

book review

**Out of Time**

**The Limits of Secular Critique**

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Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, Saba Mahmood  
*Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*  
University of California Press, Berkeley and London, 2009  
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Michael Warner, Jonathan Vanantwerpen and Craig Calhoun (eds)  
*Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*  
Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London, 2010  
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Two recent edited collections, *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* and *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, set out to explore the ways the secular operates with, not in opposition to, the religious. In showing how secular conceptions of religion make possible certain forms of legal regulation and political governance of religious action and expression, the collections make an important contribution to the resurgence of scholarly interest in religion and politics in the last

decade. At the same time, the collections also reveal the complexities inherent in attempting to interrogate the ideological and institutional operations of the secular from (various) positions in the academy that owe their prestige and privilege to secular epistemologies of critique and criticism derived from Enlightenment philosophy.

In the introduction to *Is Critique Secular?*, Wendy Brown writes that the book aims to 'loosen critique's identity with secularism as well as surrender its reliance on a notion of secularism itself insulated from critique'. (13) Secularism is able to insulate itself from critique because of 'the Enlightenment presumption that the true, the objective, the real, the rational, and even the scientific emerge only with the shedding of religious authority or "prejudice"'. (11) Because the shedding of religion is equated with objectivity, secular speech and law are able to discursively and institutionally target religious behaviour in a way that is not ostensibly prejudiced or partial. Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood seek to expose the prejudices of secular critique in media and political responses to the Danish Muhammad cartoon controversy. This event involved the publication in 2005 of cartoons of the Islamic prophet Muhammad in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*. The cartoons were subsequently deemed offensive by a range of Muslim organisations as well as a number of non-Muslim commentators. The publication and re-publication of the cartoons in English-language newspapers garnered significant media attention because of the violent nature of some of the public protests against the newspapers by Muslim groups in European and non-European countries.

Asad argues that the cartoons also gained media currency because the protests were incorporated into a narrative that positioned Western democratic principles of freedom of speech in opposition to Islamic fundamentalism. In particular, opposition to the cartoons expressed through the language of blasphemy<sup>1</sup> reinforced assumptions that Islamic traditions are 'rooted in a more restrictive system of ethics' and do 'not allow the freedom (especially the freedom of speech) provided and defended by liberal society'. (36) Following Foucault, Asad points out that the liberal concept of freedom is not absolute but involves the disciplining and regulation of subjects within conditions that are not of their own choosing. So, too, do particular Islamic principles of speech and civic duty structure and enable certain kinds of actions. (37) That pre-emptive violence can be used to maintain a Western

liberal democratic order in the 'war on terror' while the use of violence by the protestors to preserve a different kind of public and civil order is considered archaic and uncivilised speaks to the monopoly on violence that liberal democratic states hold. For Asad, then, the assumption that secular criticism leads to 'freedom and reason' while religious criticism creates 'intolerance and obscurantism' (54) reflects an ideological perception 'of European Muslims as not fully human because they are not yet morally autonomous and politically disciplined' in the ways of liberal secularism. (56)

Where Asad uses the cartoon controversy to examine how secular critique shapes what is included or excluded in the liberal notion of free speech, Mahmood argues that there was an '*inability* to understand the sense of injury expressed by so many Muslims' in public commentary on the event. (68) She explains that an Islamic ontology involves experiencing Muhammad as 'inhabiting the world, bodily and ethically'. (75) This is a different ontological approach to 'the modern concept of religion—as a set of propositions in a set of beliefs to which the individual gives assent' in liberal societies. (72) Mahmood is unconvinced therefore that appealing to a liberal secular state for protection from religious vilification (in cases such as the Danish cartoon affair) is productive given the 'distinctly different conceptions of the subject, religiosity, harm, and semiosis' produced by Islamic and secular traditions. (88) Legal appeals for juridical protection serve also to reinforce the state's sovereign power to regulate and enforce particular kinds of religious belonging and expression. What is required is the 'larger transformation of the cultural and ethical sensibilities of the Judeo-Christian population that undergird the cultural practices of secular-liberal law' so that the non-Christian religious identities of citizens cease to be points of contention in liberal democratic societies. (89)

Asad's and Mahmood's essays are thoughtful, incisive and important contributions to a growing body of work that contests the secular arrogation of truth, freedom, and reason for liberal modernity in opposition to a putative Islamic other. Following their essays is a response from Judith Butler that provides a summation of Asad's and Mahmood's key points, though framed within the former's particular concern with norms and 'the contingent conditions under which we feel shock, outrage, and moral revulsion'. (108) Asad and Mahmood each then respond to Butler. Although Butler's contribution provides an interesting and astute (albeit

brief) discussion of the ways in which homonormativity can be used to position Muslim migrants as outside the norms of liberal secularism, the series of responses that complete the collection work less to explode or deconstruct secular criticism than they do to reinforce the scholarly defence of criticism. For example, in their very first paragraphs both Asad and Mahmood explain that they will not expand on the similarities or points of agreement with Butler and proceed to outline the latter's misreading of their work.

Asad's response to Butler, in what is the conclusion to the book, reiterates his "'critique" of critique' and asks, 'When does intellectual "critique"—as against embodied practice—come to be regarded as the indispensable foundation of knowledge?' (144) One crucial way in which intellectual critique comes to be regarded as indispensable knowledge is through an academic publishing industry that singles out and provides space for established scholars to comment publicly on issues of social importance. It seems to me that if the book provides a critique of secular critique then it is also an expression of that critique within the economies of academic labour. Asad reminds us that 'secular critique ... seeks to create spaces for new truth ... by destroying spaces that were occupied by other signs'. (33) If the collection succeeds in destroying the privileged epistemological status of secular truth claims then it does so only to reassert the textual conventions and expectations of academic (secular) critique.

*Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* features a collection of essays that respond to and expand on the ideas presented in Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*.<sup>2</sup> At almost nine hundred pages, Taylor's mammoth book contains a historical genealogy of the development of secular modernity and critical analyses of contemporary forms of secular and religious practice as well as philosophical and theological ruminations on the current state of belief. Given the complexity and length of Taylor's work, *Varieties of Secularism* serves as a useful introduction to the book. The different uses to which the contributors put Taylor in examining a range of secularisms also speaks to the variety of ideas, mediations, and propositions at work in *A Secular Age*.<sup>3</sup>

Notwithstanding the scope and range of *A Secular Age*, the secularism that Taylor is concerned with is the modern liberal kind. For Taylor this secularism is the accidental by-product of internal reforms to Christianity that produced a conception

of the self-disciplining individual, (15) 'changed modes of marking time', (7) and 'a sharper division between the spiritual and the physical' realms. (16) While this historical genealogy helps us to understand how certain (Protestant) Christian ideals and modes of expression operate from within secularism, Taylor's focus on developments within a Latin Christendom seen to be constitutive of Europe and the West neglects how non-Christian religions and religious minorities within Europe shaped the internal reforms to Christianity that Taylor maps out. Saba Mahmood addresses the analytical and political implications of this focus. She writes that the equation of Europe with Christianity and the omission of non-Christian religions in Taylor's genealogy of secularism are 'akin to the omission of the history of slavery and colonialism from accounts of post-Enlightenment modernity'. (285) Such omissions undermine what Mahmood calls 'the chimera of interreligious dialogue' expressed in the conclusion to *A Secular Age*. (298) 'How would one imagine embarking on a dialogue when the other is not even acknowledged in political, existential, or epistemological terms [within the book]?' (299) Another contribution, by Nilufer Gole, notes that the renewal of scholarly interest in the secular and the religious has a relation to Islam's heightened visibility in media and political discourse in the West. (246) The resulting contestation and transformation of secular practices brought about by Islam's visibility in liberal societies throws into sharp relief how academic criticism is an enterprise intimately connected to the West's creation of its religious others.

If the production of academic knowledge about the religious and the secular is made possible by particular kinds of historical and political conditions, then the importance of interreligious dialogue as a condition of possibility for academic intervention emerges several times in *Varieties of Secularism*. In an eloquent afterward to the collection, Taylor writes that the meeting and exchange of ideas 'can stand like firebreaks in a forest fire' and that the 'particular political action' of the moment is to try and 'multiply those firebreaks'. (321) William Connolly also believes there is 'a pressing need ... to negotiate deep, multidimensional pluralism within and across territorial regimes' (136) in order to guard against entrenched 'minoritization and fundamentalism'. (140) The cultivation of these firebreaks and alliances are vital given that, as the editors of the book note, the secular and the religious have emerged as intense sites of conflict in contemporary geopolitics.

Grasping these conflicts 'depends on going beyond a narrow emphasis on consciously held understandings and explicit institutional mechanisms'. (28)

Going beyond the discursive and institutional domain that holds the liberal secular state to be the only mechanism capable of solving interreligious conflict is difficult. One of the institutional functions of liberal secular states is to facilitate interreligious dialogue as a means of reducing religious conflict. Indeed the editors note that Taylor has participated in a government inquiry with this aim.<sup>4</sup> The problem then is not so much that there are no institutional spaces and political imperatives for interreligious dialogue but that the production of academic knowledge aimed at explaining the contemporary manifestations of secular and religious conflict is already integrated into the institutional mechanisms of secularism. Moreover, to think outside institutional spaces and to cultivate dialogue and openness to those of different faiths requires careful consideration and unhurried communication that is constrained by the relentless penetration of neoliberalism into the academy and elsewhere. As Simon During notes, neoliberalism renders '*all* individual lives ... largely extraneous to democratic state capitalism's economic/political processes and cycles'. (123) Increasing neoliberal demands for universities to accelerate the delivery of courses and the production of research also means that there is less incentive and time for the kinds of challenging and risky academic work that could engage meaningfully with complex secular and religious issues.

If the economies of time instantiated through neoliberal capital foreclose the possibilities for large-scale action or radical ideas, During suggests that the mundane comes to satiate intellectual, political and spiritual desires in an age of neoliberalism. In contrast to Taylor's contention that individuals lack a sense of 'fullness' or spiritual fulfilment when belief becomes simply an option in a secular age, During argues that achieving fullness does not require 'an orientation to the transcendental'. (125) 'Today, spiritual gravity may inhere in the self-emptying contingencies through which we are concretely placed in history, nature, and place, and for that reason needs no other home than the immediate and the mundane'. (125) As I understand it, the mundane consists of an a-critical existential disposition involving the simple luxury of *being*, with no intention and direction beyond the present moment; its sheer banality and contingency makes it unable to be

assimilated into a neoliberal regime. In other words, it comprises nothing so intentional, precise and time-consuming as the energies directed towards academic critique.

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<sup>1</sup> Asad argues that the Western gloss of the protesters' grievances as 'blasphemy' is slightly misleading and that a more accurate understanding of Muslim injury in relation to the cartoons would be 'insult, harm, and offense'. (38)

<sup>2</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Contributors not discussed here include Robert Bellah, John Milbank, Wendy Brown, Akeel Bilgrami, Colin Jager, Jon Butler, Jonathan Sheehan and Jose Casanova.

<sup>4</sup> The resulting report, Gerard Bouchard and Charles Taylor, *Building the Future: A Time for Reconciliation*, Government of Quebec, Quebec City, 2008 can be accessed at <[www.accommodements.qc.ca/index-en.html](http://www.accommodements.qc.ca/index-en.html)>.