Thinking across Traditions of Thought

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Asad straddles two traditions: one deeply parochial and somewhat stagnant, and the other much more cosmopolitan and a source of continued inspiration to many in their daily lives. The first is what we might call European theory, and the second is the Islamic tradition. Both traditions are bruised in different ways, but one of the distinctive features of the Islamic tradition is that it has maintained creativity by engaging with multiple traditions while retaining deep links with everyday practices. It might have also been helped by its unique and relatively independent institutional mechanisms for knowledge production and consumption. Outside and alongside the "modern" industrialized school and university systems, *ulema*, or religious scholars, continue to be trained in *madaris* (sing. *madrassa*) with varying levels of independence. *Ulema* and jurists remain confident of resources from within the tradition to address contemporary concerns, and—as muftis, practicing jurists, and mosque custodians—continue to be linked explicitly to life around them. Many scholars within this tradition have engaged with European thought with confidence and curiosity, and the vast majority of Muslims negotiate Eurocentric practices and ideas in everyday life. The tradition remains heterogeneous and internally variable, while also being bound together by some fundamental practices. All of this makes for a relatively vibrant tradition, albeit one facing significant challenges.

European political theory and philosophy, by contrast, remains deeply limited in its engagement beyond a relatively narrow canon, despite, or perhaps because of, its global dominance. I prefer to refer to this tradition as European rather than Western because it bears no or few traces of the indigenous peoples, African Americans and others whose traditions, while physically located in the West, have been marginalized. The professionalization and compartmentalization of this tradition that thoughtful practitioners have highlighted repeatedly have limited its sphere to specialized practitioners without a clear social or political role.[1] This deeper

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question about the raison d'être of the European tradition is an important concern because this is likely to place significant limits on its dynamism. As Sanjay Seth has recently argued in his evaluation of the subdiscipline of comparative political theory, engagement with ideas beyond Europe is desperately needed to inject some vitality into political theory as a discipline.[2] Whether the other traditions need acknowledgment and engagement by academic political theory remains an open question, one that I have explored elsewhere.[3]

In this piece, Talal Asad engages in his usual insightful and generous manner with Wittgenstein, but the intuition about religion that he elaborates comes from elsewhere. It comes from Asad's immersion in the Islamic tradition. There is no doubt that Asad and Wittgenstein are both persuasive writers in the true sense of the word: in not wanting to constrain our thoughts to a single frame, in their desire to encourage a capacious imagination and, crucially, in not expecting that they will convince everybody. But of what does Asad want to persuade us? Asad wishes to alert his audience to the possible loss of a world where every problem does not have to have a solution for us humans to discover, where calculations of obligations are complex and not amenable to easy exchangeability. He wants us to imagine society as reciprocally bound in relationships of compassion rather than of controlled and managed progress. He aims to lay open the possibility that progress may inflict much pain and distress that will not go away with time. He does so by two main strategies. For the first, Wittgenstein is useful to him, and for the second, and to my mind the more crucial one, Asad needs to draw upon debates within Islam.

The first strategy of persuasion here is to sensitize readers to the limits of the language of controlled scientific progress by presenting it as yet another language, not the most rational one, and to question its strategies of influence. Asad works sympathetically with Wittgenstein to think about religion as a form of life, not just a part of life, and the relationship of language to persuasion, where language is inextricably linked to and constitutive of a form of life. Here, Asad is a more careful reader of Wittgenstein's ideas than many philosophers of religion have been in their desire to use religious acts and rituals to *expose* a language or logic of belief. In so doing, these philosophers endorse a version of positivism, the very mode of thought that Wittgenstein was concerned to challenge. Asad also reads greater appreciation for social change in Wittgenstein than some Ordinary Language philosophers ("ordinary" in the sense of being opposed to the metaphysical universalisms of analytic philosophy), following Austin or Ryle, saw in their own method.

Asad does not set out to conclusively prove the limits of scientific progress but to open the possibility that there might be other valuable languages that are lost in an uneven competition with visions of progress that have dominated rather than persuaded. This difference is important. Asad contends that "persuasion works best when the language of power is not used in confronting the one to be per-

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suaded" (414). In contrast, visions of secular scientific progress have relied heavily on power. Their imbrication with colonialism and capitalism renders suspect the ideational and moral superiority that these visions claim for themselves. Asad has long articulated concerns about the loss of alternative languages of human life. In his early essay "Conscripts of Western Civilization," Asad worried that "social and cultural variety everywhere increasingly responds to, and is managed by, categories brought into play by modern forces."[4] Quite apart from the damage to lives that the "destructive forces" of imperialism unleashed, there is a concern for the future, for the loss of clues to moving beyond singular visions of human progress. The role of colonialism and capitalism in how we imagine the future is important for Asad, and here he asks us to consider a question that was not important for Wittgenstein: how might certain language-games help to undermine a form of life?

Structural transformation is difficult to assess as persuasion precisely because, as Asad points out, the temporal frame within which its truth might be assessed is elusive. Can we evaluate this in one generation or over several generations? What implications does it have for an individual and her life? We know that modern colonialism imposed hegemonic epistemic discontinuities around the world, and like others the discursive tradition of Islam is changing within the context of global capitalism. These changes are not just the result of persuasion across traditions, although that was a central pretension of colonial civilizing missions, as well as the more recent "hearts and minds" campaign. The structural demands of global capitalism are such that without persuasion, seemingly without explicitly changing the opinions of individual Muslims, ways of life might be transforming.

And this is where his second strategy of persuasion comes in: Asad gives us a brief glimpse of an alternative language and associated grammar by focusing on debates within the Islamic tradition. The debates themselves become resources for addressing contemporary dilemmas in two important ways. First, they allow an insight into how substantive questions about rationality and representation could be addressed differently. In working through Ibn Taymiyya's "traditionalist" response, Asad provides us with a brief window into a world where "virtuous practice in social relations" frame human life (424). Such virtuous action flows from a complete submission to God. This submission is not the same as suspension of reasoning, nor is it the fusing of the submitter and God into one being. The submitter retains her volition, but she is not entirely separate from God either. Her life has purpose, and that purpose is expressed through her ability to practice social relations with justice and humility. This is a vision of *dīn*, a word that is often translated in English as "religion." This translation is deeply reductive, and Asad gives the Arabic translation as "that which one is owed" or "obedience" (425). It is perhaps Urdu, a language that I am most familiar with, that uses the term in the sense closest to what Asad argues for. In Urdu, *dīn* is often explicitly explained as "a way of life."

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Second, the very longevity of the debates within the Islamic tradition is helpful in rethinking the putative innovations of modernity. This is particularly important as it dampens the alleged crisp uniqueness of secularist questions about theological contradictions and the absurdity of particular beliefs. We glimpse that many questions have been asked before, albeit with different emphases and consequences. Their long running and somewhat cyclical presence pulls against linear progressivist visions that demand allegiance to a singular dynamic to history, one which proclaims rationality as the exclusive preserve of the European Enlightenment.

Wittgenstein has little to offer by way of alternatives to a homogenizing, constrictive modernity, and greater reliance on Ibn Taymiyya's ideas to elaborate practices and conceptions of life that support an "ensouled" self would have been very helpful. This is not a nativist suggestion. Like Asad, I too own both the Islamic and the European tradition. It is, however, useful to recognize that Ibn Taymiyya is routinely invoked in conversations on television shows, public debates, newspaper articles and *fatawa* (sing. *fatwa*) or scholarly judgements issued across the Muslim world even today. Wittgenstein, however, is discussed only by a very limited group of professionals. While professional political theory is not without its value, there is loss of vibrancy that comes perhaps from complacency borne of dominance. The contemporary vibrancy of the Islamic tradition may very well come from having worked through almost two centuries of relentless epistemic questioning.

No doubt, global structures push toward homogeneity, yet their success is by no means assured. Elsewhere I have argued that Islamism, the intellectual and political movement of the early twentieth century, can be seen as a creative response to colonial secularism.[5] At first glance, it looks like Islamists are replicating Protestantism in Muslim contexts, but the situation is more complex than that. I have argued that despite its opposition to secularism, Islamism has facilitated secularization in predominantly Muslim societies in the sense of entrenching a vision of religion as a separate sphere of human life that is coherent and internally free of contradictions. Secularization, I suggest, is a qualitative transformation in mass public imagination rather than a quantitative change in religiosity, which the debate about whether there is more or less religion in the public sphere has tended to assume. This is not to posit Islamists as being more like "us" than we had realized, but to open up the implications of secularization, the social process, to greater questioning, and to investigate the associations, such as democracy or individualization, that the concept comes bundled with. While some features look familiar, others are profoundly different. The subjectivities produced as a result of Islamist secularization are not the same as the ones produced in Reformation Europe. The public debate that Islamists have engendered about the very definition of religion has been generative of new questions.

In their effort to move beyond colonial "intellectual slavery" (*zehni ghulami*) influential Islamist thinkers such as Abul Ala Maududi (1903–79) were much more cosmopolitan than their contemporary European thinkers and engaged with a range of global ideas and debates. Maududi sought to address contemporary problems such as nationalism and racism by reworking existing ideas and concepts from within the Islamic tradition.[6] Others, like the contemporary Islamic thinker Javed Ahmed Ghamidi (1952–), have critiqued Maududi, and provided very different solutions to the problem of nationalism, again by building on repertoires of ideas and practices from within the Islamic traditions. Ordinary Muslims continue to debate these differences with a view to practices in their own lives. The resilience of conceptions of justice beyond legal rights, of norms of community, and of visions of life that exceed the temporal frames of homogenous secular time, embedded in practices within the Islamic and other traditions, allows for hope beyond the resources of European political theory and philosophy.

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Notes

1. Dunn, *Western Political Theory*; Gunnell, *Descent*; Brown, "Political Theory"; Kaufman-Osborn, "Political Theory."
2. Seth, "Postcolonial Critique."
3. Iqtidar, "Redefining 'Tradition'"; Iqtidar, "Searching for Tolerance."
4. Asad, "Conscripts," 333.
5. Iqtidar, *Secularizing Islamists?*
6. Iqtidar, "*Jizya* against Nationalism."

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