interpretation’ (Asad, 2007: 41).

Cf. Afary and Anderson (2006: 56) on German National Socialists’ appropriation of one of the oldest Christian passion plays in Europe at Obergammerau in the Bavarian Alps in order to disseminate their anti-Semitism.

India has, for instance, the NGO Muslims for Secular Democracy, in which the Shia Ismaili dissenter Ali Asghar Engineer has a central role. See http://www.mfsd.org/


References


SINDRE BANGSTAD holds a cand.polit. degree in social anthropology from the University of Bergen, Norway, and a PhD from Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands. His research focuses on Muslims in post-apartheid Cape Town, South Africa. Address: Social Welfare Research Centre, Faculty of Social Sciences, Oslo University College, PO Box 4, St Olavs Plass, N-0130 Oslo, Norway. [email: sindre.bangstad@sam.hio.no or s.bangstad@gmail.com]