Modernists Despite Themselves: The Phenomenology of the Secular and the Limits of Critique as an Instrument of Change

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Probing the discourse of religious freedoms exposes the complex and multidimensional relations between religion and social change. The critics of this discourse, especially as it is integrated into the articulation of American foreign policy, fittingly historicize and locate it in continuity with the broader discourses of orientalism, colonialism, and neoliberalism as well as with the domestic antagonisms between religious and political institutional spheres. This kind of interrogation is born out of, or shares affinity with, what I term “the phenomenology of the secular,” which is theoretically grounded, for the most part, in the work of anthropologist Talal Asad and his historicist and genealogical critique of “religion.” I argue that the phenomenologists of the secular are implicated in power reductionism and thus risk an antirealist and reactionary position. This debilitates their capacity to theorize an alternative to the hegemonic discourse they critique.

ARGUMENT AND STRUCTURE

INVOKING THE PROTECTION OF religious freedoms has gained traction in formal and informal discussions of American global

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engagements: from the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA), which highlighted the promotion of religious freedoms as a “core objective of U.S. foreign policy” (U.S. Department of State official web site), a commitment that resulted in instituting the Office of International Religious Freedom with an Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom; to the establishment of a new office in the State Department exclusively dedicated to cultivating relations with religious communities abroad (2013). Critics of this trend ask who gets to decide what and who count as “religious” and who is benefiting from this trend. This article acknowledges the validity of the suspicion that animates the critique, especially its focus on illuminating the intersection between the drive for the global promotion of religious freedoms, Islamophobia at home, and the war on (Islamist) terrorism abroad. However, I argue that the critique remains merely reactionary and paradoxical if it empties or disables the conversation about “religious freedom,” framing it as instrumental or manufactured and, by definition, indelibly corrupted by its Western and Christian-centric genealogy.

I argue these interrelated points by first orienting the reader to the critics of the discourse of religious freedoms. Countering the “naturalness” and universal pretenses of arguments in favor of the global promotion of religious liberty is a similarly well funded and growing research program resulting in special journal issues dedicated to articulating a coherent and interwoven deconstructive argument.1 Denaturalizing the supposed universality of “religious liberty” and illuminating its complicity with colonialism and neocolonialism involves demonstrating that, in the words of Saba Mahmood and Peter G. Danchin, who orchestrate much of this research, “religious liberty is inescapably context bound and inseparable from contingencies of politics, power, and history” (Mahmood and Danchin 2014: 1). Apart from the high value of this research, the discussion of religious liberty and freedom hardly goes beyond the mere unpacking of the putative “contingencies of politics” as masks for domination in which “religion” is only the product of the ever-expanding regulatory power of the secular state (governmentality). This critique is carried out from diverse disciplinary perspectives, including international relations theory (Shakman-Hurd 2008, 2010, 2013; Shakman-Hurd and Sullivan forthcoming), cultural anthropology (Mahmood 2005, 2009, 2012a, 2012b), and legal scholarship in religion (Sullivan 2005, 2010). I address each of these scholars’

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1See, for example, The South Atlantic Quarterly (2014) and Journal of Law and Religion (2014); see also Sullivan et al. (forthcoming). For a detailed critique of the arguments unfolding in these discussions, see Springs (forthcoming).
engagement with the discourse of religious freedom by illuminating their affinity with and application of the deconstructive insights of anthropologist Talal Asad. I then point out ironies inherent in the Asadian line of critique. Its pivotal deconstructing of modernist interpretations of religion notwithstanding, Asadian critics are beholden to a homogenizing narrative of modernity as an intellectual and political project. They are, as such, modernists despite themselves. Interrelated ironies emerge from their critique of the discourse of religious freedoms: theorizing Christianity reductively as only hegemonic and missionary, articulating a purist conception of an antecedent tradition prior to the advent of the modern state, locating agency disproportionately in the geopolitical and ideological unfolding of Western (Christian-centric) hegemonic discourse, and developing a crucial challenge to the liberal domestication of religion while also resisting analysis of the entanglement and co-imbrication of religion and nationalism. These are ironic because the resulting analysis remains quite ahistorical and embedded within a modernist paradigm, despite the important historicist angle and despite the critique of modernity that animates the Asadian approach. As a result of these interrelated ironies, the Asadian line attains a curious consensus with the antistatism of those who radically reject secularism and lament deep plurality. Finally, I discuss nationalism or the nation as an overlooked, mediating, analytic space that affords a more contextual and constructive analysis of religion and sociopolitical change. Before proceeding, I turn to discuss with some further detail what I mean by the Asadian line and the interrelated argument about the phenomenology of the secular.

THE ASADIAN LINE

Probing the discourse of religious freedoms exposes the complex and multidimensional relations between religion and social change. The aforementioned critics of this discourse, especially as it is integrated into American foreign policy, fittingly historicize and locate it in continuity with the broader discourses of orientalism, colonialism, and neo-imperialism/neoliberalism as well as with the domestic antagonisms between religious and political institutional spheres. This kind of interrogation is born out of, or shares an affinity with, what I term “the phenomenology of the secular,” which, as indicated, is theoretically grounded, for the most part, in Talal Asad’s historicist and genealogical critique of “religion” (1993, 2003). Undergirding this critique is, of course, the very notion of religion as a chosen belief that Asad has historicized and located within particular cultural, theological, and political agendas.
authorized by the intellectual tradition of liberalism. Simply put, interior-
izing and domesticating “religion” enabled the reshuffling of authority in
European contexts while concurrently and enduringly facilitating the pro-
jects of empire, globally.

Hence, the phenomenology of the secular is “phenomenological”
because it explains and describes divergent manifestations of the secular
globally as traceable to the big bang of secular modernity and the
project of Western empire. While the project of secular modernity is itself
subject to historicist critique, its causal properties and intellectual and po-
litical hegemony are assumed as axiomatic to the comparative study of
the “secular.” According to this account, “religious” and “secular” are fic-
titious and manufactured classifications, whose invention is due to the
disruptive forces of secular modernity with its particular normative pre-
sumptions and, crucially, its political agenda and interests. Within this
dystopia, what gets to be defined or articulated as “religious” is always
suspect as political manipulation and hegemonic in scope.

While Asad’s genealogical approach animates the undergirding suspi-
cion informing the phenomenology of the secular, it is important to note
that his genealogy does not completely theorize “religion” out of exis-
tence. “Things recognized as ‘religion’ in one place,” he writes, “consist of
things (including attitudes and practices) that hang together—but differ-
ently in different traditions. This ‘hanging together’ is what makes ‘rel-
gion’ real, and it poses the theoretically difficult question of how and to
what extent one religious dialect can be translated into another” (2012: 39
n5, emphasis added). He continues, “The reason there cannot be a uni-
versal conception of religion is not because religious phenomena are infi-
nitely varied. . . . Nor is it the case that there is no such thing, really, as
religion. It is that defining is a historical act and when the definition is de-
ployed, it does different things at different times and in different circum-
cstances, and responds to different questions, needs, and pressures” (2012:
38–39). To define diverse phenomena as “religious,” for Asad, amounts
to the imposition of particularly located cultural, intellectual, and politi-
cal agendas. This insight about the violence inherent in defining some-
thing as “religious,” without a concomitant attentiveness to the notion of
cultural translation, informs “the Asadian line.” This shorthand refers to
the critics who investigate and expose the discourse of religious freedoms
as a pivotal abstraction in the making of the modern West and as autho-
rizing neoliberal global hegemony.

What gets lost in the application of the Asadian phenomenology of
the secular, I argue below, is the notion of cultural translation—that there
is something that can be translated across contexts without reenacting
and deepening modes of domination. Without sensitivity to cultural
translation and the relevance of the “nation” along with the “state” as a constructive and contested space for conversations about religion, secularism, and religious freedoms, the phenomenologists of the secular, in other words, are implicated in power reductionism and thus risk an antirealist and reactionary position. This debilitates their capacity to theorize an alternative to the hegemonic discourse they critique. I now turn to discuss the contour of the critique.

THE CRITIQUE

What Is Being Critiqued?

The discursive critique that identifies continuities between the contemporary banner of “religious freedoms” and the colonial “civilizational mission” is especially acute as the cause of “religious freedoms” increasingly becomes integrated into official American strategizing. The strategic case for “protecting and promoting religious freedoms” abroad is deeply embedded in a domestic landscape of Islamophobia, bringing to the fore the validity of the Asadian charge of orientalism, a charge that will become clearer below.

Typifying the interlinking between the “exporting” of the supposed universal good of religious freedoms and the deep-rooted orientalism and Islamophobia that inform the parameters of IR theory and practice is a publication by the Witherspoon Institute (2012). The institute offers the following rationale (which also reverberates in the National Security Strategy of 2006 cited above; see fn. 1): “While we acknowledge that many religious traditions have produced violent extremists, we believe that in the twenty-first century Islamist extremism and terrorism pose one of the

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2See the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998 and the National Security Strategy of 2006. The incorporation of “freedoms promotion” as an American agenda is encapsulated in the following: “The United States has long championed freedom because doing so reflects our values and advances our interests. It reflects our values because we believe the desire for freedom lives in every human heart and the imperative of human dignity transcends all nations and cultures. Championing freedom advances our interests because the survival of liberty at home increasingly depends on the success of liberty abroad. Governments that honor their citizens’ dignity and desire for freedom tend to uphold responsible conduct toward other nations, while governments that brutalize their people also threaten the peace and stability of other nations. Because democracies are the most responsible members of the international system, promoting democracy is the most effective long-term measure for strengthening international stability; reducing regional conflicts; countering terrorism and terror-supporting extremism; and extending peace and prosperity. To protect our Nation and honor our values, the United States seeks to extend freedom across the globe by leading an international effort to end tyranny and to promote effective democracy” (3).

3For an analysis of how the discourses of orientalism and secularisms have informed theory and practice in international relations, see Shakman-Hurd (2008).
gravest threats to peace, security, and freedom.” Islam’s supposed special proclivity for violent extremism is framed as the upshot of religious repression to which Muslim contexts (countries), the reader is told, are especially prone: “Repression has helped incubate those Islamist ideologies and movements that endanger democracy and global security, and are a leading cause of national, regional, and global instability” (55).

The Witherspoon statements exemplify the kind of language the Asadians illuminate in their critique of the exportation and operationalization of religious liberty as an inalienable human right and the kind of agenda and hegemonies such language enables, domestically and globally. The Asadian critics, therefore, crucially contradict the truisms of what they pigeonhole as neoconservative champions of a religious freedom agenda. As a result, neo-conservatism (with its combination of political individualism and traditional social conservatism often associated with a conservative religious agenda) becomes an umbrella term, which obscures more than it illuminates. The neoconservative vantage point, against which the Asadians react and then attribute to modernity writ large, underscores the global threat against religious freedom: “Religious freedom is under siege,” their argument goes. It is not only that people “are subject to violent persecution because of their religious beliefs, or those of their tormentors,” but also, the authors of the Witherspoon publication claim, “in the west itself, including the United States, religious freedom is also under various pressures” (2012: v). This argument is usually accompanied by a host of empirical research about an increased threat to religious freedom more generally and Christian minorities more specifically, a discourse that attempts to authorize the enduring war on terrorism (read: Islamism). It is on the basis of the interrelation between local and global questions of “religious liberty” that religious freedom–qua–human right is universalized as an exportable good and as such a necessary good for

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4The Religious Freedom Project under the auspices of the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, hosts and facilitates much of this discussion. Among its various research initiatives, for instance, is a focused exploration of “Christianity’s contribution to the construction and diffusion of freedom in its political, religious, and economic dimensions” (http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/rfp/themes/christianity-freedom-historical-and-contemporary-perspectives). For an encapsulated account of Christians as victims of global trends of persecution, refer to Shah (2013) and Farr (2013). For a further conceptual framing of the threat to religious freedoms globally (including the West), see Hertzke (2013). For other examples of research participating in authorizing the war on terrorism and integrating the discourse of religious freedom into the framing of American geopolitical agendas, see Farr (2012), Rowley and Smith (2009), and Inboden (2012). Comparative ethicist David Little offers an important voice operative within the Berkley Center’s Religious Freedom Project. He paints a complex and ambivalent picture concerning the relations between intra-Christian history and the development of the conception of religious freedom as a foundational aspect of the human rights tradition. See, for example, Little (2011).
strategically ensuring American safety in a world filled with religious extremists. Countering this narrative, the Asadians argue that exporting “religious freedom” constitutes but the latest chapter in a long colonial geopolitical history of displacement and domination. Read through this lens, the deployment of the seemingly positive language of the protection of religious freedoms sounds as positive as the “mission civilisatrice,” the authorizing slogan of French colonialism.

Meet the Critics

Anthropologist Saba Mahmood articulates the thrust of the Asadian critique through a historical and genealogical study of the emergence of the discourse of religious freedom (2012a, 2012b). Mahmood locates the history of “religious liberty” activism within the context of the showdown between the Ottomans and the increasingly hard-to-deflect European intrusions into Ottoman internal affairs (beginning already around the sixteenth century)—intrusions often framed under the banner of the “right to protect Christian minorities within Ottoman territories” (2012a: 421). By 1856, Mahmood recounts, the Ottoman rulers adopted “the right of religious liberty” in order to combat the Christian missionary movement and to buttress the Muslim character of the diminishing empire. Notably, advancing the argument for religious liberty eventually secured Christians’ “right” to proselytize to Muslims and other non-Christians within the Ottoman empire, under the system of “capitulations” that granted Christian Westerners special protections. Clearly, Mahmood concludes, the recent mainstreaming of the discourse of religious freedom is necessarily implicated within the interwoven legacies of colonialism and missionizing.

Mahmood underscores that framing the Middle East as an “aberration from the norm of Western tolerance” is conceptually blinding and reveals the normative positionality of an entire industry of “religious freedom” advocacy (2012b) of which the Witherspoon report’s authors are part. This is precisely where orientalism sneaks back into the preoccupation with religious minorities around the world as intrinsic and constitutive of the Christian-centric presuppositions inherent in the religious liberties discourse because it is “the Middle East, and the Muslim world,” Mahmood writes, that “are supposed to be afflicted with the ills of fundamentalism and illiberal governments” (2012b). This framing leads to the increasing currency of religious liberty as a “salvific promise” and therefore but a new articulation of an antecedent colonial, missionary, imperial, authorizing discourse.

Mahmood’s self-declared intention is not to argue for or against religious freedoms, but rather to expose “the contradictions and paradoxes
that lie at the foundation of this much coveted right” (2012b). It is my task here to also illuminate the contradictions and paradoxes in the Asadian line that she, along with other critics, pursues. In her historical scrutiny, Mahmood contrasts the modern liberal and Western drive toward “sameness” with the Ottoman design, in which the intention was to retain a thoroughly stratified political order. The liberal model of tolerance, civil equality, and religious liberty, with its concomitant conception of religion-*qua*-belief, is entirely modern, Mahmood concludes. Therefore, she positions the historical Ottoman “nonliberal model of pluralism” in contrast to the liberal Western one, which seeks “to politically transform difference into sameness” (2012b). This grim characterization of modern nationalism reveals Mahmood’s as well as other Asadians’ inclinations to rely on modernist paradigms for explicating the phenomenon of nationalism while discursively criticizing—as she does in her study of pious Muslim women in Egypt (2005)—how religion (and female agency) gets to be defined within and in opposition to a modernist and secularist framework. Before turning to this paradox, I first proceed to discuss the discursive critique of modernity intimated by the Asadians.

Genealogy of the Modern

Mahmood and the other genealogists echo Asad’s conception of the modern state as the generator of the highly contextual category of “belief,” perceived “as being at once a privilege (the subject’s right to choose his or her belief) and a danger (belief’s incitement to violence and intolerance)” (2012: 43). The genesis of this ambivalent conception of religion-*qua*-belief is attributed to modernity, with its usual intellectual suspects: John Locke’s work on delimiting the state’s realm of coercion, protecting something called “conscience,” and thus engendering the coveted modern good of tolerance. What this theory presupposes and privileges is the primacy of cognition, choice, and the autonomous self, the very building blocks of liberal modernity with its conception of citizenship as “sameness” against which Mahmood seems to be reacting.5

5In her admirable effort to demystify the “nonliberal other” through the ethnographic study of pious politics of Muslim traditionalist women, and in allowing these women to speak back and press against Western liberal sensibilities without any attempt on her part to salvage some “redeemable liberal elements” (2005: 5, for example) from those Muslim practices, Mahmood largely reifies the “liberal” or “liberalism” over against which she portrays the Egyptian women’s piety movement. While my critique of those who work within or intersect with the Asadian intellectual trajectory (grounded in his reading of Foucault) is too expansive to allow me to focus at length on how this trajectory exerts itself in Mahmood’s Politics of Piety, the influences are there and implicate her in what could well be discussed as communitarian vs. liberal, a mutually exclusive logic of dichotomous opposition. Matt Waggoner offers a helpful critique of Mahmood’s study of obedience and agency and her dismissal of the concept of individual autonomy as inescapably Kantian and Eurocentric and
Such a modernist tone likewise underlies Asad’s portrayal of liberalism as a multifaceted tradition. “I am aware that liberalism is a complex historical tradition, that Locke is not Constant and Constant is not Mill and Mill is not Rawls” (2009: 25). And yet this tradition authorized modernity: “As a discursive space, liberalism provides its advocates with a common political and moral language in which to identify problems and to dispute them. Such ideas as individual autonomy, freedom of (economic, political, social) exchange, limitation of state power, rule of law, national self-determination, and religious toleration belong to that space, not least when their meanings are debated” (2009: 25). And this tradition’s conceptualization of the human person is pivotal for the universalizing discourse of certain freedoms as inalienable. The inalienability of such freedoms as the freedom of belief revolves around the basic conception of personal ownership. Freedom itself is “an inalienable form of property, a capacity that all individual persons possess in a state of nature, rooted in a living body” (2009: 28). While recognizing that liberalism contains various voices, Asad nonetheless locates this tradition within the conventional narration of modernity and the intellectuals associated with this development of which the “state” is both instrumental and emblematic.

It is precisely the universalizing of highly particularistic conceptions of choice and personhood that the Asadian critique contests. Indeed, the conception of an autonomous, choosing individual is integral to defining “belief” as a matter of individual conscience, outwardly manifested in ritualistic forms that accordingly ought to be protected from intrusion. Hence, the discourse of religious freedoms and liberties purports to defend individuals’ consciences against coercion and to ensure the personal and communal freedom to act upon beliefs in the form of ritualistic

thus untranslatable across cultural and historical contexts (2005: 247). According to Waggoner, it is not clear why Mahmood aspires to salvage the concept of agency but nonetheless disengages it from its conventional emancipatory connotations (249), redescribing it as “vegetival” [rather] than the “agentival” (248) and risking ahistoricity despite her attention to the irreconcilable particularities of cultural and historical contexts. The risk of ahistoricity resides in a presumption that “there are fixed desires, goals, and subject forms unique to specific cultures” (249). Hence, Waggoner argues that despite the historical and context-specific focus of her study of pious women in Egypt, Mahmood’s rejection of “Western” conceptions of agency (as well as critique of feminist poststructuralist lenses) puts her ironically back in the kind of cultural essentialism she sought to deconstruct. Similar ironies play out in her and other Asadians’ engagement with the untranslatability of “religion” and the language of “religious freedom” across cultures, because any effort to do so supposedly universalizes cultural particularity that is not, in effect, universal. In both Mahmood’s study of the different and nonliberal modality of agency of pious Muslim women in Egypt and in her genealogy of religious freedom, which is the focus of this article, the modern nation-state embodies a particular projection of the “secular” that is thoroughly modernist in its historical narration and concomitant assumptions about the relations between religion and national formation.
practices. The invention of conscience, therefore, enabled the differentiation of public from private, where “religion” and “subjectivity” resided outside the coercive force of the “state.” The latter could only exercise force in “securing objective public interests: the protection of life, limb, and property” (2012: 43). These sets of objective areas constitute the business of the secular modern state. Hence, for Asad and those working in his tradition, the modern state produced a particular definition of religion that was deeply embedded within “a political discourse about ‘privacy,’ a claim to civil immunity with regard to religious faith” (2012: 44). But, as I explore below, to recognize the discursivity of religion and the modern state cannot reduce religion to state-making as it relates to global power structures and cultural hegemonies.

Critiquing the Critics

The Asadian critique of the intellectual tradition authorizing the project of modernity is highly selective. Retrieving what he refers to as a “minor tradition” going back to Baruch/Benedict Spinoza, William Connolly challenges the homogenizing Asadian account of the Enlightenment. He notes that Asad’s indebtedness to Michel Foucault also grounds him in a thread of this minor intellectual tradition born out of Spinoza’s experience of “double exclusion” from both Christian and Jewish ecclesiastical traditions (2006: 82–83). For Connolly, Spinoza offers a clear resistance to the “thin intellectualism that grips secularism—that is, the idea that thinking can be separated from its affective dimension and that exercises of the self and collective rituals merely represent or symbolize beliefs” (2006: 84). In Spinoza and “late modern Spinozists,” Connolly identifies the necessary resources for imagining a pluralistic ethics of engagement with a “minority in a world of interconnected minorities,” which he reads Asad as also aspiring to, considering it obvious that the purpose of Asad’s critique of modernity is not “to construct a new theocentric regime” (2006: 79). Retrieving Spinoza and the minor tradition Connolly associates with him is indeed critical for exposing the heterogeneity of an otherwise homogeneous description of Western modernity on which the Asadian line relies. This reliance prevents cultivating the constructive upshot of the critique, that is, theorizing how religion relates (and translates) structurally and hermeneutically to cultivating conditions for deep plurality. This modality of critique also theorizes the role of Christianity in the production of the discourse of religious freedoms in a rather monochromatic manner. It stresses empire and aggressive missionizing rather than the complex theological, philosophical, sociopolitical, cultural, and economic contestations that transformed Christianity into Christianities and that allowed the potential emergence of pluralistic ethics debated
within the frameworks of nation-states and mediated through the category of citizenship. To overlook engagement with such complexities and minor traditions (à la Connolly) provides the kind of false choice Mahmood seems to be articulating: the Ottoman millet system with its stratified recognition of plurality or the fictional, imposed, and manufactured sameness associated with modern domesticating and taming of the “religious.”

The theoretical underpinning of this binary is not inconsistent with Mahmood’s earlier study of pious Egyptian Muslim women and their enactment of agency through inhabiting their interpretations of the Muslim norms of submissiveness and obedience. This insistence on an ethic of embodiment as countering the possibility of translating ethical experiences cross-culturally, as Matt Waggoner argues, stands in a profound tension with relational ethical reflections such as Judith Butler’s conceptualization of an ethics and politics of alterity. Alterity here entails recognition of the self’s embodiment as well as vulnerability and dependence on others. Illuminating the vulnerability and dependence of human persons and thus their relationality is how Butler recovers a universalist framework that affords translatability of ethical languages cross-culturally. This cross-cultural translatability is not necessarily dominating and hegemonic, as the Asadians have it, but could also introduce subversive and counter-hegemonic resources (Waggoner 2005: 257–259). An ethic of embodiment without relationality is self-referential, conservative, ahistorical, and essentialist when it comes to the analysis of culture and cultural differences. This is despite its overwhelming resistance to universalism through attentiveness to the historical and the particular. The same conceptual limit that posits the false binary of the millet system—stratified nonliberal pluralism—vs. sameness and the erasure of particularities informs the Asadian critique of the discourse of religious freedom.

Without an explicit normative embrace of how the question of religious freedoms and freedom of conscience plays into cultivating conditions for deep plurality (one that does not necessarily impose the parochial as universal), the act of critique constitutes an antithesis to the kind of orientalism informing triumphalist accounts of the Christian underpinnings of the concept of religious freedom. In other words, to recognize how a discourse about religious freedoms became complicit with empire need not be reductionist, which the Asadian critique ultimately becomes in its reliance on an unreconstructed modernist narrative. One must also

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6For critiques of the Asadian line along this focus on pluralizing the narrative of the secular that takes into account the complex and diverse Christian contexts and divergent trajectories of European history, see Casanova (2008).
be cautious about subsuming all proponents of religious freedom and minority rights under the broad rubric of empire and domination. After all, it seems silly to equate political philosopher Martha Nussbaum’s work in defense of religious freedom and tolerance (2008) or Will Kymlicka’s on the diffusion of the multicultural discourse of citizenship (2007) with the Witherspoon report.

To be sure, the larger effort to denaturalize “religious freedoms” seems to be caught in a monotone narrative that, as a matter of course, glosses over how “religions” are interwoven into the legitimating fabric that then enables the various “states” to reproduce the hegemonic discourse of religious freedoms. This oversight is detrimental to the critics’ otherwise significant contribution. Their reliance on the modernist paradigm of nationalism—which locates the onset of nationalism with watershed events such as industrialization, the French Revolution, the development of print capitalism, and anticolonial struggles for independence—illuminates the paradoxes inherent in their critique.7

The Asadians, I illustrate below, are beholden to a methodological nationalism that too easily enables them to draw distinctions between an entity called the “state” and its imposition of a category called “religion” upon various communities. The conflation of the state with the nation glosses over how “states” are authorized, not only vaguely through a universalizing discourse of modernity, but very particularly through the ethnocultural, linguistic, and religious specificities of the national imagination.

DISCURSIVE RUPTURE

About the Purist Trap

Asad views liberalism as the product of an inevitable “discursive rupture.” In fact, he writes that “every new tradition, whether it is called religious or not, is founded in a discursive rupture—which means through a kind of violence” (2011: 286). But, while Asad offers a critique of the modernist discourse and the violent rupture it generates, he nonetheless relies heavily on a narrative that views modernity as inaugurating the novel phenomenon of nationalism, which he clearly views negatively.

7Benedict Anderson’s oft-cited Imagined Communities (1991) typifies a modernist account of the emergence of nationalism and the nation-state unit. Revisions to this modernist timeline locate the onset of (proto-)nationalisms in the sociopolitical and theological complexities that marked the era of the Protestant Reformations and subsequent developments. For an exposition of the decisive role of the Protestant Reformations in the development of modern nationalism, see Figgis (1956), Gorski (2003), Hirschi (2012), Little (2014), and Marx (2003).
He tells us, “The [French] revolution inaugurated the age of modern empires, unleashing modern warfare, nationalism, racism, and genocide around the world. All of this is certainly part of ‘Christian’ Europe’s history.” “Of course,” Asad continues, “it would be absurd to suggest that it is the sum, or the essence, of Western history, but it is a part. Is it not therefore also part of its inheritance?” (2009: 27)

Ironically, Asad depends upon a binary that he tries to deconstruct and move beyond. In discussing the powerful concept of seduction as valorized within the context of the liberal model, his reliance on the liberal/modern vs. traditional/nonmodern binary comes to the fore. He posits that “the liberal distinction between coercion and reasoned choice”—a distinction at the heart of discourse on freedoms—crumbles in the space of seduction where “both consent and coercion are ambiguously present” (Asad 2009: 31). The paradox here is that seduction is the name of the game within the liberal context, which is fundamentally dependent on a perception of the person as a choosing self. “Thus in liberal democracies the individual as consumer and as voter is subjected to a variety of allurements through appeals to greed, vanity, envy, revenge, and so on. What in other circumstances may be identified and condemned as moral failings are here essential to the functioning of a particular kind of economy and polity” (Asad 2009: 31). The puzzle here is how a utopian interpretation of tradition as the opposite of the unfavorable ideological logic of the liberal state coheres with the Asadian critique of modernist binaries.

For Asad, then, “liberal democracy” is always spoken of in the abstract, enabling a location of the “state” as a faceless imposition. Even, as I show below, where he discusses the meanings that constitute “Frenchness” as a conflict zone between secularism and certain religious practices and symbols, he presupposes these cultural meanings as ultimately manufactured by and traceable to the modernist state-making agenda. This assumption is modernist because it portrays “Frenchness” as unimaginable outside the “disruptive rupture” of modernity, initiating and constitutive of the reshuffling of the relations between political and ecclesiastical authorities. Likewise, in analyzing the shifting meanings and the historicity of religious liberty as a human right, Mahmood attributes primary causality to the institutions of state and colonial, imperial, and later neo-imperial domination. She importantly recognizes that the discursive issue is not merely juridical, but intricately linked to the structuring of majority–minority relations in every national context.⁸ This is an important insight that could lead to an interpretative engagement with

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⁸This is also echoed in Mahmood (2009).
the intersecting and elastic relations between religious and national boundaries, but Mahmood instead situates the question within the broader narrative of modern state-centrism. She writes to this effect: “Things of course started to change with the birth of the modern state wherein the terms of ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ came to serve as constitutional devices for resolving differences that the ideology of nationalism sought to eradicate, eliminate, or assimilate” (Mahmood 2012b). Both within various national contexts and internationally, it is “realpolitik concerns” that Mahmood seeks to uncover by deconstructing the discourse of religious freedom and liberty. To this extent, she too offers a rather modernist and realist (in the political science use of this concept) narration of the rise of the nation-state. But the anticlericalism of much modern nationalism (see, for example, Smith 2003) does not preclude the participation of religious and cultural memories, symbols, and narratives in constructing the symbolic topographies or boundaries within which the topic of “religious freedoms” is then debated, protected, or violated.

The Asadian critique of religion as a highly modern and Christian-centric category with its cognitive bias and functional instrumentality in reshaping the political order does not mean that Hindus, Buddhists, and Tibetans were invented out of nowhere. Rather, these identities were imagined in highly contextual and complex manners and, while their imagining cannot be fully understood outside the intersecting discourses of colonialism, nationalism, and Christian missionizing, they cannot be reduced to these discourses either. Such a reductive presumption is anti-realist and, on the altar of conflating modernity with cultural and political imperialism, it sacrifices the Asadian analytic balancing act of cultural translation, which could rescue the critique of the (neo)liberal and neo-conservative discourses from this trap of over-historicity. In the same way in which Butler’s notion of human relational dependency and vulnerability challenges Mahmood’s resistance to a cross-cultural yet embodied ethical framework, Asad’s own notion of cultural translation

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9This is ironic considering that realist theorizing in IR usually operates with the kind of secularist presumptions that she and her colleagues otherwise radically critique.

10This trap of ahistoricity animates many contributions to “The Politics of Religious Freedom,” a guest-edited blog by Elizabeth Shakman-Hurd and Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, under the auspices of the SSRC’s The Immanent Frame. The line of critique extrapolated from this sustained discussion on the blog also echoes and is interwoven with Politics of Religious Freedom: Contested Norms & Local Practices, a joint research project led by Danchin et al. (n.d.). The project purports to engage comparatively “the multiple historical trajectories, concepts, and practices now organized under the rubric of religious freedom.” This very framing, despite an acknowledgment of “multiple historical trajectories,” already illuminates an abiding suspicion of a unitary and overwhelming hegemony and imperialist motives behind the deployment of such a rubric. For a notable example, see Heffner’s critique of the Asadian premises below.
contains the seeds of critiquing the Asadian line’s dismissal of the universal validity of the concept of “religious freedom” as a manufactured construct with universalizing pretenses but no universal traction across cultural terrains.

In reducing religion entirely to modernity and to the interconnected orientalist, imperialist, and neoliberal agendas, Asadians ironically hold on to a purist interpretation of premodern religion as something that a discursive critique can somehow rescue.11 This assumption precludes consideration of contextual change and reframing. To provide an example, religious studies scholar Donald S. Lopez is only partially correct that Tibetans are “prisoners of Shangri-La” or of Western fantasies about them (1998). As one critic of Lopez’s thesis argues, orientalist fantasies of Tibet are indeed crucial for analyzing Tibetan nationalism, but Tibetans cannot be reduced to Western fantasies of them (Thurman 2001); nor can an admittedly contemporary notion of a Tibetan national identity be dismissed as “alien” even if commodified as an easily digestible cause for a Western audience. The Asadian line risks falling into the trap of this kind of excessive self-referentiality as well as maintaining an ironically ahistorical hold on an apolitical and nonethnic interpretation of religiosity. Similarly, only a deeply historical approach can provide an explanatory framework for the kind of transformations that Haredi communities in Israel, for instance, have undergone as a result of their interrelation with the secular (and Jewish) Israeli nation-state. These transformations cannot be dismissed, anthropologically speaking, as in-authentic. The Asadians presuppose such relations as mono-directional, assigning agency only to the amorphous liberal/secular state and, by extension, to the “West.”

So here comes another, related paradox. Despite a concentrated effort to broaden the modalities of agency and to illuminate the enduring orientalism of discourses in IR (including that of religious freedoms), the Asadians produce a reactionary and purist prism through which to read the nature of the violent relations between tradition and modernity: good “religion” remains untouched by the traces of the political and intellectual project of modernity. Of course, the Asadians urge, it cannot be referred to as “religion” at all. Hence, the Asadian juxtaposition of tradition with the novelty of the modern state project precludes an appreciation of actual interconnections between the religious and the political

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11 In connection with this “recovery,” works such as Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) are cited to illuminate the insidious connection between neoliberalism and identity in the contemporary world. “Culture” or “identity,” accordingly, is a commodity packaged in the service of global capitalism (see, for instance, Shakman-Hurd 2013).
imaginations. These interconnections are not the mere inventions of political entrepreneurs. Instead, they are grounded in divergent histories and cultural practices that predate modernity. At stake is not only the usual political manipulation for the advancement of a particular agenda; rather, political hegemony is integral to a particular (always selective) religious imagination.\textsuperscript{12} The Asadian reliance on a modernist explanatory paradigm can only analyze such phenomena as pathological. This testifies to another irony of the Asadian line. It resists the domestication of religion as an instrument of state-making while also resisting the interfacing of religion in the making of nationalism and the elasticity of this relationship. This irony clearly comes through in Asad’s own engagement with nationalism.

Asad and Nationalism

Asad’s profound argument that “the public sphere is a space necessarily (not just contingently) articulated by power” (2003: 185) presents a fundamental and familiar critique of the hegemony of liberal discourse, demanding that this discourse become aware of its cultural modes of violence, regardless of its commitment to tolerance and inclusivity. But the recognition that the boundaries of the public are demarcated by power can be further enriched and complicated by reflecting on how religious memories, symbols, and claims intersect with and even construct the very parameters of the public, otherwise articulated as the “national.” This, I suggest, may introduce some constructive possibilities to the otherwise antagonistic implications of the Asadian critique.

The ironic or paradoxical reliance on the modernist paradigm, however, suggests that “deprivatization,” à la Asad, would amount to a reversal and subversion of modern assumptions and institutions (including those of the “state”). But, as already established, the point of the critique and decentering of Christianity and the “provincializing of Europe” (to borrow from Dipesh Chakrabarty) is not to establish a theocentric regime or an Ottoman millet system but rather to imagine a deep plurality that would move beyond the monocultural presumptions of modern nationalism. Let us recall that Connolly does so through a retrieval of Spinoza’s double exclusion as a foundation for his constructive conceptualization of an ethics of engagement “in a world of interconnected minorities” (2006: 91). This is where he illuminates the constructive, yet under-theorized, dimensions of the Asadian line, which indeed cohere with his own work.

\textsuperscript{12}For examples of how this selectivity works out within diverse national contexts, see Hibbard (2010).
Nonetheless, Connolly’s ethics of multiple minorities likewise presupposes a methodological nationalism: axiomatic boundaries within which “rhizomatic” pluralism can take shape (2006: 90–91). This vision effectively theorizes nationalism out of existence and with it the messy work of engaging the dynamic interrelations between religion, ethnicity, and national boundaries. Surely, one may approach the complex case of Israel/Palestine with Connolly’s “ethics of engagement” in an effort to transform the chauvinism that underlies the conflict. Nothing will change, however, without a substantive transformation of the meanings of Jewish–Israeli identity and a reimagining of Israel/Palestine, spatially and normatively. The nation-state remains the locus where such hermeneutics takes place. It is not theorized out of existence—a mode of theorizing that can easily slide into a form of cosmopolitan teleology, which carries its own forms of cultural violence.

It is revealing that, while Asad understands the public space as imbued by culturally embedded sensibilities, he nonetheless presumes that these “sensibilities—memories and aspirations, fears and hopes” are somehow exclusive of religious dimensions. For Asad, “the modern idea of religious belief (protected as a right in the individual and regulated institutionally) is a critical function of the liberal-democratic nation-state but not of democratic sensibility” (2012: 56–57). In this regard, he effectively problematizes the assumption of the atomistic, choosing subject. Even if one arrives at a belief as an outcome of an intellectual process, relying on cognition, this choice is not unconnected to discursive formations: the disciplining of sensibilities (2012: 44). This argument reinforces a modernist materialist interpretation of nationalism as an invented construct, instrumental for manufacturing liberal democracies and their consumers/citizens. But Asad asks a question that may point to the multiple directions operative in imagining and evaluating democratic sensibilities:

How does democratic sensibility as an ethos (whether “religious” or “secular”) accord with democracy as a state system? The former, after all, involves the desire for mutual care, distress at the infliction of pain and indignity, concern for the truth more than for immutable subjective rights, the ability to listen and not merely to tell, and the willingness to

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13 The notion of “rhizomatic” echoes Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who, drawing on a biological metaphor of the rhizome’s tran-species links, developed a theory that attempted to avoid dualistic and binary categories in interpreting knowledge (1987).
14 This post- or antinationalist prism is also apparent very specifically in Butler (2012).
15 For an illustration of this argument in the context of the nationalism literature, see Gellner (1983).
evaluate behavior without being judgmental toward others; it tends toward greater inclusivity. The latter—democracy as a state system—is jealous of its sovereignty, defines and protects the subjective rights of its citizens (including their right to “religious freedom”), infuses them with nationalist fervor, and invokes bureaucratic rationality in governing them justly; it is fundamentally exclusive. (2012: 56)

The distinction between democracy as an ethos and democracy as a state system is important for at least two reasons. The first relates to the normativity inferred from the statement above: democratic ethos and inclusivity appear to be goods that ought to be sought after and protected. Secondly, the notion of “democracy as an ethos” seems to forget the embedded reality or the actual demos and how it is constituted through practices, memories, narratives, symbols, and sacrifices. That Asad contrasts a democratic ethos to democracy as a state once again suggests a modernist gloss.

Indeed, Asad’s engagement with nationalism as distinct from his discussion of the “liberal–secular state” remains within the landscape sculpted by functionalist and/or (social) evolutionary modernist accounts of nationalism (works by scholars like Julian Huxley, Margaret Jacob, and C. J. H. Hayes as well as Clifford Geertz). This constitutes a limited engagement with the literature on nationalism and religion, which leads Asad in one essay (2003: 187–195) to dismiss, and in another (2006: 499) to retrieve, functionalist explanatory frameworks that may lend themselves to suggesting modern nationalism as a replacement for religion (echoing a Durkheimian trajectory). While likewise dismissive of the evolutionary lens (which carries obvious functionalist undertones) that views nationalism as a human, social religion and that views reason and civil society as the ground of such religion, Asad and those working within the Asadian and related traditions nonetheless operate with the theoretical presumption of the state as the embodiment of such an evolutionary aspiration. So, while rejecting the normative connotations and while illuminating the kind of violence inflicted by the modern–liberal–secular hegemony, Asad nonetheless also assumes the descriptive accuracy of the aspirational objectives of liberal secularity.

Hence, it is not entirely correct to say that Asad does not pay attention to nationalism. In fact, he does so but only in a highly modernist sense. His theoretical engagement with nationalism entails extrapolating an interpretation of the construct of nationalism from Carl Schmitt’s well-known notion of political theology. Asad writes, “Nationalism has a religious origin.” The bottom line for Asad is that nationalism and
theology do not only share “structural analogies,” per Schmitt’s thesis, but that what came to be categorized as “society” in the nineteenth century is a novel phenomenon born out of historically specific developments. This is where Asad’s invaluable genealogical work on secularism sheds light on the historicity of the “secular” and “social,” tracing these categories back partly to the Renaissance doctrine of humanism, the Enlightenment notion of “nature,” and Georg W. F. Hegel’s philosophy of history (2003: 192). But the recurrent presumption that the “nation” was entirely born out of these developments conforms with the modernist accounts of nationalism, even if the latter usually adheres to unrevised secularist interpretations of “religion.” Indeed, it is not only the case that the relations between religion and nationalism cannot be understood simply in analogical or emergent terms, as in Schmitt’s work, but it is also not the case that the nation-state is instrumental in restructuring and redefining “religion” altogether. It may be that both Schmitt’s insight about the structural analogies and Asad’s underscoring of the very modernity of the terms under consideration are correct and relevant to the contemporary analysis of religion in global politics. What these two approaches miss, however, is how the “nations” that authorize “states” are also not modern. The Asadians overlook important sociological and anthropological data suggesting that collectivistic identities, as sociologist of religion Slavica Jakelić argues, did not arise with the onset of liberal modernity and that a genealogy of the relations between modern nationalisms and traditional religions cannot be summed up with the language of displacement or replacement (2010: Chap. 1). In fact, “traditional religions” were already collectivistic. However, Asad and the scholars working within his tradition presume that the nation is an utterly modern construct and, like the modernist theorists of nationalism, only allow instrumental space for

16The reliance on a modernist paradigm then explains why Asad refers to Benedict Anderson’s thesis, illuminating especially the point that a radical break in conceptions of time and space undergirds the rise of modern nationalisms (2003: 193–194). On these pages, Asad most clearly articulates his narrative of the rise of the modern nation-state as emblematic of the break in which the “medieval Christian universe, with its interlinked times (eternity and its moving image, and the irruptions of the former into the latter: Creation, Fall, Christ’s life and death, Judgment Day) and hierarchy of spaces (the heaven, the earth, purgatory, hell), is broken down by the modern doctrine of secularism into a duality: a world of self-authenticating things in which we really live as social beings and a religious world that exists only in our imagination” (194). “To insist,” Asad continues, “that nationalism should be seen as religion, or even as having been ‘shaped’ by religion is . . . to miss the nature and consequence of the revolution brought about by modern doctrines and practices of the secular in the structure of collective representations. Of course modern nationalism draws on preexisting languages and practices—including those that we call, anachronistically, ‘religious.’ How could it be otherwise? Yet it doesn’t follow from this that religion forms nationalism” (194).
religious institutions and vocabularies, especially in the consolidating early period.\(^{17}\)

Of course, for Asad, the “secular” and the “religious” are both born out of the historical, theological, and intellectual developments cited above, and their binary confinement within restricted spheres (public vs. private) is pivotal for the logic of the modern nation-state. And yet, while the social or public space may be presented as natural and neutral, it is always articulated not only by power, but also by legitimated power (authority). That legitimation is ultimately cultural, ethnic, and religious, and, as such, is always selective and open for reinterpretation and redrawing. This point about legitimacy brings Max Weber’s negotiations between Marxist and Nietzschean reductionisms to the fore. His notion of “elective affinities” both elevates the highly hermeneutical quality of nationalism and its potential multidirectionality.\(^{18}\) Not only can “nationalisms” change as a result of interacting with explicitly religious interests, but the institution of the nation-state can also transform religious traditions. This insight, however, is lost in the Asadian homogenizing narration of the modern state and ironically ahistorical reading of religious traditions.

In Asad’s aforementioned effort to map French secularism, for instance, recognition of the enduring elasticity of the interrelation between religion and nationalism is subordinated to the master narrative of the rise of the absolute modern state as representing a paradigm shift and an enduring explanatory framework for the various perceived fault lines that emerged between religion and state. The discussion of French secularism, he argues, is squarely located within the question of nationalism’s autochthonous drive and its structural and conceptual reliance on a distinction

\(^{17}\) The two paradigms for the study of religion and nationalism (modernist and ethnosymbolist) fluctuate along a spectrum of reductionism, reflecting comparable (and interrelated) patterns in IR theorizing. In every case, the type of reductionism that treats religion epiphenomenally can be intellectually traced back to the kind of social reductionism found in Durkheim, Marxist economic reductionism, Nietzschean power-reductionism, or Freudian psychological reductionism. The idealist reductionism that may mark the ethnosymbolist approach, on the other hand, views the emergence of modern nationalisms as entirely dependent on preexisting (even if always reinterpreted and appropriated) sacred foundations: myths about chosenness, providential mission, and so forth. In some curious and not consciously acknowledged manner, this type of reductionism exemplifies a Hegelian conception of history against which materialist critics such as Karl Marx reacted in their attempts to rescue the “real interests of people” from the claws of super-structural ideology that religion epitomizes. These types of reductionisms also mark much of the literature on religion and conflict and religious nationalism. See, for example, Juergensmeyer (1993, 2000) and Norris and Inglehart (2004). For an overview of the state of the field on religion and violence, see Appleby (2012).

\(^{18}\) See Little (1995) for an example of a work that deploys a Weberian lens to the analysis of nationalism and ethnoreligious conflicts.
between political and religious spaces. Certainly, for Asad, the “secular” is not a culturally empty or neutral space, even if it is presented as “natural” or simply “social.” The curious construct of “Judeo-Christian” values, he stresses, is woven into the modernist manufacturing of a fiction of “shared cultural values”—the building blocks marshaled into the disciplining of the sensibilities of secular “Frenchness.” Secular Frenchness, Asad retorts, is currently threatened by the Muslim Others whose very otherness, famously conveyed in Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters*, spurred the development of the discourse of *laïcité* during the Third Republic and its colonialist expansion (*mission civilisatrice*). This constitutes his critique of orientalism and laical secularism as they interface in the contested fault lines embodied in French girls’ veiled hair, within the context of French public schools. The nuances of this critique notwithstanding, the patterns and engines of change between religion (Islam) and the state (Judeo-Christian yet laical) remain, for the Asadian narrative, antagonistic, mono-directional, and thus modernist. The modernist orientation comes through lucidly in Asad’s reading of the modern secular French state as persistently representing the *cuius regio eius religio* principle which, for him, does not necessarily amount to “the commitment to or interdiction of a particular religion . . . but the installation of a single absolute power—the sovereign state—drawn from a single abstract source and facing a single political task: the worldly care of its population regardless of its beliefs” (2006: 499). This interpretation of the “state” as the embodiment of the rupture from the traditional to the modern, then, provides a highly modernist prism through which he reads the contestation of French secularism. The upshot of his analysis pivots around outlining the state’s regulatory classification of “good” or “safe/tame” and “bad” or “subversive” forms of religiosity or religious signs and symbols—the definitional highlight of modernity and the birth of tolerance of which the *cuius regio eius religio* is a celebrated precursor.

Likewise, in his discussion concerning whether Islamism should be regarded as nationalism, Asad juxtaposes Arab nationalism and Islamism, arguing that “while the ‘Arab nation’ is inconceivable without its history, the Islamic umma presupposes only the Qur’an and sunna” (2003: 197). Indeed, important distinctions between Arab nationalism and Islamism exist, but once again, the modernist paradigm may lead Asad to overstate these differences. In particular, ahistoricizing Islamist accounts overlooks the high contextuality of yet another, crucial variable—“ethnicity”—for deciphering the meanings and imagining and reimagining of nationalisms in specific contexts. As the Muslim historiographer Ibn Khaldun observed in the fourteenth century, ‘*asabiyya*, or social solidarity based on a perception of belonging to a particular group,
is an undeniable anthropological datum, even within the wide terrains of the Muslim empires (1967: 98). The Asadian critics overlook this variable, which forces an analysis of modern nationalism not merely as a disruptive novel phenomenon instrumental (in its manufactured fiction of “shared cultural values”) for the facelessness and far-reaching tentacles of the modern liberal discourse. In focusing on the violent domestication of “religion” (a colonial act), they sidestep consideration of how “religion” interfaces with imagining and embodying the “nation,” hardly a modern phenomenon.

Mahmood, along with a growing group of scholars, popularized Asad’s ironic modernist bias. Her application of Asad’s genealogical lens posits the “modern state” as the embodiment of secular modernity, a radical break with tradition. One example is her typical depiction and historicizing of the hegemony of “secular rationality”: “as [it] has come to define law, statecraft, knowledge production, and economic relations in the modern world,” she writes, “it has also simultaneously transformed the conceptions, ideals, practices, and institutions of religious life” (2009: 64). Indeed, Mahmood’s grim description of modernity in her work on the discourse of religious freedoms resonates with her earlier study of the pious Muslim women in Egypt and their reclaiming of religiosity through their embodied rejection of conventional feminist interpretations of agency as emancipatory vis-à-vis patriarchy and other modes of structural and cultural violence. Mahmood’s critique there, as noted, pivots around rejecting conceptions of individual autonomy and freedom as Christian- and Eurocentric and thus untranslatable, without being hegemonic, to other contexts. This position presumes irreconcilable binaries between “Western” and Muslim modalities of female agency, thereby reifying and ahistoricizing these identities. This approach delimits the possibility to imagine trans-historical and cross-cultural (albeit context-sensitive) discussion about gender rights, and in a highly related manner, it leads her to dismiss substantive engagement with the translatability of the protection of religious freedoms and of conscience (thus the potential freedom from religion) as a valid imperative and empowering counter-hegemonic vocabulary.

Therefore, the oversight of the Asadian trajectory is its subscribing, despite itself, to a kind of binary that ascribes utter secularity and modernity to the state. It is not only the case that within the context of modernity, “religion” became domesticated, privatized, and articulated as belief, but also that the many states that emerged were authorized by selective retrieval and interpretations of cultural, religious, and ethnic heritages and that the very dynamics of the modern nation-state generated new hybridities and imaginations of national belongings that are as authentic as
prestate and premodern communal identifications. The Asadians, however, limit their analysis by confining “religion” as formally prescribed within unreconstructed liberal secularism. This approach leads them to engage in a kind of phenomenology of the liberal–secular, in which, despite a plurality of languages, cultures, and geographies, they nonetheless identify similar patterns everywhere. Regardless of whether the “religious personality of the state is pronounced [as in Egypt],” write Mahmood and Danchin (2014: 4), or whether such a “personality” is rather implicit or “muted” as in India or Italy, legal cases involving the question of religious freedoms illuminate the operative and supposed unidirectional (top-down) logic of state governmentality. In contexts as diverse as Egypt, India, the United States, Italy, and France, Mahmood and Danchin detect the same patterns in which “the deployment of the concept of public order” serves “to secure the state’s right to intervene and regulate the religious practices of its citizens” (2014: 4–5). In other words, the violent act of defining religion serves to securitize religion for state projects and ultimately for the neoliberal (and Judeo-Christian) agenda of the United States. And it is the same everywhere.

It Is the Same Everywhere

The discursive critique of religious freedom is effective in illuminating how it enables regulating and domesticating various communities and traditions through the very act of defining (and confining) them as “religious.” For instance, Rosalind I. J. Hackett scrutinizes how the designation “minority religious groups” is used in sub-Saharan Africa and what agenda it serves in various contexts. Of particular importance is the question of indigenous African traditional religions and their legal status: “Indigenous religions are still largely perceived as pre-modern with ambiguous status as either religion or culture; they struggle for public recognition and equal treatment under the law. Moreover, they are hampered by being part of a generalized and heterogeneous category, with no clear designation or centralized leadership” (2013; see also Hackett 2011). Hackett illuminates how the paradoxical constraints depicted by Tisa Wenger in We Have a Religion (2009) play out in African contexts and the struggles of indigenous populations to preserve their traditions. Wenger’s thesis outlines the pressure on Native Americans (Pueblo Indian leaders in New Mexico in the 1920s) to conform to the category “religion” in order to reject missionary forces and enjoy protection under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, a protection instrumental for ensuring the rights of Native Americans to engage in a wide range of ceremonial practices that otherwise would have no legal standing or protection. But developments like these can become “a double-edged sword,”
in the words of theologian William Cavanaugh (2012): paradoxically, the very appeal to the vocabulary and logic of constitutional rights (of religion) granted the Pueblo Indians protection, and yet coopted and domesticated them by defining their practices as “religious.” Indeed, as Hackett relates by mentioning the work of David Chidester (1996), there is a long missionary and colonial history in Africa (as elsewhere) that makes the debate and cause of religious freedoms and taxonomies of groups/subjects far from innocent.

The legal complexities and the sociocultural and political variables integral to such configurations are not only evident in postcolonial contexts, but rather are emblematic, Winnifred Sullivan tells us, of the “West” as well. Sullivan argues for the impossibility of the legal good of religious freedom by focusing on the case of Warner v. Boca Raton, which concerned the freedom to exercise unorthodox practices or what occasionally is referred to as “lived religion.” Sullivan writes: “Courts need some way of deciding what counts as religion if they are to enforce these laws. Is it possible to do this without setting up a legal hierarchy of religious orthodoxy? And who is legally and constitutionally qualified to make such judgments? Can ‘lived religion’ ever be protected by laws guaranteeing religious freedom?” (2005:3)

Anthropologist of law and religion Hussein Ali Agrama confirms Sullivan’s thesis by comparing it conceptually to apostasy cases in Egypt and the French ban on the veil. Agrama identifies “a contradictory structure of suspicion” in the contexts of the United States, France, and Egypt. “On the one hand, private belief and public act/expression are made separate, but on the other, they are brought together in order to define and defend religious freedoms” (2012a: 151). In the 1993 Egyptian apostasy case of Nasr Abu Zayd’s intellectual critique of Islam, the verdict of apostasy was grounded supposedly only on “outer” or material acts (his explicit unorthodox writing) and not on his “interior” belief (Agrama 2012a: 151). This differentiation between “outer” practice/action and “inner” belief is ambiguous, Agrama points out, because it exposes the law’s allowance for freedom of a certain kind of “pure” belief untouched by worldly motivations and manifesting in no way that might be perceived as threatening. Here the “state,” via the court, retains a right to

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19Cavanaugh’s warning came in reference to the logic of utilizing the language of “religious freedoms” in the legal contestations (which he condoned at the time of this argument) against the Obama administration’s Affordable Care Act.

20Sullivan’s work is central to a growing conversation in American academia that focuses on religion from a legalistic perspective, concluding that granting special protection to “religion” is a conceptually flawed approach. See Hamilton (2005) and Leiter (2013). For a conceptual critique of this emerging discussion, see Little (2013).
regulate “correct” belief. “Acts and expressions of belief,” Agrama concludes, “are therefore objects of special suspicion, to be put under particular scrutiny” (2012b). So, while freedom of belief is supposedly protected within this discourse, the state can investigate whether such beliefs are indeed authentic, genuine, and nonsubversive. A similar logic, Agrama reports, undergirds the French ban on the veil and the suspicions that this outer sign reflects and represents potential ulterior motives, transgressing the supposed interiority of the “religious.” Hence, Agrama concludes, echoing the Asadian phenomenology of the secular, the legal principle of the freedom of religion enables suspicion and regulation of religion, and therefore should be regarded as an instrument of state power rather than a source of protection subsumed under the fiction of “religion” (for example, Asad 2006: 524–525).

Of course, as Joan Wallach Scott masterfully articulated in the case of France (2007), this suspicion is informed and incubated within orientalist fantasies and phobias, colonial legacies, and the discourse of secularism as integral to “Frenchness.” Scott’s thick familiarity with French history and its ethos informs her much deeper analysis of the ban of the veil and its significance within the French context. While, as noted above, Asad’s own analysis of the practices of French secularism surrounding the Islamic veil explores the multivalent meanings of the veil within the French context and exposes “Frenchness” as laic as an arena of antagonistic contestations (applying descriptors such as “rupture” and “subversion”), his general conclusion remains beholden to a modernist paradigm of nationalism that re-inscribes the binaries he aspires to overcome. The Asadian phenomenologists of the secular, as the brief survey of examples indicates, do not only reproduce the modernist and antagonistic Asadian paradoxes but also lose the anthropological complexities that inform Asad’s own work on the case of France and other instances. Such textured complexities get lost when the phenomenologists of the secular search for the same patterns everywhere, in order, so it seems, to make a case against the rationale informing neoliberal and neoconservative “religious freedom” agendas and the local political, cultural, and religious entrepreneurs who participate in this game. When one is focused on identifying discursive hegemony and its pervasive tentacles and local manifestations, everything begins to look the same (i.e., the manufacturing and regulating of religion by and for the state), even if expressed in various contexts and through diverse cultural contents. The silences generated by the kind of discussion that unfolds above are audible.

In addition to overemphasizing the regulatory function of the modern state and overlooking the elasticity and co-imbrication of nationalism and religion (a problem Asad himself recognizes in probing the
contested meanings of French secularism), scholars working within the Asadian line neglect to consider Asad’s aforementioned notion of translation, recognizing there is something that can be called “religion” out there that is real, that cuts across cultural lines, and that must be protected, even if qualified discursively and contextually. This neglect leads such scholars all too easily to classify any discussion of religious rights instrumentally as hegemonic, colonialist, and Western, leaving little to no space for the constructive work of translation. I find a clear illustration of this tendency in Shakman-Hurd’s critique of the Chicago Council’s “Report of the Task Force on Religion and the Making of U.S. Policy,” co-chaired by R. Scott Appleby and Cizik (2010). I now turn to profile this critique and its antirealist implications.

LOST IN TRANSLATION?

The Great Evil

A product of sustained conversations among scholars, practitioners, and policy makers of various (and sometimes even contradictory) vantage points, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs’ report, entitled Engaging Religious Communities Abroad: A New Imperative for U.S. Foreign Policy, illuminates anthropological realities glossed over by the secularist myopia that has dominated the analytic scope of policy makers. The report suggests remedying the secularist myopia by consciously enriching and broadening the scope of diplomatic interactions with religious leaders, institutions, and lay people around the globe. The authors stress the varying roles of religious networks and individuals (destructive and constructive potentialities) and they urge movement away from a restrictive counter-terrorist prism toward the cultivation of religious literacy on the part of diplomats, politicians, soldiers, and other actors shaping international affairs. “The limited focus [on terrorism and counter-terrorism strategies],” the authors of the report write, “has caused many U.S. decision makers to overlook and undervalue the influential role of religious leaders and communities in helping address vexing global problems and promoting peace” (2010: 5). In emphasizing the internal pluralities of religious communities, one implication of the report (although it does not necessarily reflect a unanimous intention on the part of the diverse participants in the task force) could be a concentrated effort to challenge the orientalist underpinnings and secularist assumptions that inform strategies of counter-terrorism as they play into policy making.

Therefore, there is a missed opportunity here when Shakman-Hurd, a critic of the secularist and orientalist undertones of IR paradigms,
dismisses the report as unoriginal, U.S.-centric, and thus narcissistically hegemonic: “This report is an attempt to create a particular kind of world, one defined by the projection of American power—a certain kind of religious power,” she declares (2010). The ulterior motive she attributes to the report, in agreement with Sullivan (2010), is to export “an establishmentarian position” whereby U.S. foreign policy operates with certain curiously un-American guidelines that would enable discriminating among and aiding other religious communities, depending on their compliance with U.S. parameters. Drawing on Sullivan and Mahmood, Shakman-Hurd believes the many scholars who contributed to the discussion in the report intended to enable “the projection of American power through the securitization of religion.” This assertion echoes the same kind of “contradictory structure of suspicion” that the phenomenologists of the secular consider to be the underpinning logic informing instance after instance of the state’s responses to apparent transgressions of the fault lines between religion and state. Or, as Sullivan writes in her companion piece, “This report simply dresses up American political realism in a religious garb” (2010). Shakman-Hurd argues that the report sanctions only those religions that are deemed “safe” by the National Security Council (NSC), thus privileging the Protestant theopolitical imagination that elevates “belief” as the primary feature of a religion. This privileging conveniently fits into American exceptionalism and its distinct brand of religious nationalism.21

The potentially establishmentarian implications of the task force’s recommendations deserve critique and unpacking refracted through a post-colonial theoretical lens. However that Shakman-Hurd can only read the report as an imperialist export of the American theopolitical imagination for the purposes of domesticating and subjugating various communities around the globe shows her firm grounding in Mahmood’s denaturalizing of the discourse or “industry” of religious freedoms. She is thus vulnerable to the same self-referential paradoxical traps I have already associated with the Asadian line—namely modernist, ahistorical, nonethnic, and purist interpretations of the links between religion and nationalism. In a more recently released work, the welcomed hope that this debunking through relentless power analysis will achieve “a peaceful coexistence for the variety of persons involved” (Shakman-Hurd and Sullivan forthcoming: 1) will gain traction only by moving beyond the paralysis of Asadian power reductionism.

21I heard Shakman-Hurd connect the critique of establishmentarian tendencies to a scrutiny of American religious nationalism and ethos in a presentation delivered at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association in Toronto (March 27, 2014).
Indeed, what is so objectionable to the critics is how the Chicago Council’s task force seems to globally operationalize what each of the individual cases cited above accomplished locally. Accordingly, the report purportedly authorizes (or legitimizes) a new chapter in a familiar history of Western Christian (nominally or otherwise) colonialism. Put simply, the genealogy of religious freedom (and here Asad comes through strongly) shows that the act of defining and recognizing some phenomenon or group as religious, and thus as deserving protection, subordinates the phenomenon to state regulation. Thus, becoming “religious” is viewed as a violent act of subordination and regulation of identity. So Shakman-Hurd accuses the authors of the task force report of falling into this paradox: while supposedly recognizing that “governmental regulation of religion can lead to increased persecution” (the establishment problem), she argues that the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 and the general tenor of the task force report are informed by the impulse to “securitize” religion, making it safe for a geopolitical agenda in the same way that the modern state necessitated the domestication of religion-qua-belief. “In recommending that the NSC direct, not only governmental, but also nongovernmental engagement with religious actors and communities overseas, it vests in the government the authority and institutional capacity to regulate religion both directly and through nongovernmental proxies, calling explicitly for ‘practical religious literacy’ on the part of governmental offices and institutions” (2010).

While more than a dose of suspicion of American exceptionalism as it plays out in the Chicago Council’s task force report specifically, and American foreign policy more broadly, is critical to interrogating and reimagining American foreign policy, the aforementioned critics overestimate and oversimplify American hegemony and the instrumentalization of the discourse of religious freedom. Shakman-Hurd ridicules the task force for presuming America’s potential role as “the global theologian of reform, separating the wheat from the chaff—turning water to wine” (2010) and determining what might count as “religious” (thereby imposing the parochial metrics of “world religions”). This ridicule, however, highlights the critics’ inclination to offer decontextualized caricatures both of American discursive power as typifying the cultural, structural, and religious violence associated with modernity and especially the “modern state” and of all those “others” who are colonized by liberal discursivity. Thus, even though those who oppose operationalizing the discourse of religious freedoms as a strategy of American foreign policy (or and its various proxies) expose the persistence of colonial, Christian-centric, and orientalist motifs informing the debate, their belief that the “state” is the space where questions of “freedoms” and “religions” are
manufactured is myopic and may be faulted as power reductionist and ironically reliant on a modernist paradigm. This is ironic because the hallmark of an Asadian critique is the debunking of this paradigm. This form of power reductionism, therefore, operates against the constructive impulse to work toward “peaceful coexistence” beyond the perpetual identifying and overturning of the hegemony that prevails at a given time. In alluding above to Connolly’s retrieval of the minor Spinozist tradition, we have already encountered a critique of the Asadian take on the intellectual project of modernity and one that is echoed by Asad’s many interlocutors. Likewise, American anthropologist Robert Hefner problematizes the historically homogenizing claims that the Asadians attribute to the rise of the “modern West” as a political project. Focusing on path-dependency and the contexts of diverse governance regimes, Hefner offers an important challenge to the inclination to “over-intellectualize and homogenize the genealogy of religious freedom in the modern West” (2012). Instead, he suggests using the designation “civic pluralist” rather than “liberal” to denote the various patterns, uses, and instrumentality that the vocabulary of religious freedom assumes in various contexts. This suggestion allows critical space for collective claims standing in tension with the individualist presumptions that the critics reinscribe as the pivot informing the discussion of religious freedoms. Hence, moving away from the homogenizing and decontextualized articulation of the history of religious freedom as Hefner suggests not only enables potentially theorizing nationalism as a key space for negotiating such freedoms. It also introduces the critical tensions that define conversations in normative political theory concerning the justness of various multicultural interpretations of citizenship and whether such conversations should be subsumed as a subset of a human rights discourse. The issue of what gets to be defined as a “religion” and who gets to define it can become a critical concern where the structural arrangement afforded by the multicultural landscape could reinforce hierarchies and sanction unjust practices, adding further layers of obstacles that might prevent intra-tradition reform. But a move from mere deconstructive critique that outlines discursive formations would entail deep hermeneutical engagements with cultural, religious, and historical memories and practices. These processes are not the same as exposing the meanings of publicity as Judeo-Christian-*qua*-secular, orientalist, and ultimately grounded in the *realepolitik* of empire or neoliberal expansionism. Instead, they illuminate the

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22 For theoretical instances reflecting the complexities of these debates, see Kymlicka (2007), Frazer and Honneth (2003), and Okin (1999).
multidirectionality of agency and the relevance of premodern meanings, ethnicities, and political agendas as well as the meanings and experiences generated within the very frameworks of modern nation-statism. A move from the deconstructive to the constructive would also entail explicating the theory of justice that informs the critics’ categorizing of certain practices as “wrong.” Might such a theory embrace some liberal institutions such as voting, gender equality, and freedom of assembly?²³

Expanding the Asadian interpretation of the modern state to a critique of the discourse of religious freedom, therefore, imposes blind spots of consequence, which leave it debilitated by the deconstructive turn. I presume that the point of deconstructing the modern-secular discourse is to imagine deep plurality rather than the imposition of a theocracy or stratified millet-like system, but the Asadians provide no clear blueprints for socio-politically working out such pluralism. This could prove important since they do study real cases, not mere intellectual abstractions, from apostasy in Egypt to burial practices in the United States. What would it mean for the “religious” to disrupt public civility, in the way Asad famously challenges (2003: 182–183) sociologist José Casanova’s enduringly liberal principles of publicity?

One may wonder if Shakman-Hurd can envision translation in the Asadian sense as even a possibility for creative engagement, or at least one that is more constructive than ignorance of, for instance, the distinctions between Shi’ites and Sunnis, which clearly typified the “secular myopia” underlying the shock in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Even when the contributors to her religious freedom blog on the SSRC’s The Immanent Frame attempt to study contextually the violence inherent in the discourse of religious liberties, they often end up exemplifying the parochialism of the discourse despite its universalist pretenses. This is where the discursive critique of the industry of religious freedoms becomes ironically self-referential: it cannot imagine the value of developing fluency in the histories of Shi’ites and Sunnis, to return to

²³Contrasting Asad’s critique of human rights as an instrument and invention of the secular modern designed to consolidate political agendas to the Sudanese legal scholar Abdullahi An-Na’im’s contextual and constructive engagement with religion (Islam) and the tradition of human rights, David Little illuminates the internal inconsistencies that mark the Asadian reductionist critique of human rights and liberalism more broadly: on the one hand, Asad dismisses the “human rights” frame as an insidious instrument of empire and neoliberal agenda cloaked in a Judeo-Christian garb. On the other hand, Asad does not seem to propose a return to theocracy. These inconsistencies need to be worked out with a specific attention to which liberal/secular values, institutions, and practices are worth keeping. Little underscores that An-Na’im’s conceptual framing of the relation between religion and human rights pivots on a commitment and embrace of the principle of pluralism which does resonate with the “modern” and “secular” in that it recognizes the need to operate within outside constraints on religious expressions (see Little 2006).
these examples, outside of colonial, missionary, and orientalist prisms. This is a trap in that, despite their concentrated efforts to deconstruct and historicize the modernist narrative, the phenomenologists of the secular inescapably and foundationally depend on a modernist metanarrative which, in its contemporary manifestation, sees the West-qua-U.S. as the subject of history without considering the many on-the-ground hybridities, cross-fertilizations, and dynamic patterns of co-imbrication among competing forces and narratives. Is the endpoint of critique the rescue of some sort of religiosuity untouched by the modern state? If yes, this task is self-defeating, for it relies on a modernist paradigm concerning the link between religion and nationalism and thus reintroduces the very presuppositions it deconstructs, including a purist conception of religion. This self-referential and reactionary approach can easily revert into a blinding antirealist and ahistorical analytic prism, refusing the authenticity of various collective identity claims as well as the embodied universality inferred from the recognition of human dependency and vulnerability. This recognition led some theorists like Butler to appreciate the intersectionality of various contexts of injustice and thus the context-sensitive translatability of the language of personal autonomy and freedom.

Asad’s own careful articulation of the analytic act of translation could overcome the potential antirealism of the critics who concur with his narration of modernity as a rupture and radical reconfiguration of authority structures, a process that required the invention of “religion” as choice, interiority, or belief. But while translation may offer a constructive space and Asad himself saw limits to the hegemonic hold of the “state,”24 those operating within the Asadian line all too easily succumb to power reductionism, underscoring the pivotal agency of the liberal secular state, as we saw in Shakman-Hurd and Mahmood’s works. This monotonic and reductionist line is especially curious given that Shakman-Hurd offers an otherwise penetrating critique of theory and practice in international relations, a field whose state-centrism is detrimental to such a degree that even distinguished realists are beginning to discover “nationalism” and “culture” (see, for instance, Mearsheimer and Walt 2008). Shakman-Hurd and the other Asadians, including Asad himself, are likewise beholden to a modernist account of the “state” that precludes the necessary, contextually specific scrutiny of what makes the “state” work, namely the “nation,” and how the always-contested indices such as “religion,” “ethnicity,” and “culture” might interface with authorizing,

24 Asad recognizes certain scholarly works as innovative in that they explore various senses as modes of articulating counter-narratives and embodying counter-hegemonic experiences. These include Hirschkind (2006) and Schmidt (2000).
imagining, and reimagining the subjective boundaries of the nations behind the state.

Veena Das encapsulates the upshot of Asad’s works: “To the usual claim that secularism was instrumental as the ideology of modern liberal states in bringing about peace in the context of warring religions in European history, Asad offers the counterargument that the issue is not one of ending violence but one of shifting the violence of religious wars into the violence of national and colonial wars” (2006: 93). This powerful insight informs the critique of the discourse of religious freedoms as necessarily implicated in the structural and cultural violence associated with modernity as well as operative in authorizing direct forms of violence, domestically and globally. Ironically, the critics converge with the neoconservative champions of religious freedoms in their often equally monotonic interpretation of the modern “state” as marginalizing, displacing, and encroaching on the very individualistic conscience supposedly created by modernity as an intellectual and political project.

Convergence: Modernists Despite Themselves

The unreconstructed modernism of the critics of the discourse of religious freedoms and their monochromatic narrative of the rise of the modern state find a common resting place also with the antistatism of radical orthodoxy’s rejection of the secular and possibly of the condition of plurality. This is a strange overlap indeed, since the phenomenologists of the secular devote so much effort to exposing and deconstructing the Christian- and Eurocentricity of the discourse, supposedly with an underlying normative orientation in favor of plurality and multiperspectivity, though they do not quite own up to this normativity. On the other side of the spectrum, the antistatism associated with radical orthodoxy is explicit and unequivocal. It views modernity as the tragic fall and disintegration of medieval Christendom (where religious pluralism was beyond the realm of the imagination); the outcome of theological errors, especially the detrimental “migration of the holy” (Bossy 1985) from the Church to the nation-state (“a hellish anti-church”), in need of correction; and an idolatrous turn, the debunking of which is very much aided by the literature emerging out of Carl Schmitt’s Political Theology. Both lines of critique are modernist despite themselves and thus they curiously find a common resting place despite otherwise radically different normative points of departure. Above I explain how the phenomenologists of the secular rely on the modernist paradigm of nationalism, thus betraying a form of power reductionism that prohibits conceptualizing change within a deeply pluralistic topography. A similar power reductionism embedded within a narrow and homogenizing view of the Enlightenment’s
intellectual and theological traditions characterizes the other side of the spectrum’s critique of the modern state. William Cavanaugh’s work typifies this approach.

In fact, Cavanaugh’s *The Myth of Religious Violence* (2009) ends up drawing on and supporting the Asadian line of critique. Yet Cavanaugh’s discursive analysis of the myth of the modern West is antistatist and antinationalist in rather different ways than what appears to be suggested by the Asadians. While the Asadians seemingly operate with no explicit normative agenda, their rejection of secularist presumptions nonetheless intimates an appreciation of pluralism as potentially imagined outside the violent boundaries of the liberal discourse. This could be inferred from Asad’s aforementioned distinction between democratic ethos and democracy as a state project, with the attendant inclusivity and exclusivity he associates with each.

In contradistinction, Cavanaugh, operating within the tradition of radical orthodoxy, engages in a deconstructive critique of the architectural structures of modernity in order to reverse secularism and to correct what he views as the theological errors informing its development, a process necessitating a recovery of Platonist–Augustinian orthodoxy. Ethicist Jeffrey Stout aptly critiques this highly intellectualist interpretation of secularization. “One reason for doubting that the mythos or ideology of secularism is what caused the secularization of public discourse,” Stout writes, “is that its proponents have never had the numbers or the clout to change the world as dramatically as Cavanaugh’s story supposes” (2004: 101). Stout further points out that, despite the obvious sociological indications to the contrary, the proponents of radical orthodoxy ironically accept and rely on the claim of the secularism paradigm that “modernity is a progressively secularizing force in the sense that it tends to produce increasing levels of disbelief and disenchantment” (2004: 101). Stout argues that since the sociological predictions of the secularism paradigm did not transpire, there is no reason to embrace “an intellectualist account of how the process of secularization works and what set it in motion” (2004: 101–102). He responds to this intellectualist stance by underscoring that secularization unfolded not as a misguided intellectual construct, but rather in response to “the increasing need to cope with religious plurality discursively on a daily basis under circumstances where improved transportation and communication were changing the political and economic landscape” (2004: 102). In other words, no return to the kind of hegemony associated with medieval Christendom is possible, and what is left is the need to confront deep plurality as this predicament plays out on a case-by-case basis.
Indeed, there are striking similarities between Asad and Cavanaugh’s deconstruction of the discursive functionality of the political category of “religion” and how it relates to the secular liberal state. Echoing Asad’s point about the marginalization of certain kinds of voices and arguments in the so-called public space where reasoned debates and deliberations take place, Cavanaugh also stresses that the lines determining publicity or secularity or the “political” are constituted by power. For Cavanaugh, “religion is a special political category that marginalizes and domesticates whatever forms of collective social action that happen to retain a positive or utopian orientation” (2011a, 2011b: 227). Indeed, the act of defining something as “religious,” from this perspective, is a violent and disruptive act, denoting the ideological reframing of the sources of authority (or the “migration of the holy” from Church to state). “The myth of religious violence,” Cavanaugh agrees with Asad, “helped and continues to help facilitate this process by making the secular nation-state appear as necessary to tame the inherently volatile effects of religion in public life” (2011a, 2011b: 228).

On the one hand, the phenomenologists of the secular, as established above, operate with a similar storyline. For them, one aspect of exposing the Christian- and Eurocentricity underlying the modern liberal discourse and the instrumentality of the “state” in articulating “religion” involves a challenge to the universal pretenses of categories such as “religion.” By extension, this critique translates into a deep suspicion of the discourse of religious freedom, the kind of actions it may authorize globally, and the cultural and structural violence it may entail domestically within the contexts of multicultural Euro-American societies. This line of critique does not offer a constructive framework for a nonviolent, socio-political ethics of relationality across pluralistic landscapes. Such constructive imagining will require moving away from the modernist analytic paradigm for theorizing the “state” as coextensive with the “nation” and, as such, an utterly novel and lamentable development.

On the other hand, the arguments grounded in radical orthodoxy recognize the Christian and colonial landscape within which the category “religion” emerged, but they deem this narrative as needing to be corrected and subverted. For some, that may mean removing any traces of idolatrous devotion from the state (indicative of the logic identified in the Schmittian insight concerning political theology). Yet this withdrawal relies, despite itself, on a liberal modernist interpretation of the state as potentially neutral vis-à-vis the Church and as an entity that does not need to be authorized by a particularistic interpretation of a group and, at the same time, on individualistic notions of the protection of conscience from the intrusions of the state. This ambivalence did not escape
Cavanaugh’s own observation above about the discourse of religious freedoms as a potentially double-edged sword. Like the Asadian phenomenology of the secular, this ironic reliance on the modernist paradigm overlooks the nexus between nationalism, religion, and ethnicity. It also ignores the kinds of challenges presented by the unavoidable realities of plurality. Thus, unlike the Asadians, it affirms and is content with the Christian-centric nature of a radical antistatist critique. This critique is coherent with the reimagining of the theological landscape of medieval Christendom and not so much attuned to the demands of pluralistic societies, demands concerning the nonviolent contestations and negotiations of competing conceptions of the good, which always take place within culturally specific (not neutral) spaces constituted by but not reduced to power. This is where the normativity inferred from Asad’s appeal to democracy as an ethos clearly breaks away from the rejectionist stance that merely pathologizes modern secularity or reduces it to realpolitik.

For the Asadian line to be effective, those operating within this tradition will need to engage in cultural translation to avoid the temptation of antirealism and to come to terms with their normative commitment to deep pluralism and thus with the kind of liberal–modern–secular institutions, practices, and virtues with their self-correcting mechanisms that are conducive to (and indeed emerged in part in order to accommodate) plurality. Otherwise, such critics converge with an antistatist, Christian theological agenda and remain silent about the normative implications of the stratified plurality of the Ottoman Empire’s millet system. In reference to radical orthodoxy, Stout’s rhetorical inquiry—“Is there nothing in the political life of modern democracies, or in the lives of those who are struggling for just and decent arrangements within them, that a loving God would bless?”—shows that avoiding the challenge of secularism as it relates to plurality “has little to offer besides nostalgia, utopian fantasy, and withdrawal into a strongly bounded enclave” (2004: 104–105).25

Along the same lines, one might wonder whether the Asadians can imagine the modern secular nation-state not only pathologically but also positively as potentially affording the kind of democratic ethos Asad gestures toward and whether their theorizing of tradition as violently disrupted through various discursive formations likewise amounts to nostalgia and utopian fantasy.

25Stout is not just countering this intellectualist argument with one of his own about the possibility of holding the state accountable. He offers a concrete and constructive model of virtuous citizenship as a mode of holding the American modern democratic state accountable and open to self-corrections (see Stout 2010). I view this as an example of a constructive vision, compatible with my argument in this article.
CONCLUSION

In this article, I have argued that the critique of the discourse of religious freedoms through a genealogical framework relies on a reactionary, overly intellectualized, reductionist account of modernity that needs to be overcome in order to open up constructive venues for discussion that move beyond the various refrains lamenting European and American hegemony. Certainly, we ought not forget the enduring legacy of colonialism and its interconnections with Christian missionary impulses and activities as well as elective affinities and co-incubation with the orientalist discourse. However, the Asadian purist, ahistorical, and nonrelational prism through which tradition is analyzed too simply writes missionary activism off solely as an instrument of an imperial agenda. This unidirectional idea overlooks how frequently religious people organized against and resisted empire and how this form of resistance is also distinctively modern and presumptive of a cross-cutting perception of human persons and their rights. “The complex political context of European overseas imperialism,” writes sociologist Peter Stamatov, “was the generative setting for modern forms of long distance political advocacy” (2010: 621). Certainly, theological and other assumptions undergird long distance religious activism, whether on behalf of slaves in the eighteenth century or displaced persons in the twenty-first century. However, the commitments and motivations of religious actors in global arenas defy a simple categorizing as “colonial” or “neoliberal.” Indeed, nothing constructive can come out of an essentialist, abstracted, and monochromatic discussion of “liberal Western secularism” and its insidious, supposedly global reach.

I argued, therefore, that the Asadians’ inability to see anything modern as potentially valuable is debilitating and symptomatic of their broader reliance on a blanket critique of Western modernity as a normative, historical, and political project of which American power is currently the main embodiment. Retaining the discursive effectiveness of the Asadian line will require engaging substantially, even hermeneutically, the “nation” as constitutive of intersubjectivity and interrelated discursive fields, which, in turn, authorize and inform social, political, economic, and geopolitical practices and patterning of exclusion (which can manifest in direct and symbolic forms of violence). Important areas of potential analytic cross-fertilization already exist in the study of symbolic boundaries in the subfield of the cultural sociology of religion.  

Attention to symbolic boundaries illuminates how religious metaphors,

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26 For a comprehensive review of the various preoccupations of the subfield of the cultural sociology of religion, see Edgell (2012).
vocabularies, ideas, and practices vindicate and naturalize unequal social relations as well as intra-religious injustices. This focus enables engaging in a discursive critique of power relations, but also in the interpretative possibility of transforming symbolic boundaries and their shaping of social and political mechanisms, institutions, and practices of inclusion and exclusion.

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