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

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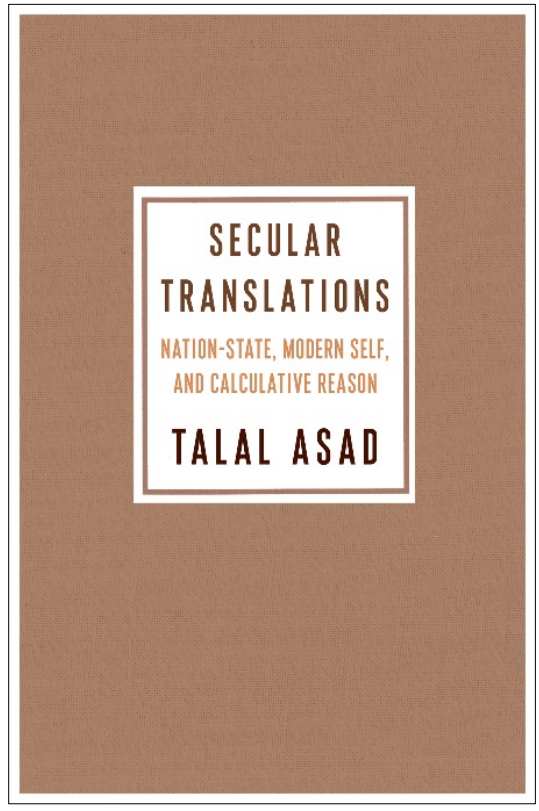

Those who are familiar with Talal Asad's works, in particular *Genealogies of Religion* (1993) and *Formations of the Secular* (2003), will not be surprised that this book too deals with "the idea of the secular" (1). In his previous works, Asad has dealt with the secular by offering genealogical critiques of the binary between the religious and the secular to show that the category "religion" is in fact a construction of the secular itself and the structures it is part of, i.e., colonialism, nation-state, and modernity at large. However, this time, while keeping and developing this line of thought, Asad approaches the issue "indirectly" in terms of translation and language, and he has a new interlocutor: Ludwig Wittgenstein, an early twentieth-century philosopher, whose writings have influenced a wide variety of thought and are currently enjoying an anthropological renaissance. This new Wittgensteinian turn in anthropology fundamentally draws upon the posthumously published work *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), rather than earlier *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) where language is mainly discussed from a logico-metaphysical standpoint in terms of its referentiality and verifiability.

There are two crucial ideas in *Philosophical Investigations* that are key to this turn as well as Asad's work. The first is what is usually called "language games": using language is similar to playing a game. Just like playing a game, in using and learning a language, one follows the rules shaped by a

given context of language use or speaking. Uttering a word or a statement might mean different things in different contexts. Thus, attempts to fix the meaning and reference of a statement and to coin universal concepts miss the everyday, ordinary, "anthropological," and fugitive nature of language. This is also connected to the idea that universal definitions are always informed by specific, historical circumstances and, in turn, shape specific forms of life. This is a familiar Asadian theme that has been previously conveyed through Foucauldian notions of genealogy and power/knowledge in a different way: universal definitions (universal knowledge claims) are, in fact, produced by historical power relations and, in turn, serve to produce power relations. The second idea from *Investigations* is that speaking a language is part of a "form of life" (2). This means not only that access to a certain language is access to a form of life but also that language itself forms life. It is not a means one uses to make sense of the world, but rather an essential part of the world. That is why Asad suggests that he is not interested in what the subject does with language but what language does with the subject.

The book critiques liberal secular understandings of language and translation, which assume that one has direct access to truth through language that is supposed to be a transparent, universal means of communication. In this sense, translation is simply a cognitive activity of interpretation and "a move from one set of signs to another" (65). Asad challenges this secular understanding of translation on two counts throughout the book. First, drawing upon Walter Benjamin's notion of translation, he suggests that translation is a challenge both to the receiving language as well as the original. Second, he shows that translation might not be a purely cognitive activity, but there are ways in which "the sign [is] translated into the sensible body through the cultivation of sensibilities" (5).

The book consists of three long chapters, which Asad initially delivered as Ruth Benedict Lectures at Columbia University in April 2017, plus a short introduction and epilogue. The three main chapters might also be seen as three different essays that the issue of translation and language cuts across. In the first chapter "Secular Equality and Religious Language," Asad challenges two kinds of arguments: (i) against those who point to secularism as a radical break from "religion," he shows the religious, Christian roots of secularism; (ii) against those who see liberal secular equality as a Christian gift to the world, he shows how it is far from being a gift. In the first half of the chapter, he critiques liberal secular equality by pointing to different cases where it is either founded on inequality or produces inequalities. This part is perhaps the most familiar within Asad's oeuvre. He then starts a protracted critique of Habermasian liberal post-secularism. According to Habermas, when believers want to participate in the public sphere, their language must be translated (or *translatable*) into the secular, rational, universal language of the public sphere, where meaningful communication takes place equally between different individuals. This is what Asad terms "secular translation," a translation from the religious (particular and obscure) to the secular (universal and clear) (43–44).

In Habermas's accounts of public sphere and communicative action, there is no place for "pre-liberal" or "non-liberal" religions, even for inspiration (46). For him, a secularization that is not destructive could be, and historically was, possible only in the West (47). Obviously, during this secularization and making of the modern state, a "religion" (Christianity in this case) is not simply translated but it is first universally defined as "religion." Islam is untranslatable because it has not been able to adjust to modernity, as Habermasian accounts implicitly assume, because his theory is normatively grounded in a Western liberal secular order, which presupposes the "rationality," "autonomy," and "transparency" of individuals, that has been defined against the tradition-bound, communal, and untranslatable/opaque Islamic selves. Asad suggests that there is no place in this understanding for

"indeterminateness, opaqueness, an evocation of the past, and the impossibility of understanding some discourse without far-reaching shifts in the way that one lives and feels and thinks" (49). For Asad, à la Benjamin, translation must change both the source language and the receiving language—an impossibility in Habermas's secular translation where a language is simply made intelligible to another one (51). This is, of course, possible only when that language has inherent intelligibility.

In the final parts of the chapter, Asad turns to the headscarf debates in France in early 2000s. He points out how both those who defended wearing headscarf as a right and those who supported its ban in public spaces treated the headscarf as a sign. For the defenders, it was a sign of affirming and embracing an identity while for the latter, it was a sign of religious suppression (53). Then, the headscarf's "real meaning" had to be deciphered, interpreted, and translated into the language of the public sphere. Yet it was never thought of as something that Muslim women inhabited as part of orientation, as a way of living. Rather, it was either interpreted as a sign of their desire to show identity or a sign of women's repression by their husbands and fathers. Seeing translation this way assumes an irreconcilable distinction between what one publicly practices and one's "real" motivation behind embracing these practices that others cannot see, which necessitates the interpretation of signs (of behavior). Also, seeing the headscarf as a sign of inequality in either case, this discussion is telling about the notion of agency guiding the liberal secular understanding. In this understanding, agents are active individuals who are exercising their own will freely. This is the precondition of equality. In reaction, Asad recalls his earlier genealogy of monastic discipline from *Genealogies of Religion* (1993). This discipline explicitly aimed to create a "will to obey" through a program of communal living. The Christian monk is thus not someone who submits to another's will because of fear or forced dependence, or someone who lost his will. He is a person who sees and practices obedience as a virtue and this requires setting aside the idea of an autonomous agent (54).

In the second chapter, "Translation and the Sensible Body," Asad takes up the question of the Qur'an's untranslatability and the idea of translation of the text into what he calls "the sensible body" (55). This seems to be what is found in Islam as discursive tradition. There is a fundamental secular, liberal attitude toward the fact that the Qur'an is not translated into the language of the praying subject during the prayer, underlying the arguments that exclude Islam from "modernity": if you do not know what a text says, which you can if you are allowed to read it in your own language, what is the point of reading it and what do "they" try to hide from you by not letting you understand it? Asad suggests that this is a question that relies on the unquestioned conviction that "understanding discourse always requires that it be abstracted," which belongs to "a particular language ideology according to which a message can always be separated from its medium […] and the *act* of recitation [is] considered identical to the sheer presence of the *text*" (61).

This language ideology is what Asad criticizes throughout the book, which, he suggests, misses the entire point of Islam and the language itself. He then goes on to point out some ways of thinking about the translation of the Qur'anic language as a translation to the sensible human body, highlighting, once more, that language is not only what we do with it but also "what it does *to us* and *in us*" (64, italics in the original). To account for this, he provides examples from Islamic tradition. He first cites Hanbalis—one of the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*)—and their understanding of reading (*qara'a*, "to read, to recite") the Qur'an as an act of trust (*imān*, "faith") toward a power infinitely greater than human beings and uniquely perfect. "Reciting it is […] the recognition of ideals (mercy, compassion, wisdom, forgiveness, friendship, etc.) […] In being recited, the Qur'an […] [is] an affirmation of those ideals as

originating in God in the presence of God" and cultivating those sensibilities in the praying subject (65). The humbleness reflected in the bodily posture when reciting the Qur'an might be an example. The text, through the act of recitation, translates into a sensible body or bodily sensibilities.

Similarly, for Ghazālī, a highly regarded and debated Muslim philosopher from the eleventh century, there is no single principle for exercises such as fasting, worship, charity, and everyday behavior. And there is no prior self but only certain potentialities and tendencies one can continuously cultivate. Unlike the rational, a priori subject of liberalism, who follows principles of his reason, there is no prior self in Islam. Rather, Islamic selves are cultivated through engagement with tradition and multiple temporalities. Effectively, there is no ahistorical principle guiding the practices of Muslims, but they do refer to pasts, presents, and futures. Asad notes that for Ghazālī, "there is no essential self that can guide itself; there are only potentialities of the soul that can be realized through or against a living tradition" (75). This problematizes the secular notion of will or intention that originates with the authentic self because the prior self, as the cause of all actions, has no need for tradition. But Muslim selves are always in the making through or against the tradition. This is the gist of what Asad calls "discursive tradition."

Asad visits Ibn Taymiyya, a medieval theologian, against universalizing definitions and concepts: "the plausibility of arguments itself depends crucially on the sensibilities, habits, and relationships that articulate individuals—and therefore on what makes sense to them in their lives—and not on a universalizing logic" (94–95). He concludes that language is not separable from "the message" conveyed in it and the message is not simply cognitive. "Don't look for the meaning (of an enunciation) look to its use […] not only to how the subject uses language but also to how language uses him or her" (96). This is what we learn from both Ibn Taymiyya and Wittgenstein. Asad wants to argue that there is no "primary purpose" of language. "The primary purpose of Qur'anic language here is not simply to communicate but to model—with the help of relatives, friends, and teachers—a process in which communication is, of course, an element but an element that cannot be 'abstracted'" (96). Returning to those "who point out that Christian scriptures have, almost uniquely, been translated into numerous languages for liturgical purposes" (as opposed to the untranslatability of Qur'an and its unadaptable nature), Asad suggests that "the scriptures become less and less relevant to how Christians actually live […] it is almost impossible to say what kind of life people are actually living simply on the basis of their declared Christian beliefs" (96–97).

In the third chapter "Masks, Security, and the Language of Numbers," Asad explores the ways in which the concept of a unique, self-governing agent generates uncertainties in reading the intentions of the real self in relation to its public presentation. He discusses how statistical, calculative reason deployed by the state has come to be regarded as an objective translation of social reality and rational instrument for resolving future problems as well as the obstacles inherited from the past. If "culture" is regarded as a space of meaningful signs (and if ritual is just taken to be a presentation to be deciphered) rather than inherited ways of learning how to do things, the life studied by the ethnographer comes to be regarded as a kind of text to be interpreted and translated. Here Asad sustains his earlier critique of the influential American cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz's universal definition of culture and religion, who likens doing ethnography to reading a complicated manuscript (101). This is closely linked to the idea of "native's point of view" foundational for anthropology: the anthropologist participates in the activities of a community until he can see from the native's point of view so that he can later translate this "information" for a purpose foreign to it.

Asad suggests that the interpretation of signs is essential to the modern state and its calculative reason. This partly results from the liberal secular distinction between the public self, or presentation of the self, and the authentic, inner self. This distinction turns modern society into a society of insecurities because everyone wears a "mask" in their public presentation to govern impressions and actions of others. In this sense, we are obsessed with finding and reading signs—signs of treason, betrayal, deception, trickery, abuse, and so on. Interpreting signs into a coherent narrative is a way of reaching the inner self, the true being.

The defining feature of the modern state is that it provides security and protects citizens from external threats and threats inside the national territories. And, precisely for this reason, to sustain its existence, it needs threats, it looks for threats and enemies to the body of the population. This is where Asad's analogy between the paranoiac and the modern state is relevant. Just as there is no contingency for the paranoiac because all signs for him make a coherent narrative, a plot against him, the modern state is also invested in the work of reading signs of treason and threat so that it can identify enemies, deviances, crimes, and violations, even before they emerge (118–121). That is why it often appeals to the techniques of profiling (a process of translation through computation) and actuarial techniques, translating contingency into degrees of probability so that uncertainties can be quantified and manipulated if not completely eliminated (124). Another important move here is that Asad, drawing upon Ian Hacking's notion of "looping effect," suggests that the state does not only classify the existing categories of threat, but also, and much more importantly, it produces them. That is, when one interprets signs of culture and ritual, one does not just interpret an observable practice but creates objects to be observed and interpreted. Again, Wittgensteinian lessons: not everything in life is waiting to be interpreted and there is no direct access to truth by way of interpreting signs.

As Asad indicates in the epilogue, the book's aim is to problematize the thinking of the terms "religion" and "secular" too rigidly. Secular reason has failed to understand failure as an essential part of human life when it takes language/translation as the unfailing medium of transparency in the service of the human (155). He thinks, and this is the underlying argument throughout the book, that the failure to understand failure is a manifestation of anthropocentric arrogance (hubris). The failure of secular reason is its conviction that the world (and language) is entirely knowable and controllable. This "failure comes from the attempt to express the inexpressible, to explain the inexplicable, to do the impossible: poetry, as all good translators recognize, is the impossibility of capturing everything expressed in one language into the words of another" (157). Wittgenstein ended the *Tractatus*, the only work published in his lifetime, by suggesting that where one cannot speak, one must be silent. He was not able to speak for a while after writing this sentence, as he took a long break from philosophy following the publication of the work. Perhaps he reached the limits of what he could say but he placed those limits there. In a sense, he followed his own rules. But there is no private language, as he also suggests himself. Asad reminds us that language is a shared experience, a form of life; it is not a toolkit through which one can only produce a bunch of verifiable statements, a way of direct access to reality, and to know, to grasp, to control that reality. Our contemporary failure is a failure to understand this.

This is an immensely rich text, undoubtedly Asad's tour de force. Hence my extensive summary that misses and risks a lot. And the book left me with two main questions. Are Asad's "discursive traditions" spatial and temporal "outsiders" of modern Western Christianity? To what extent have Islam and other discursive traditions been Christianized/secularized? Put differently, to what extent is modern Islam *still* a discursive tradition? And, is Islam still working with or against multiple temporalities? These ques-

tions abstract and secularly translate Asad's claims. Abstracting, formalizing, and generalizing claims, most of the time ignoring their specific, metaphorical, figural uses, are fundamental tools of criticism in particular, and academic work in general. Once again, the question: is critique secular?—which leads me to my second question: What does Asad do when he translates these "discursive traditions" into an academic work in English, what kinds of elements are *lost in translation*? What are the failures of this *this-worldly* translation that the translation itself fails to recognize? Or, if he does not translate, what does he do, what is his relationship to especially Islam as a discursive tradition? Is he talking "from within"?

This text speaks to many disciplines and fields; Asad's home discipline, cultural anthropology, is one of them. Religious studies is definitely another natural audience of the book, along with Islamic and Middle Eastern studies scholars. Those who are in the fields of language and literature, especially the ones with an interest in translation, will find the book useful, provocative, and perhaps frustrating. As a fairly accessible text, the book directly responds to multiple discussions that are at the intersection of these fields. Thus, it is another immensely rich contribution to these fields as well as critical theory by Asad on the question, critique, and theorization of the secular, translation, language, the modern state, and subjectivity and selfhood. The book is a very significant addition to theory and critique, which are perhaps mistakenly qualified as "post-secular," which Talal Asad and his students, such as the late Saba Mahmood, pioneered.