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Arabic 401: Response 2

Identity & Recognition in Talal Asad's "Formation of the Secular"

"That's why they call it *self-esteem*!"

-comedian Kat Williams, *Pimp Chronicles*, HBO broadcast, 2004

In Formation of the Secular Talal Asad deconstructs the tacit positivist inevitability of modernity in the context of the unraveling borders of European Civilization. Rather than acceptance of a singular constructed history that can be traced forward and backward for linear adaptation to post-colonial citizenship in the European diaspora Asad constructs his analysis in terms of tools and narratives that recall his training as an anthropologist. I found this effort appropriate; the understanding of humans as religious creatures may require "a man from Mars" point of view if it is to be achieved at all.

Prior to publishing Formation of the Secular Asad explained that in it he would not focus upon achieving a more dynamic definition of religion; "religion as a category is constantly being defined within social and historical contexts, and people have specific reasons for defining it one way or another."<sup>1</sup> Who controls definition and for what reasons form his spheres of interest. Social reality for Asad is made of actions not essences. The actions that frame the notion of European Civilization, the conceptual seat of both modernity and religion, include construction of borders, identifying oppositions, excluding and including participants. Anthropologist Asad understands the human world past and present through tool-use. Concepts of modernity and religion as opposites are significant as tools to maintain a sense of certainty in a world whose old political boundaries based upon religious affiliation have shifted and no longer make sense.<sup>2</sup> Through a process of excavation Asad unearths insecurity rooted in an ahistorical conflation of Christianity with European-ness, in post-colonial guilt and fear of retribution.

The first thread that Talal grasps is in comparison of societies all considered European and that yet define the secular and religious spheres distinctly from each other, thus debunking European homogeneity. Secondly, Talal untangles the story of forward motion as a sense of progress that leads linearly toward an irreligious public life and in retrograde revises history so that it neatly culminates in European cultural dominance. This dominance conceives of Muslim culture as a *carrier civilization*. It recognizes that Islam brought some good things to Europe such as scientific knowledge but because of religious orthodoxy lacked the vigor to exploit them itself. This is illustrative of the superiority complex that the offspring of the Christian Crusader labors under, a heavy suit of armor more constraining than a burqa.<sup>3</sup>

So here we are at a moment, again, when Empire has ceased to be a winning proposition. As ever imperialists avoid reminders of membership in what has become a vestigial social hierarchy yet cling to it because of familiarity and benefits to those enfranchised by it. This time-honored insecurity forms the shaky ground for the contemporary fiction of Muslim hostility toward non-Muslims and a perception of Muslims as usurpers of what is felt as a European birthright, to be the sole progeny of Hellenic Civilization.

Talal's treatment of the word "secular" as noun, verb and adjective demonstrates how deeply significant he feels the structure of language is to the process of creating clarity in our social structures. What we call ourselves and each other matters because it demonstrates the value we place on mutual respect. It is the essence and the core action of civilization.

European orthodoxy, whether left or right-wing, is anxious and stymied, according to Asad, by fixation upon exclusivity since it defines itself in terms of oppositions. This produces both a crippling inability to recognize the plurality increasingly characteristic of not merely European, whatever that is, but world life and a profound source of misery as world citizens fight amongst ourselves for the right to be recognized as human.

Since we can't seem to do without a narrative to structure our social interactions it seems clear through Asad's work and others encountered in discussion and reading that we contemporaries need room for fresh stories to guide us. As I am newly and narrowly experienced with explicit Arab culture I can't pronounce that "Arab Literature holds the key", however I have seen a useful narrative design that I believe is Arab in origin. For examples, in *Kalilla wa Dimna* [ ] and *The 1001 Arabian Nights* [ ] the flow of the story is organized as a story within a story wherein the narrator is also a character but one who has some distance from the main story line. This creates a critical space within the flow of the story where the narrator can or could reflect on the action and yet not be excluded from it. This in turn allows the reader critical, reflective space and includes all of us: readers, narrators and writers as self-defining members in the story world. This may be the order of creative space required for us to get beyond denominational religion and on to a vision of inclusive contemporary life.

## **Epilogue**

In the center of the town plaza a woman sat under a tree resting at mid-day. She saw three men standing nearby in the sun arguing. As she drank water, they shouted at each other and waved their arms threateningly, then took turns storming away only to return a few minutes later to say one more angry word. As the sun passed its zenith the argument wore on. " They can only be brothers" she thought wearily and went back to work.

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<sup>1</sup> Asia Source [http://www.asiasource.org/news/special\\_reports/asad.cfm](http://www.asiasource.org/news/special_reports/asad.cfm)

<sup>2</sup> For me, a citizen of the European diaspora but with no active, direct experience of life in "Europe", caution is called for in evaluating Asad's arguments.

<sup>3</sup> Talal emphasized "l'affaire du foulard" the furor that erupted when French Arab schoolgirls were stigmatized for wearing traditional head scarves.

#### Sources

Asad, Talal, "Formation of the Secular", 2004

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