



Talal Asad, *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2018. 225 pp.

Reviewed by: Tugay Taşçı

The book under review is an expanded version of the inaugural Ruth Benedict Lectures delivered at Columbia University in 2017. All chapters and sections present strong depth, as multiple strands of arguments and analyses ranging from incredibly rich disciplines of study are interlaced within and among the various chapters. Given that reducing the author's essays into a single argument are next to impossible, the main ideas of this book have nevertheless been pitched and formed around the phenomenon and theme of translation, for translation cultivates and renders a particular understanding of a self whose genesis is rooted not only in the culture where one grows and learns, but also in a religious tradition whose effects can never be denied as such. Thus secular and religious issues have historically been much contested issues. Seen through the lens of the contemporary world, secular and religious issues are best apprehended and expressed through writing, for writing has secured its place as the dominant channel through which ideas and, moreover, practices flow (pp. 2–5).

Chapter One, "Secular Equality and Religious Language," draws on the Habermasian thesis that the foundational and essential values of secularization and classical liberalism are translations from Christian history (p. 16). Several major European writers have made the same claim long before Hebermas, including figures such as Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, Karl Löwith, Matthew Arnold, and Ernest Renan. This has a particular resonance for Asad for it begs the question "Why is it important for self-described secularists to claim a Christian heritage?" Due to the difficulty of separating the historical traces, Asad moves on to the more

@ MA. Student, İstanbul University. tugaytaschi@hotmail.com

ID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8094-2238>

general principle lying at the heart of the discussion instead of setting out from personal motives: namely what is the effect of making such a claim and how does its project into the larger spectrum. He argues that one can clearly see this claim to have led to the political exclusion of all who cannot claim the heritage that classical liberalists demand. However, for the proponents of this thesis, this demand is not Christianity *per se*, but European Christianity.

Furthermore, Asad not only sees semantic ruptures between the liberal and Christian notions of equality, but also the notions within secular-liberal discourse, including liberty and neutrality. Thus, he goes on to criticize Jürgen Habermas' thesis that the Christian concept of '*imago Dei*' (Man created in the image of God) can be translated into the political domain as all human beings should be treated equally. Asad thinks that Hebermas overlooks the matter and hence ignores an explicit semantic rupture. In order for the idea of man created in the image of God to be given a worldly sense, the idea must first be stripped off the beliefs Protestant theologians emphasize. Furthermore, the idea of equality has been heavily misrepresented, regardless of the idea that power structures like the Church and monarchies had been left in the past. Drawing largely on the available historical data, the fact that inhumane imperial visions of liberalism since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century have created a market capitalism that is as destructive as its previous forms becomes apparent.

Moving forward, Asad finds Hebermas' proposal that religious discourse had been included in the public domain through translation in order to inspire and strengthen moral commitments in politics to be incompatible. This does not quite square with the paradigm due to the approach of religious language being secondary to the liberal language; religious language is the one that needs to be translated into another epistemological form rather than the form being translated into. Therefore neither equality nor an amalgamation is sought. As Asad quotes, Walter Benjamin once observed in a passage that "Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue."

The second essay, "Translation and the Sensible Body," is a discussion of Lamin Sanneh's ideas on Christianity's abandonment of its liturgical language and Islam's insistence on the untranslatability of Arabic. It brings an interesting episode to the table, a debate dating back to medieval theologians that centers on

the secular conceptualization of language where the ability of separating between message and medium is assumed, hence paving the way for the secular project, which Islam is considered as an obstacle due to its very same insistence on the inseparability of the message from the medium. Because Scripture in a sense does translate, in liturgical acts; scripture gets translated into the 'sensible human body', and we gain some insight into how language acts in and upon us. This idea is beautifully demonstrated by Rudolph Ware's work *The Walking Qur'an: Islamic Education, Embodied Knowledge, and History in West Africa* (2014). Then, how should one consider the translation of Qur'anic language to the sensible human body? For language is not just what we do with it, as J. L. Austin famously argued in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), but also what it does to us and within us. Making a proper translation of sacred texts that not only provides meaning but also a sense of physical unity between the message and its recipient is surely incredibly difficult if not impossible. Taken further in detail, liturgical language has the performative and transformative abilities the believer counts on. Language within the boundaries of the discursive tradition mediates divinity to the believer's body (p. 68). In this way, Asad attributes an ethical formation to recitation, as the reciter engages not only with the verbal pronunciation of sacred text but also with the physical dimensions of that particular text that creates an external pattern of behavior within the reciter.

In contrast to secular language, the recipient is never a passive agent upon whom certain forms of linguistic expositions are dictated but an active-receiver of a particular message amalgamated with her own personhood and spirit that helps her to become a better human being. Asad gives the polymath Al-Ghazālī (d.505/1111) as an example, for whom "the self gradually learns to develop its abilities from within a tradition that presupposes generational collaboration in the preservation, teaching, and exercise of practical knowledge (praxis and gnosis) that is rooted in a vision of the good life" (p. 74).

Asad, shifting the attention away from the classical perception of language in both liturgical and daily usage in his last essay "Masks, Security and the Language of Numbers," concentrates on the influence of statistical calculation, the language of numbers that not only constitutes but also reinforces the sovereignty of nation-states and upon which nation states heavily depend for the sake of taming ambiguity. In one important sense, the primary language of the secular reasoning that employs numbers requires being alienated from the world it has been abstracted from. Such reasoning deals with risk not simply as a danger but as an opportunity

for the continuous increase of knowledge, wealth, and power. In this section, Asad turns first to some contemporary ethnographers and sociologists such as Mauss, Gouldner, Leo Strauss, Skinner, and Goffman who have written about ritual as a formal expression of the distinction between one's private, authentic self and the self that one publicly presents through behavior, a distinction that depends crucially on presenting and reading masks as signs. One distinction that helps maintain nation-states borders on quasi-paranoia, the on-going justification of elaborate and increasingly violent methods of mass surveillance of citizens due to internally assumed conspiracies. Hannah Arendt famously argued that "the concept of enmity in modernity is replaced by that of conspiracy, and this produces a mentality in which reality, real enmity or real friendship are no longer experienced and understood in its own terms but is automatically assumed to signify something else. Thus Arendt's theory pretty much resonates with that of Goffman's when Goffman says that 'behaviour that appears spontaneous is really a calculated show'" (p. 105). Indeed, this is the way modern nation states operate: In order to present free will and liberal orientation to its citizens, they mask their practices through a special form of spontaneity that appears to be random but nevertheless has been cautiously calculated. For example, the line between identifying potential political treason and creating it by means of entrapment is not always easy to draw. This reflects an ambiguity in modern states where risks are identified and constructed at the same time. By quoting Goffman again, Asad shows that every individual attempts to control others by controlling the impressions one makes upon them. One does this by trying to suppress one's feelings and presenting a view of oneself to others that is in accordance with one's objectives in that particular situation (p. 105). This is the phase where masks play a fundamental role, for individual citizens needs not only to control their behavior in relation to the state authority but are also demanded to wear a particular mask, an identity from which the state can feel at ease with and be assured the individual will present no danger either physically or intellectually.

The last section of the book is a comprehensive epilogue in which Asad notes secularism's obsession with taming uncertainty. Nevertheless, while Asad recognizes that secular reason has created, and to some degree developed, scientific progress in the modern world and has enabled human beings to live a better life on one hand, he considers its obsession with progress to ironically miss crucial aspects of human life: humanity's failures (p. 155) and lack of acceptance of fragility regarding issues like climate change and humanity's impact on it.

This is an incredibly rich and sophisticated book that opens new platforms for various forms of discussion regarding our understanding of being human being firstly, and our understanding of language, modernity, politics, secondly. However, my only critique of this book would be that Asad only uses scholars who are still within the Western paradigm, with few exceptions to this such as Al-Ghazālī. This is may be because he only and solely wanted to show the present reality of the various types of Westernized systems and the future that awaits us based on current trajectories; maybe some other reasons also exist that I cannot guess at. For example, even though he uses Hallaq's work on Ibn Taymiyya, his major publications on nation states and orientalism are missing; had he used the works of Moroccan scholar Abdurrahman Taha, Argentine semiotician Walter Mignolo, Indian intellectual Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, legal philosopher Wael b. Hallaq and the likes of those who had made valid criticisms regarding secularism, colonialism, enlightenment, or modern ethics, this book would have been a more comprehensive read and a more tangible critique. Despite these, the book is still a phenomenal work whose ideas are to be appreciated and debated intensively.