What Might Talal Asad Have to Say for the Study of Religion?

For many academics, the force of Talal Asad's work lies in (1) his tracing of the genealogy of "religion" as a concept and (2) his push for reflexivity on the part of scholars who employ concepts like these in their research. This coupling of genealogy and reflexivity is generally acknowledged as a necessary foundation for Religious Studies, even marking off the discipline as it is constituted today (especially in the United States) both from older *Religionswissenschaft* and from theology.[1] Yet some scholars feel that in this push for genealogy and reflexivity, anthropologists and other scholars of religion have abdicated the responsibility to study the subject-matter of religion in favor of studying merely the category. As Jonathan Boyarin puts it, quoting an unnamed senior colleague of his:

> He agreed that the edited volume [viz., Talal Asad, ed., *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*] contained significant insights about the history of the discipline and its critique of current anthropological practice. Yet he wondered: "Yes, but tell me — what's Asad going to do next?" The clear implication was that this critical focus on the discipline itself was all well and good, but that ultimately it was a blind alley, a diversion from the anthropological study of things *out there*.[2]

I think this understanding of anthropology of religion in general, and Talal Asad's work in particular, is misguided. Asad, I believe, offers much more than a "postmodern" takedown or genealogy of religion as a category. I argue that Asad offers a potent, sound set

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[1] Thus Donovan Schaefer, for instance, writes: "I could write here about the defining effect Asad has had on my own work and that of many other religious studies scholars, shaping our collective approach to secularism, religion, and embodiment. But I would rather tell the story of how Asad has reshaped the entire field of religious studies. I can't imagine that the scholarship I now find exciting would have been possible without Talal Asad. … A quick survey of citations in the flagship Journal of the American Academy of Religions shows that his work began to seep into our conversations in the mid-1990s. Many of these early articles cited Asad's (1983) criticisms of Clifford Geertz that appeared in *Man*, which came to wider attention when republished as part of *Genealogies of Religion* (see LaMothe 2008; McCutcheon 1997; Schilbrack 2005)." Donovan Schaefer, "Talal Asad's Challenge to Religious Studies," *Religion and Society* 11, no. 1 (September 1, 2020): 20, https://doi.org/10.3167/arrs.2020.110102.

[2] Jonathan Boyarin, "For Talal," *Religion and Society* 11, no. 1 (September 1, 2020): 8, https://doi.org/10.3167/arrs.2020.110102. Italics in original.

of resources for studying religion not just as a category but as a form of life. This paper will elaborate how. One initial formulation is given again by quoting Boyarin:

> Taken in sum, these works [of Asad's] are not merely various works of an anthropologist; they are an anthropology. They are grounded in a life history profoundly shaped by the workings of European colonialism, nationalism, and anti-Semitism, and nourished by the tools and language of metropolitan scholarship. The result is not only critique that is all the more devastating because of the classic voice and syntax of reason through which they are expressed. Departing from that critique, these works constitute various stages on an itinerary of anti-racist and anti-triumphalist investigations of the human.[3]

In so doing, Asad lays the ground for a way of thinking *through* lived experiences of the self and of the other, that is through forms of life, to reach *towards* some kind of critique within and between traditions.

I begin with some biography. I then examine Asad's famous essay "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category" from his 1993 book *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. I highlight how Asad both follows and departs from Geertz, suggesting that it is here that Asad raises some of the substantive contributions that are elaborated in a more positive form in his later work. I turn to this work next, focusing in particular on Asad's 2003 book *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, noting a few ways in which I read Asad to be making positive contributions to the anthropology of religion, specifically through his attempt to delineate various vocabularies of secularism (the titular "formations of the secular"). At this point, I also stress how I understand many of these interventions to be rooted in how Asad works through Wittgenstein. In the last section, I follow up on this project by focusing in particular on "pain" as an exemplary site for this sort of anthropology of religion. This line of research, as reflected also in the work of Asad's students like David Scott, Hussein Ali Agrama, Charles Hirschkind, Saba Mahmood, and others, is indicative of the direction anthropology of religion has taken since Asad's original work. Through this review of relevant literature, I aim

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[3] Ibid., 11.

to provide a state of the question: what might anthropology of religion offer to those who study religion in its diverse manifestations today?

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In a recent article, Asad offers autobiographical reflections that key us into how his work developed.[4] We should remember first that his father was Muhammad Asad, born in 1900 as Leopold Weiss (thus like Wittgenstein, who was ten years older, an Austrian Jew by birth; indeed, a further similarity is that both were to spend much of the 1920s wandering about after the collapse of their natal Austro-Hungarian Empire). Muhammad Asad married a Saudi woman, Munira, after he converted to Islam in Berlin in 1926; their child was Talal, born in Medina in 1932. Talal wrote about his mother that she "came from an Arabian tribe (Shammar) in Northern Nejd and had no formal schooling. But she often recited long, sad poems about exile in tribal Arabic that she had learned as a child; it is one of my great regrets that I never recorded them when she was alive."[5] The family moved to what was then British India and later became Pakistan in the 1930s. During World War II, Talal's paternal grandparents were murdered by the Nazis; meanwhile, his parents were detained by the British as enemy aliens.

The point of these reflections is not just biographical; or, in being so, so much more than. Asad writes in 2020 that these experiences are the crucible for his later thinking on nations, race, and empire, between European colonialism on the one hand and the rise of fascism on the other. And more deeply than that, the way religion and culture are lived and acted out. In other words, these autobiographical remarks are indicative of the way in which Asad works *through* forms of life, including ones that are intimately familiar.

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[4] Talal Asad, "Autobiographical Reflections on Anthropology and Religion," *Religion and Society* 11, no. 1 (September 1, 2020): 1–7, https://doi.org/10.3167/arrs.2020.110102.
[5] Ibid., 1.

Asad was with his family in Lahore when the Partition happened in 1947; shortly after which Asad, by his own words, "lost his faith." His first encounter with anthropology came in these years. As he writes:

> It was also at that time that the elderly wife of an American lecturer at a missionary college in Lahore, who had befriended me, lent me a copy of Ruth Benedict's (1935) *Patterns of Culture* and spoke to me about a discipline called anthropology. I found the book's classification of cultures as Apollonian or Dionysian enormously attractive (Nietzsche was a great 'hero' of mine during my teenage years). It appeared to open up the possibility of seeing entire ways of life in terms of dominant cultural style.[6]

But instead of pursuing anthropology, Asad followed his father's wishes and studied architecture in England. There, Asad discovered philosophy, captivated in particular by A.J. Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic*, one of the great works of early analytic philosophy. In 1954, he was introduced by a friend to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, just a year after the book's publication and just three years after Wittgenstein's death in 1951 at the age of 62. Asad then studied anthropology in Edinburgh from 1955 to 1959 before graduating with a BLitt from Oxford in 1961. He then immediately accepted a position "to teach five years at the University of Khartoum, with the promise that I would get paid leave during that period to carry out ethnographic fieldwork," as part of an arrangement that was common for Oxford anthropologists at that time.[7] Asad received his PhD from Oxford in 1968, after fieldwork with the Kababish tribe of northern Sudan. By his own estimation, the resulting book was unsuccessful: "this focus on *a priori* secular categories [economy, politics, and history] is why I now consider the book that emerged from my fieldwork to be a failure."[8]

More important, in many ways, than this "failure" is how Asad's early work is haunted by "the colonial question." After all, Asad went to Sudan just five years after it gained independence from the UK (in 1956), and was working at Oxford with E. E. Evans-

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[6] Ibid., 2.
[7] Ibid., 3.
[8] Ibid.

Pritchard, one of the leading lights of British social anthropology. This partly accounts for Asad's concern already in his first book with what David Scott and Charles Hirschkind later called "not just the supposed motivations of colonial anthropologists but … the *ideological* character of their dominant theoretical paradigm, namely functionalism."[9]

Seen in this way, Asad's earliest work inaugurates a critical, skeptical streak in his work, exemplified in his 1973 edited volume, *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*.[10] Here, as Scott and Hirschkind note, Asad shows sympathy "to the anticolonial rejection of anthropology's hubristic will-to-omniscient-knowledge" while simultaneously having "very early articulated a doubt about the *register* and *direction* of this criticism."[11] It is certainly true, as noted above, that there is a Nietzschean vein that runs throughout his work, a line of thought that seeks to place ideas within their ideological conditions via a genealogy that locates supposedly transcendental values in historical conditions. This should not be underestimated, especially because this work was so early: *Orientalism* was only published in 1978, and *Discipline and Punish* in 1975 in French and 1977 in English. But, as Hirschkind and Scott note, there is in this genealogy already a doubt "whether the reactive and defensive moralizing posture of assertion and counterassertion was at all constructive."[12] In my view, Asad partook *of* this movement, sharing in skepticism of the discipline's existing relationship with power, and perhaps rightly should be identified *with* it in its early phase. However, as I will argue, Asad went on to produce work that has much more to give to scholarship than just genealogy and reflexivity, important as these may be.

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[9] Charles Hirschkind and David Scott, eds., *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 2.
[10] Talal Asad, ed., *Anthropology & the Colonial Encounter* (London: Ithaca Press, 1973).
[11] Ibid., 2.
[12] Hirschkind and Scott, *Powers of the Secular Modern*, 2.

One place to locate an initial articulation of Asad's project is in his seminal 1983 article "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz," published in *Man*, as the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland was then called.[13] This essay, significantly revised, was to form the first chapter of Asad's 1993 book *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, which is now seen as foundational to Religious Studies. As is evident from the title, Asad pursues a project of critique with regard to Geertz. In a moment, I will turn to this essay in detail to parse out the moves Asad is making in his critique of Geertz, moves that I think already indicate how a genealogical inquiry into concepts is of a piece with a more clearly constructive investigation of grammars that are part of a form of life.

But first, I want to briefly return to Asad's biographical reflections to signal how he narrates an important event in this shift of his thought to questions of religion. One impetus was the encounter with Foucault, during a period when his most important works were still being written and translated. Another impetus was Asad's increasing dissatisfaction with Marxist (secular) explanations of religion as "ideology," premised as they were on an asymmetrical relationship between the those studying and those being studied. But the main impetus was elsewhere, as Asad makes clear:

> But my fumbling in this direction (I wasn't entirely clear what I wanted to say about anthropology or religion) began to be clarified by the very personal experience of my mother's final illness. In 1975, while I was teaching at the University of Hull, I learned that my mother had advanced cancer. I decided to go to Saudi Arabia and stayed with her there until she died a year later. The political atmosphere and the social rigidity in a society awash with newfound wealth was very uncongenial, but the entire experience had a considerable impact on me and my ideas. I tried — unsuccessfully — to sort things out in my 1978 Malinowski Memorial Lecture (which I had been invited to give before my year in Saudi Arabia) in which I dealt with the definition of ideology, the classic Marxist theoretical term for false consciousness, as well as with the 'authentic' accounts of cultures studied by anthropologists. I tried to distinguish language *in* life from the language used by anthropologists *about* life, and to trace the slippery role of 'meaning' in anthropological accounts of other cultures. I tried to think in that presentation about matters that interested

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[13] Talal Asad, "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz," *Man* 18, no. 2 (1983): 237–59, https://doi.org/10.2307/2801433.

anthropologists of the time, as well as larger issues that had shaped my life up to that point.

> Improbable though it may seem, my struggle to articulate my ideas and criticisms was largely prompted by my reflection on my mother's religious life. My father spoke and wrote impressively about the religion to which he had converted. My mother, by contrast, lived as a Muslim without expounding the doctrines of Islam, without defending it from attack or trying to persuade others of its superior virtue. My point is not simply that she was a pious woman — that she performed her prescribed prayers regularly, read portions of the Qur'an aloud early every morning, and fasted during the month of Ramadan. It is that I now realized I had thought of her life in terms of *a lack* instead of trying to understand it in her own terms, as she had lived it. I began to see that, like so many non-intellectuals, her religious practices were embodied, and that her embodied religion did not offer itself to hermeneutic methods — to the deciphering by observers of the *real* meaning of what she did — although it obviously 'meant' much to her.[14]

There is a way in which Asad's thinking about religion is provoked in and through an intimate encounter with a form of life. It is not just a confrontation with Marx and Foucault, engaging with and working past them in a theoretical register; it is also a confrontation of these secular, academic grammars (what Jonathan Boyarin called "the classic voice and syntax of reason") with a reality that in some sense eludes capture via disenchantment and secular social science. Religion is important as a shoal where projects like Marx's and Foucault's founder.

Another way to put this would be in terms of ethics, of the encounter with the other as a primary site for thinking. The trouble with such an encounter with the other is that it is in no sense willed. Levinas speaks of the encounter with the other as the null-site not just for ethical responsibility but as the *sine qua non* of subjectivity, knowledge, and metaphysics *tout court* — hence Levinas' distinctive conception of ethics as first philosophy. One does not *choose* to encounter the other, as one does not *choose* to encounter death — or the death of one's mother. Levinas characteristically says that we are "taken hostage" by the other.[15] I

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[14] Asad, "Autobiographical Reflections," 4. Italics in original.

[15] For instance, he writes: "But in the responsibility for the Other, for another freedom, the negativity of this anarchy, this refusal of the present, of appearing, of the immemorial, commands me and ordains me to the other, to the first one on the scene, and makes me approach him, makes me his neighbor. It thus diverges from nothingness as well as from being. It provokes this responsibility against my will, that is, by substituting me for the other as a hostage." Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 11.

bring Levinas in because I sense an affinity with Asad at this point in that he is always conscious that these questions of discourse, or of categories of social-scientific study, are bound up with more existential (if not more fundamental) questions of selfhood and freedom — questions of life that subtend critique.

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I will return to these thoughts momentarily, as their elaboration requires that we encounter Asad at a later point in his career. First, I want to bring out the points that are already evident in Asad's critique of Geertz. Asad says that the basic point of his essay is "to problematize the idea of an anthropological definition of religion by assigning that endeavor to a particular history of knowledge and power … out of which the modern world has been constructed."[16] One example of a "universal, transhistorical definition of religion" — that which Asad thinks cannot be — is that proposed earlier by Geertz. Geertz had located "religion" in a symbolic system that is part of a culture, which he understands as a semiotically organized system of meaning. "Religion" gains its meaning from its location in a cultural context. Asad doesn't reject this definition initially; in a way, he accepts the fact that "religion" is indeed a concept that emerges in historically specific circumstances. But Asad thinks that such a universal definition of religion is impossible "not only because its [i.e., religion's] constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes" (29).

These "discursive processes" include, most prominently, the Christian heritage in which definitions of religion like Geertz's are steeped. As Asad puts it: "what appears to anthropologists today to be self-evident, namely that religion is essentially a matter of symbolic meanings linked to ideas of general order (expressed through either or both rite and

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[16] Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 54. Following parenthetical citations refer to this text.

doctrine), that it has generic functions/features, and that it must not be confused with any of its particular historical or cultural forms, is in fact a view that has a specific Christian history" (42). Why is this Christian heritage a problem, exactly? Asad thinks that in forgetting the specific history of the definition of religion, we also forget how closely intertwined religion has been with power. Thus, Asad says, the entire "theoretical search for an essence of religion invites us to separate it conceptually from the domain of power" (29). So far, this is of a piece with Foucault: Asad proposes that we undertake a genealogy of the discourse on the study of religion so as to excavate the entanglement of this particular knowledge formation with historically shifting forms of power.

Where does he go next? The conclusion of the essay is a little more elusive. Asad writes that "the anthropological student of *particular* religions should therefore begin … [by] unpacking the comprehensive concept which he or she translates as 'religion' into heterogeneous elements according to its historical character" (54). In other words, before studying any particular religious practices we must take stock of what concepts of "religion" we are operating with. Thus, it is not enough to locate religion within the context of a culture. For Asad, religious symbols cannot be understood on the analogy with words as "vehicles for meaning" (53). Instead, *meaning* comes from *use*: Asad thinks that "the possibility and authoritative status" of "the meanings of religious practices and utterances … are to be explained as products of historically distinctive disciplines and forces" (54). Interestingly, I think Asad would agree with Geertz that the meaning of particular religious practices and symbols is tied to their cultural context — at least, construed as "forms of life." Thus, Asad says that "religious symbols … cannot be understood independently of their historical relations with nonreligious symbols or of their articulations in and of social life, in which work and power are always crucial" (53). And he asks the reader: "If religious symbols are

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understood, on the analogy with words, as vehicles for meaning, can such meanings be established independently of the form of life in which they are used?" (53)

One reading would be to start to note how Wittgenstein is already present in this question. But the scant comments in this essay are difficult to parse (there is only a passing mention of "form of life," with no direct quotation). I think Asad's relationship to Wittgenstein was still developing, but the foundations were laid in Asad's encounter with Geertz. In my reading, the sort of genealogical, skeptical stance adopted by Asad vis-à-vis Geertz is still recognizably Foucauldian (and thence Saidian, and part of a broader movement of postcolonial theory). Yet we are beginning to glimpse a different sort of critique in the insistence that even as we throw out a universal definition of religion in culture like Geertz's, we must still locate religion *in* a form of life. In other words, what lies at the bottom is not discourse — or, if it is language, a language-game that is always already part of a form of life.

Again, I want to stress that these are not just theoretical, methodological advances. Perhaps more significant than any discontent with Foucault or Marx was Asad's sense of the inadequacy of these theories to cope with the very ordinary experience of his mother's passing and enduring piety. It is worth once more quoting at length from Asad's late autobiographical reflections on this subject:

> In a very fundamental sense, these 'religious' activities had been no different from the mundane part of her life because they *were* mundane and integral to her everyday life. And while I had seen her act in this way as far back as I could remember, it was only after her death — when I turned in a sustained way to Wittgenstein for an understanding of religion (although he himself was not 'religious') — that I began to see her life differently. I saw it now not as an attempt to deepen and aestheticize her experience (as it is fashionable in some quarters to say), but as a way of being. My mother didn't intellectualize her religion, but by that I don't wish to say that she was 'a blind follower'. Her prayers, recitations, and fasting were intended neither for other people to decode nor for enhancing her own experience; they were addressed to her God. During her married life she had not been always receptive to my father's enlightened arguments about changing some of her religious practices. Was this because she was irrational, incapable of responding to a rational argument, as I thought at the time? I have come to believe that I was wrong in thinking so: she didn't abandon particular

> practices because she felt that the change wouldn't fit easily into the entirety of her life as a Muslim. The idea that her feelings of fear, reverence, love, and so forth were to be understood as 'emotions' and therefore as 'non-rational' had for long seemed to me an unsatisfactory way of thinking about devoutness. This became clearer over time as I learned to think of embodiment not as mechanization but as the articulation of a particular encounter — in my mother's case, of her relationship to her God.
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> At any rate, my learning from my mother's life is an instance of the fact that not all learning presupposes a process of teaching — and therefore of an authoritative teacher. Which is not to say that in life there is never a place for an experienced teacher or expert to whom one can turn; it is to say that dialogue in the course of our everyday lives is needed to decide which experts to turn to and how to use them. 'An expert', so one might say, is someone whose expertise (experience) one builds on. Looked at from the other end, a good teacher is one who learns through teaching. And because time is finite, learning in life — like the language in which one teaches — is never complete.[17]

The question, again, is of *experience*, which here substitutes for expertise. The earlier critique of anthropology's complicity with colonialism could be framed as a critique of expertise. Indeed, as Edward Said importantly pointed out, the "expertise" produced by Area Studies was and should have been treated with skepticism. But Asad realized that to refuse experts is not, or should not be, to refuse to learn or to refuse to accept that there is a teacher at all. This is one of the most profound continuities between Asad and Wittgenstein. Both are concerned, after all, with what it means to find one's voice, to learn to speak at all. (Stanley Cavell notes that the child we find in the passage from Augustine's *Confessions* with which Wittgenstein opens the *Investigations* is in a sense the child that pushes back throughout the quasi-dialog that follows; when we want to assert that something is unknowable, that there is no deeper meaning to be found, the child looks startled and asks us if we are thus telling them that there is no language to be spoken, that a refusal of meaning might lead to the horrible image of a child forever mute — "as invisible to the elders among whom it moves, attempting to divine speech for itself, and as in a position of isolation and unintelligibility so complete as to reveal childhood as such to be a state akin to madness."[18])

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[17] Asad, "Autobiographical Reflections," 4.

[18] Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises*, The Jerusalem-Harvard Lectures (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 22.

Yet the continuities between Wittgenstein and Asad are more profound still. I want to indicate here three points on which they converge: (1) a refusal of any traditional sense of meaning as semiotic, hence the critique of Geertz; (2) an emphasis on the dignity of the everyday, betraying a profound sense of continuity with earlier anthropology; (3) a commitment to thinking with forms of life and, to a lesser extent, grammatical investigations as method for investigating them.

Perhaps Wittgenstein's core insight adopted by Asad is that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (§43).[19] "Use" is not context (which would be an alternative ground for meaning). Rather, different kinds of use — pointing, naming — are practices within a particular language-game. I need to know how to play the game to access language at even the most basic level: only someone who has already learned the rules of chess can meaningfully ask "what does the king look like?" (§31). And in order to learn a language from pointing, we need to already be able to speak another language. This is where Wittgenstein departs significantly from all earlier theories of meaning (in particular those Toril Moi identifies as Saussurean and post-Saussurean).[20] Wittgenstein begins the *Philosophical Investigations* with a quote from Augustine's *Confessions*, a scene of a child learning to speak via ostension ("When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out," §1). Where Augustine's child learned to speak by learning names, Wittgenstein's child is initiated into practices, into the relevant forms of life (§32). Learning a language is learning to see and acquiring a world: "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" (§19).

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[19] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968). Parenthetical section numbers are to this text. I reproduce all italics from the original, rather than adding my own.
[20] Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226464589.001.0001.

Where Geertz had located the "meaning" of religion in its reference to an underlying symbolic structure, Asad will insist that no such reduction is possible. Yet in so doing he doesn't say that what lies "at bottom" is discourse. Instead, Asad will use Wittgenstein to insist, in interesting ways along with Geertz, that it is in fact *forms of life* that give meaning insofar as meaning can be located anywhere. This vocabulary will allow Asad to respond to his mother's "prayers, recitations, and fasting" by insisting that they "were intended neither for other people to decode nor for enhancing her own experience" — in other words, they are not keys to any deeper layer of meaning at all. The importance of feelings and practices to her life as a Muslim are not *irrational*.

This brings me to the last point of continuity I want to stress, which is what we should do once we realize that meaning is not founded on any deeper ground but is redirected to forms of life. There is a way in which this is all that can be said. Wittgenstein tells us:

> We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems. (§109) … Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything.— Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example, is of no interest to us. (§126) … Instead, we now demonstrate a method, by examples; and the series of examples can be broken off. (§133)

The perplexing question is, what now? Are we urged to some sort of quietism, and thence unable to respond to the child's urge to learn to make meaning? That seems difficult to accept, though it is an open question whether it is a path that Wittgenstein chose to follow.

If we want to avoid the route of quietism, we can start by identifying what the *Investigations* in fact *does*. One quasi-method that has been deduced from the *Investigations* is that of the grammatical investigation. Meaning comes from use; in a certain sense, grammar can be translated as "discourse" or "context." One could then understand Asad's "genealogy of religion" as something like a grammatical investigation. This would allow us to parse Asad's difficult-to-understand point that "different kinds of practice and discourse are intrinsic to the field in which religious representations (like any representation) acquire their

identity and their truthfulness."[21] But we should stress that this "field" constituted by "practice and discourse" is no solid ground on which to build a theory of meaning. This is part of Wittgenstein's legacy, and the most contested part of his interpretation. Stanley Cavell writes poignantly of those who have read Wittgenstein and "have thereupon left the field of philosophy, perhaps in favor of a field," out of despair at the lack of ground to till in this place Wittgenstein sets us in.[22] Cavell says in the forward to his *magnum opus The Claim of Reason* that "what follows may be thought of as the record of one who stayed."[23] Asad, too, I think, chooses to stay in the field despite (or because of?) his "doubts about the character of one's talents, or conviction, or interest, or about one's taste, or lack of it, for arguments that forever seem on the wrong ground."[24] Let us now see how.

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It might still feel like these points have a methodological character, that Asad is critiquing prior theorists by borrowing from other theory. There is a sense in which that is right. Indeed, Asad's main fieldwork had taken place back in the 1960s, and at this point he was living and teaching full-time in the United States. There is a sense of remove from the kind of anthropological fieldwork he had once engaged in, and I sympathize with those who hunger for more "empirical" work with religion. Yet as I suggested above, I think we should understand Asad as choosing at this juncture to stay in the field nonetheless. Asad *is* interested in a form of anthropology of religion, as he sees it: the anthropology of secularism. In a way, his field becomes secular discourse, as experienced for instance from the vantage-point of New York, where Asad has taught since 1988. In this section, I want to delineate

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[21] Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 54.
[22] Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, 1 edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), xvii.
[23] Ibid., xviii.
[24] Ibid., xvii.

some of the features of this later work, as an indication of what Asad might have to teach us beyond critique of given universal categories.

Asad's main work in the anthropology of secularism is published in *Formations of the Secular* (2003). There, he begins by parsing the "secular" as both a political doctrine on the one hand and an ontology or epistemology on the other. In other words, an anthropology of the secular needs to deal first with secularism as a political doctrine tied up with modernity, "a colonial imposition, an entire worldview that gives precedence to the material over the spiritual, a modern culture of alienation and unrestrained pleasure."[25] It is easy to see the negative side of this sort of secularism. Yet an anthropology of the secular must also traffic in the deeper meanings of the secular as "necessary to universal humanism, a rational principle that calls for the suppression — or at any rate, the restraint — of religious passion so that a dangerous source of intolerance and delusion can be controlled, and political unity, peace, and progress secured."[26] Asad is by no means *critiquing* secularism as a negative force of modernity, though it does take the form; nor is he *praising* secularism as the necessary foundation for political goods like human rights and the dignity of the individual, though it is that as well. Asad is rather insisting that these are two sides of the same coin: "the two are interdependent."[27]

The question then arises: what kind of unity can be perceived between the disparate manifestations of secularism as rational principle, philosophy and worldview, and way of living? The answer is a form of life: "I take the secular to be a concept that brings together certain behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life."[28] The task of an anthropology of the secular "is a matter of showing how contingencies relate to changes in

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[25] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2003), 21.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid., 24.
[28] Ibid., 25.

the grammar of concepts — that is, how the changes in concepts articulate changes in practices."[29] Here we see how Asad picks up the notion of a grammatical investigation and runs with it. Now, it seems like Wittgenstein is key to the study of things that are in fact observable in some sense in the world, not just key to critiquing a given theory or category of analysis.

The footnote to this quote on page 25 says "the notion of grammar here is of course derived from Wittgenstein's idea of grammatical investigation." This is one of Asad's most explicit acknowledgments of Wittgenstein's influence on his work. Although Asad says that "this notion pervades all his later writing," he does specifically cite §90 of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein writes:

> it is of the essence of our investigation that we do not seek to learn anything *new* by it. We want to *understand* something that is already in plain view. For *this* is what we seem in some sense not to understand. (§89)

In order to "understand something already in plain view," we must "remind ourselves … of the *kind of statement* that we make about phenomena" (§90). We do this via a grammatical investigation, which "sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away … caused, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language" (§90). Here, we must tread carefully. For, as Wittgenstein notes,

> it may come to look as if there were something like a final analysis of our forms of language, and so a *single* completely resolved form of every expression. That is, as if our usual forms of expression were, essentially, unanalysed; as if there were something hidden in them that had to be brought to light. When this is done the expression is completely clarified and our problem solved. (§90)

In Asad's terms, this would be what Geertz was doing; and indeed it seems like the kind of investigation of the secular that Asad urges is quite like investigating practices and discourses in the field and relating them to some underlying code that clarifies their meaning. It is interesting that for Wittgenstein, too, the struggle is to distinguish his work from that of a

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[29] Ibid.

senior, very influential predecessor, in his case Frege. How is the later Wittgenstein not

pushing us to analysis, and thence analytic philosophy post-Russell and Frege? Analogously,

how is Asad not urging us to engage in what is more or less traditional social anthropology?

A few sections later, Wittgenstein describes this difficulty with great beauty:

> Here it is difficult as it were to keep our heads up, — to see that we must stick to the subjects of our every-day thinking, and not go astray and imagine that we have to describe extreme subtleties, which in turn we are after all quite unable to describe with the means at our disposal. We feel as if we had to repair a torn spider's web with our fingers. (§106)

What is this spider's web that we have to repair? I think we would be wrong to understand it

as a web of signs or meanings. Then repairing it would be an act of great skill that somebody

like Geertz would be well-suited to undertake. To me, a web is suggestive of *relationships*. I

want to think again about Asad's relationship with his mother. These intimate relationships

are the very sort of thin silk that can be torn by carelessness, for instance by casual dismissal

of religious practice as "ideology." The impulse to repair the torn spider's web is ethical and

much more than. This sort of web is what I think Stanley Cavell describes when he imagines

a "thin net over the abyss" as the "very shaky foundations" upon which we feel "terrified that

maybe language (and understanding, and knowledge) rests."[30] Rather than being scared,

though, we might relish this work of repair: "You think that after all you must be weaving a

piece of cloth: because you are sitting at a loom — even if it is empty — and going through

the motions of weaving" (§414). Anthropology, the work of studying relationships, is also the

work of making them.

Two more quotes from Wittgenstein will prove illuminating on just what it is that is

involved in this work. Wittgenstein continues working through the specter of Russell, Frege,

and his own earlier work, where grammatical investigation was analysis that does in fact get

down to the bottom of something. Thus, he says:

> The ideal, as we think of it, is unshakeable. You can never get outside it; you must always turn

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[30] Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 178.

> back. There is no outside; outside you cannot breathe. — Where does this idea come from? It is like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off. (§103)

This is a monumental realization, yet so mundane and banal (who among us has not forgotten that they had glasses on?) that it is barely worth mentioning. It represents in a sense Wittgenstein's movement from the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* to the *Philosophical Investigations* — not so much a process of *critique* and *denial* as of a realization that the *Tractatus* did not represent a neutral world-picture so much as a way of looking at the world.

But what is it that these glasses do, exactly? Wittgenstein continues the metaphor in §114:

> 'But *this* is how it is———' I say to myself over and over again. I feel as though, if only I could fix my gaze absolutely sharply on this fact, get it in focus, I must grasp the essence of the matter. One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing's nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it. (§114)

One way to take the metaphor of glasses is that we must in fact take them off. If only we could rid our world of myths, of obscurantism, and finally see clearly what lies beneath this whole mess of practices and discourses, we might be able to properly trace the outline of the objects we study! But all we're doing is tracing the outline of the frame through which we're looking at things. Which brings us back to Asad. What anthropology of secularism will *not* do is to investigate "myth" or otherwise "sacred discourse." That would be to reiterate the Geertzian anthropological project. Instead, Asad says, "what I want to do here is to trace practical consequences of its [myth's] uses in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries in order to investigate some of the ways the secular was constituted."[31] The secular is the glasses, and one cannot take the glasses off to get a good clear view of the objects (after all, "outside you cannot breathe"; academics can only survive within the frame created by the secular). But we can trace the frame within which we look at things.

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[31] Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 23.

And what does that give us? Wittgenstein writes in his "Lecture on Ethics":

> My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk ethics or religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely, hopeless.[32]

Our language is our "cage." We could take this to mean that we are prisoners of our language; and in a sense we are, as we are also taken hostage by the other whom we encounter. Yet I see something more positive here. After all, running against the walls of our cage does at least one thing well: it shows us the dimensions of the cage we are in. To my ears, this is a deeply Kantian move. Kant said that we can never know things-in-themselves — we are trapped in a cage constituted by the noumena. Yet by making clear these conditions of possibility we can secure the grounds for both reason and religion.[33] I am not sure what the benefit of running around our cage is in the end for Wittgenstein; perhaps the only consequence will be our exhaustion. But, regardless, I think this is a pretty good picture of what it is we do when we trace round the frame through which we look at things, for example through an anthropology of the secular.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

One of Wittgenstein's most famous injunctions is to "bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use" (§116). One example of this in Asad's oeuvre is "pain" — where the philosophical tendency is to get caught up in discussions of "skepticism," while ordinary encounters have more to do with, say, stubbing one's toes. Pain and skepticism are also important themes for Wittgenstein's *Investigations*, especially as read in enlightening ways by Stanley Cavell, as it also is for work that comes after Asad, like that of Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood. Pain is thus, in my opinion, an especially good site for understanding what Asad's anthropology of religion can offer us today. The discussion of

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[32] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lecture on Ethics* (Oxford, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2014), 51, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118887103.

[33] We should remember that Kant says in his *Critique of Pure Reason* that he sought to "deny knowledge in order to make room for faith" (B xxx).

pain in Asad's *Formations of the Secular* highlights in particular two important ways in which this work goes significantly beyond Wittgenstein: through embodiment towards a different form of critique.

Pain also follows from an anthropology of secularism, especially as "the secular depends on particular conceptions of *action* and *passion*."[34] Why focus on pain, though? Asad says:

> First, because in the sense of passion, pain is associated with religious subjectivity and often regarded as inimical to reason; second, because in the sense of suffering it is thought of as a human condition that secular agency must eliminate universally.[35]

Secularism here stands in for liberalism. In this grammar, progress is made by removing suffering, especially by overcoming pain. This relies on a conception of agency as some kind of mind controlling the body's passions, including pain. This is the assumption that Asad wants to argue against. He does so by following lines we sketched above. Pain only has meaning *within* forms of life. And our everyday encounters with pain involve much more than just suffering to be overcome. In particular, pain is not just "something that happens to the body or that afflicts the mind … one can think of pain not merely as a passive state (although it can be just that) but as itself agentive."[36] How so? Is this a point about pain being conceptualized differently in different cultures? Not quite. Well, Asad certainly thinks with the fact that pain is experienced in different ways culturally; but to locate the "meaning" in culture is to deflect from the real challenge posed in this sort of anthropology of secularism, that of undermining the distinction between a "physical" sensation that can be "culturally" mediated. Asad writes:

> In an important sense "cultural" and "physical" cease to be dichotomies, although for analytical purposes they can be distinguished. What a subject experiences as painful, and how, are not simply mediated culturally and physically, *they are themselves modes of living a relationship*. The ability to live such relationships over time transforms pain from a passive

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[34] Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 67.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid., 79.

experience into an active one, and thus defines one of the ways of living sanely in the world.[37]

Asad thus turns to think about embodiment in complex ways, not as a simple alternative to secularism, but as a kind of attunement to different forms of life.

But there is a worry here, at least for me. If there is anything that seems to be bad and ought in fact in all cases to be ameliorated, it is pain and suffering. Put more positively, we often appeal to instances where pain and suffering is occurring and point to them as sites for necessary progress, especially if somebody is being wronged by e.g. an agent of the state, as implied in much human rights discourse. Isn't it dangerous to write off pain and suffering as a ground for appealing for justice? In other words, doesn't Asad's project lead us to lose the purchase for critique? To borrow from Wittgenstein: "We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground!" (§107)

I would suggest that Asad *is* taking us back to rough ground. He *is* invested in being able to critique and push for justice in some sense, just not in the obvious sense that relies on questionable grounds of secularism and meaning. Asad writes:

> It does not follow, of course, that one cannot or should not seek to reform the social relations one inhabits, still less that pain is intrinsically "a valuable thing." My point is that one can live one's pain sanely or insanely, and (although ideas about insanity change) that the progressivist model of agency diverts attention away from our trying to understand how this is done in different traditions, because of the assumption that the agent always seeks to overcome pain conceived as object and as state of passivity. … as a social relationship pain is more than an experience. It is part of what creates the conditions of action and experience.[38]

The alternative conception of critique that Asad advances relies on a redirection of agency to embodiment and experience, understood not as presumed universals but as located in a form of life.

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[37] Ibid., 84. Italics in original
[38] Ibid., 84–85.

More deeply, though, we see here Asad offering one of the most distinctive and powerful contributions he has elaborated recently: tradition. Asad says that he uses "tradition" in two ways: "first, as a theoretical location for raising questions about authority, time, language use, and embodiment; and second, as an empirical arrangement in which discursivity and materiality are connected through the minutiae of everyday living."[39] A tradition is something like a form of life, both discursive and embodied, but it is also a place for dialog and for critique of a certain form: "Tradition stresses embodied, critical learning rather than abstract theorization … Critique is central to a living tradition; it is essential to how its followers assess the relevance of the past for the present, and the present for the future."[40] This critique can even take the form of the re-description of a form of life "in another way than the one generally familiar to us," with the purpose of changing behavior.[41] Thus, Asad says: "If language is rooted in ways of being and doing, description is not merely necessary *to* critique; it may *be* critique."[42]

This is a good description of what is happening with pain in the passages I quoted above — to describe pain in the way Asad does, as embodied and somehow aside from secularism, *is* critique. Note again that this is not *using* descriptions instrumentally for the purpose of advancing critique. Critical Theory, as articulated for instance by Max Horkheimer, thinks that "traditional theory" can be put to critical uses, by accepting traditional scientific theory as a valuable project in itself, that can just be repurposed.[43] One problem with this is that it requires ground from which to critique that is somehow neutral, either far above (a "god's-eye view," though usually a god secularized as reason or nature) or

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[39] Talal Asad, "Thinking About Tradition, Religion, and Politics in Egypt Today," *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 1 (September 2015): 166, https://doi.org/10.1086/683002.
[40] Ibid., 166–67.
[41] Talal Asad, "Thinking about Religion through Wittgenstein," *Critical Times* 3, no. 3 (December 1, 2020): 409, https://doi.org/10.1215/26410478-8662304.
[42] Ibid., 410.
[43] See Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, ed. Stanley Aronowitz, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Continuum, 1982), 188–243.

far below (the material reality that Marxists insist underlies all superstructures, like religion) our everyday forms of life. But critique for Asad is precisely immanent *in* these forms of life, understood as traditions. Thus, Asad says, "criticism is an activity rooted in and directed at what binds people to their forms of life, not simply an expression of 'rational argument.'"[44] And what binds people to their form of life is (in part) tradition, understood "not simply as an object of theory, but as a source of living thought," as Hussein Ali Agrama describes it.[45]

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Which brings us back, full circle, to what Asad can offer us today. I began by suggesting that his work operates beyond "mere critique." Indeed, I hope to have shown clearly that he is in no sense merely applying a genealogical or otherwise critical method to religion as a particular object of study, as some have assumed he does with respect to Geertz. I have argued that what Asad offers is grounded on working *through* lived experiences, whether those take place "in the field," as he did in Sudan more than half a century ago; in intimate relationships, as with his mother; or in "everyday life," even under conditions of advanced capitalism as in the United States today. I have also shown how much of what Asad has to offer to studying religion is thought through and with Wittgenstein, both in content (meaning, grammar, form of life) and method.

I hope these points put to rest the false impression that Asad's project is primarily critical (that is, offering a perhaps valuable methodological point but not engaged in "actual" study of religion). But, more importantly, I hope also to have sketched how Asad's work, especially in and after his 2003 book *Formations of the Secular*, does in fact think *through* forms of life to reach *towards* critique as lived within and between traditions. Yet this is a strange form of critique, as befits the work of somebody whose work is shot through with an

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[44] Asad, "Thinking about Religion through Wittgenstein," 410.
[45] Hussein Ali Agrama, "Friendship and Time in the Work of Talal Asad," *Religion and Society* 11, no. 1 (September 1, 2020): 16, https://doi.org/10.3167/arrs.2020.110102.

"anthropological skepticism" that is as willing to subvert traditions' pretensions to truth as it is willing to reconstruct other ways of being through thorough investigation into traditions and forms of life.[46] In 2015, Asad wrote:

> The tradition of *amr bi-l-ma'ruf* could form an orientation of mutual care of the self, based on the principle of friendship (and therefore of responsibility to and between friends) not on the legal principle of citizenship. This sharing would be the outcome of continuous work between friends or lovers, not an expression of accomplished cultural fact. … The longing for tradition by someone who doesn't have one that Wittgenstein spoke of is not a frightened wish for the comfort that comes from submission to authority; it is a desire for being transformed through friendship, through belonging to others who belong to you, as they themselves are also changed by that mutuality.[47]

Might this be a picture of what critique may be, after Talal Asad?

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[46] This characterization of "anthropological skepticism" is due to Hirschkind and Scott in their introduction to *Powers of the Secular Modern*.

[47] Asad, "Thinking About Tradition, Religion, and Politics in Egypt Today," 212–13.

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