

Janell Watson

Modernizing Middle Eastern Studies, Historicizing Religion, Particularizing Human Rights

An Interview with Talal Asad

Talal Asad is best known for his work on the genealogy of religion, secularism, and suicide bombing. Trained as a cultural anthropologist at Oxford, he performed his obligatory fieldwork and then moved on to studies that interrogate the very foundations of their topics. He has published genealogical accounts of religion and of secularism, in both cases questioning standard Eurocentric conceptions of modernity and Western perceptions of the so-called Islamic world. He adroitly reframes questions, as for example when he asks not what motivates suicide bombers but rather why the West is more shocked by this particular kind of violence than by much more devastating acts of state-sponsored violence.

Born in Saudi Arabia, then raised mostly in India and Pakistan, Asad moved to the United Kingdom for his university studies. He completed his undergraduate education at the University of Edinburgh in 1959 and his graduate degrees at Oxford University in 1968. After receiving his PhD, he was a lecturer in social anthropology at Khartoum University in Sudan, then lecturer, senior lecturer, and reader at Hull University in the United Kingdom. In 1989 Asad moved to the United States, where he was professor of anthropology at the New School for Social Research, then at Johns Hopkins University. He is currently distinguished professor of anthropology at the City University of New York Graduate Center. He has held visiting professorships at Ain Shams University in Cairo, King Saud University in Riyadh, the University of California at Berkeley, and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris.

As a doctoral student, Asad did fieldwork in northern Sudan, where he studied the political structures of a group of nomads. This resulted in a first book, *The Kababish Arabs: Power, Authority, and Consent in a Nomadic Tribe* (Hurst, 1970). He became interested in questions of colonialism and edited an essay collection, *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (Ithaca, 1973). He and Roger Owen co-edited *The Sociology of Developing Societies: The Middle East* (Macmillan,

1983). Having become increasingly interested in both Islam and Christianity, he published *Genealogies of Religion* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), then *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford University Press, 2003). He addressed issues related to the events of 9/11 in the 2006 Wellek Library Lectures, which became the book *On Suicide Bombing* (Columbia University Press, 2007). In 2007 he participated in a symposium sponsored by the Townsend Center for the Humanities at the University of California, Berkeley. His paper was published along with papers and comments by Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood as *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (University of California Press, 2009). He is currently writing a book on secularism and human rights in the European and Islamic traditions.

This interview took place in New York on January 21, 2011, a few days before Asad left to spend a sabbatical semester in Cairo.

Watson I would like to begin by asking you about your career in general. How did you become interested in cultural anthropology? Can you tell me about this group of nomads that you studied for your dissertation and first book?

Asad Right. Well, I was very interested in anthropology or in what I thought it was before I began to study it formally. This might be because my parents come from very different cultural backgrounds. My mother was a Saudi Arabian; my father was an Austrian Jew who converted to Islam. I was born in Saudi Arabia but then largely brought up in India and Pakistan. I went to England to do architecture, and I studied architecture for two years in London. This was my father's choice, really. He thought it would provide scope for my imagination and at the same time give me the discipline he thought I needed. So I went to a school run by practicing architects. It was fun, but I was not terribly well suited to architecture really. But then I discovered anthropology. So I went to Edinburgh University to study anthropology, and I did my undergraduate degree there. After that I moved to Oxford University, where I completed a BLitt and eventually wrote a DPhil. At that time the Anthropology Institute at Oxford had a special relationship with the Anthropology Department at Khartoum University, which involved recruiting faculty from Oxford graduates who hadn't yet completed their doctorates. Britain didn't have an awful lot of money for field research, so this was an attractive option for many of us students. Khartoum contracted us to teach and then provided us with funds for a period of research. The money

enabled us to get trucks and all sorts of wonderful equipment for research. So during my contract with the University of Khartoum I went to the field with my wife and we spent a whole year with a nomadic tribe in northwestern Sudan. The department had a research plan funded by the Ford Foundation whose underlying idea was to provide an ethnographic coverage of the tribes of northern Sudan. I had to work in the north, and I chose to work on a nomadic population called the Kababish. It turned out to be a very interesting group that had been virtually formed as “a tribe” under British colonial rule in the first half of the twentieth century. I did a political study of that tribal group, a political and economic study.

Watson Your 1970 book on the Kababish nomads focuses on politics. Was this a departure from the anthropological norm of the time?

Asad No, not really. I mean, there had been a number of studies of tribal politics, and in fact a central theoretical concern that preoccupied British anthropology in the first half of the twentieth century was whether “primitive” societies could be said to have “law,” and that involved distinguishing it from “politics.” Indeed, a classic study in British social anthropology, written around about 1940, was about the political and ecological systems of the Nuer [*The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People*], a transhumant tribe in the southern Sudan, and it was written, incidentally, by my mentor at Oxford, E. E. Evans-Pritchard. The book dealt with a very different kind of politics from the one I focused on, but still, that’s what it dealt with. Evans-Pritchard had also written another famous book that attempted to combine anthropology with political history in Cyrenaica [*The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*]. It was during the Second World War, when he did research for it as a member of the intelligence unit of the British army in north Africa. That was also when he converted to Catholicism, incidentally: they had to bring over an Italian priest from across the lines in order for him to be received into the church. In fact there were a number of other anthropologists who had dealt with politics in central and southern Africa. Perhaps there had been fewer who had focused on colonialism, which was what I became increasingly interested in. Colonialism was instrumental in making that particular tribe—the Kababish—into “a tribe.”

Watson You’ve also written about economics in developing societies, from the perspective of the sociology and anthropology of economics.

Asad Yes. But I don't really consider myself to be a specialist in the question of economic development. You know, there has been a lot written on it. It's become a major field in anthropology since the rise and decline of Marxist anthropology. For some reason economic anthropology didn't interest me so much, although I've written on that, too. In any case, I always felt that the assumption of social development following a linear path should be problematized. Anyway, although I edited a book on the developing Middle East together with the economic historian Roger Owen, I wasn't all that interested. We did this at the urging of a friend who was editing a series on the sociology of developing societies.

Watson You were involved in questions of coloniality early on, editing an essay collection on the topic in 1973. You were also publicly critical of Orientalism. At the time you were working in the United Kingdom, where the greatest Orientalists were located. What was your relationship to Orientalist studies at that time?

Asad It was a very general one. Remember I came from a Muslim background and of course Orientalism had been, as you know from Edward Said's book, very much focused on the study of Islam and the Middle East. In that sense I had been very aware of Orientalists early on. And of course my father, who was a committed Muslim and a Muslim scholar, did a lot of translations of Islamic theological texts from Arabic, and he often spoke to me about Orientalists (you see, he didn't consider himself one) who wrote in an unsympathetic or even hostile way about Islam. This was a more general kind of recognition of their significance for the society that he had chosen to enter. Anyway, although I didn't go as far as he did in dismissing Orientalists, this attitude encouraged me to regard Orientalist texts critically while also recognizing their scholarly value. They may also have contributed to my crisis of faith. When I was a boy of about fourteen or so I began to have serious doubts about my beliefs. My father was very good about it, I must say. He didn't try to stop me from traveling to the West because of my weakened faith. You know, I thought it would be wonderful there because, in contrast to Pakistan, which was a religious society, England must be a land of enlightenment and liberty and open-mindedness, and everything I thought was absent in the place I had grown up in. That was an illusion, of course. I was slowly disabused of it after I arrived in England. It took me a while to recognize that most people there were just as narrow-minded and self-satisfied as anywhere else—though perhaps about different things. So

the whole question of Orientalism gradually fitted into that awareness for me, as part of what I thought was the unacceptable attitude towards the peoples from whom I came and with whom I identified myself despite my loss of faith.

So there was this personal disappointment, but also increasingly I became aware of the theoretical poverty of what was generally known as Orientalism. We had a small reading group in the late sixties that I started together with some friends, and it soon morphed into annual meetings in which we invited various specialists to look critically at the material written on the Middle East by Orientalists as well as by others. We invited people from the West generally, mostly from Europe and the United States, but also from the Arab world. The papers we presented at these meetings were then published in an annual we founded called *Review of Middle East Studies* (in 1975, 1976, and 1978). We were very struck—I was certainly very struck—not only by the bias of many of the writings on Islam and the Middle East but also by the abysmally low level of thinking with which these scholars seemed to be satisfied. When you looked at, you know, at substantive work on the West (critical philosophy, literary criticism, historiography), it was light-years away from the kind of conceptual understanding that Orientalists and students of the modern Middle East brought to bear on the history and thought of that region. The sophistication on the one side and the naïveté on the other were remarkable. And I am not just talking about political bias but about the assumptions that were taken for granted, the questions that *weren't* asked. So that was also part of our concern about Orientalism at the time—its impoverished theoretical imagination.

Watson Was Orientalism a discipline, in the contemporary sense? Were there disciplinary boundaries and norms? Was it typical to have a department of Orientalism, for example?

Asad No, Orientalism wasn't a discipline. Given the great strategic interest of the region since the Second World War, there were increasing numbers of people who interested themselves in the contemporary Middle East, its societies and politics, but they were still very much affected by the ideas propounded by Orientalists. Orientalism was the European scholarly specialism that had dealt (particularly since the nineteenth century) with "the East." It was typically concerned with medieval Arab history, Islamic law, classical Arabic literature, the origins of Islam—and often all these topics together under the rubric of Islamic civilization. Which was another very striking thing about

Orientalism, an indication of what it was like. You had people who wrote about seventh-century Arabia and equally about twentieth-century Turkey. They took it for granted that they could talk about an enormous swath of historical time and a great variety of societies all the way from Morocco to Indonesia, because it was assumed that a single time and a single culture dominated them. The languages involved might be different (they might even belong to different language families), and the physical environments and historical experience might be different, but none of that essentially mattered. You might call yourself a historian, you might call yourself a theologian, but, you know, you had no doubt about what you could pontificate about. A single approach, a single methodology, a singular confidence applied everywhere. Imagine making that assumption that with regard to European culture, thought, and politics. This was surely a sign of just how primitive the field was, not just in terms of quantity but also of quality. So I would say that its primitive intellectual character was what distinguished Orientalism, regardless of what university department Orientalists belonged to. Even later, people who specialized in the politics of the Middle East might be in a politics department, historians of the Arab world in history departments, and so on, but they were largely influenced by Orientalist ideas. Orientalists after all were the ones who knew Middle Eastern languages well. I mean they might not speak it very well but they could certainly read it. Indeed, because of this, it can't be denied that many of them have done useful work translating, editing, and collating texts. But their intellectual orientation has been profoundly flawed.

Watson A few years later, we have the meteoric success of Edward Said in literary studies, along with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha. Meanwhile, the historians invent subaltern studies. What was the impact of early postcolonial studies on cultural anthropology and Middle Eastern studies?

Asad Not very much on cultural anthropology at first. I'm trying to remember now how much of an impact postcolonial studies had on Middle Eastern studies, but in any case it was much later. Certainly our group was enormously encouraged by Edward Said's book. I must say when I read Said's book in 1978 I was very impressed. A few years earlier I had also become greatly interested in Michel Foucault, and the beginning of Said's book of course draws on Foucault. Although that was not quite, in my view, the most interesting use of Foucault's

notion of power and discourse. There is no doubt that Said's book has been an extremely positive intervention. I do nevertheless have some theoretical disagreements with it that I won't elaborate on here. I was a friend of his and we talked and argued over several things, but the aspect of Foucault that I was interested in at the time was discipline and power as a *productive* force. And that aspect is clearly missing in Said's book. Much of what he has to say there comes out of his analysis of various literary writers, and all of that is very insightful and suggestive. What I was more interested in, however, were the writings of diplomats, traders, and administrators, and the practices of power they were embedded in. That kind of practical writing, rather than literary writings, and its practical *effects* on society, on ways of thought and behavior, were what I wanted to see. Nevertheless, the publication of *Orientalism* was a great event and a signpost to an entire field in which new questions could be asked.

Watson When did you turn to questions of religion? What drew you to the topic?

Asad I think it was quite early on. I mean, I was very interested in Marxist theory, and in the late sixties I had also joined a reading group focusing on Marx and Marxist writers, including people like Louis Althusser, for whom I still have very considerable respect. Marxist writings on ideology intrigued me very much. I would say that the kind of interest I had in ideology led to my being increasingly frustrated by certain assumptions about religion (the paradigmatic form of ideology in Marxism) that didn't seem to me persuasive. I was not religious at the time but I found the Marxist notion of ideology unsatisfactory as a way of understanding religion. Now there had been a number of attempts to rethink the classic Marxist notion of ideology, most prominently by Foucault himself. I was attracted by the idea of moving away from the notion of false consciousness and, indeed, from consciousness itself as an explanatory notion. So that led me at the same time—I am now talking about the late seventies—to rethink the significance of religion. There was also something else. I used to go quite often to Egypt after the years that I spent in the Sudan. There I talked to many Marxist and “post-Enlightenment” friends about what seemed to me to be the political inadequacy of their attitude to religion, about their failed attempts to lead “the masses” without any serious engagement with the things that mattered greatly in their lives, including their religion. It seemed to me quite wrong to think that the

Watson You've written not only on Islam but also on medieval Christianity. Have you been criticized or misunderstood for comparing medieval Christianity to contemporary Islam? In your comparisons you of course develop a sophisticated critique of temporality (and modernity). It's obvious that you don't think that way, but there is a popular stereotype that Middle Eastern Muslims are living in the Middle Ages.

Asad I'm not aware of such criticisms, although there may be some. Strictly speaking, I'm not "comparing" medieval Christianity to contemporary Islam — nor am I equating the time of the former with that of the latter. There are a number of writers who have noted and described the theoretical and political implications of categorizing contemporary peoples as noncontemporaneous — Reinhart Koselleck, Margaret Hodgen, and Johannes Fabian. But that is not, of course, what I do with my analyses of medieval Christianity and contemporary Islam in *Genealogies*. I try to develop questions (both parallel and contrasting questions) about discourse and embodiment. Each of them inhabits its own temporality; neither belongs to the Enlightenment narrative of progress.

Watson It would seem that the events of 2001 launched the wider interest in Middle Eastern studies as well as in religious studies. But surely interesting things were already developing in these fields during the 1990s, which was an especially pivotal decade for cultural anthropology — its self-reflexive turn, which prompted anthropologists to ask, What are we doing?

Asad In some ways, as it is often said, 2001 changed everything; in other ways it didn't really change much at all. It was simply one very important intensification of certain trends that predated it, and certainly this intensification was palpable. There was a concern about terrorists before then, but it didn't have quite the powerful impetus towards war and surveillance that 9/11 gave it. Yes, there is an interest, of course, in religion, too, and in the Middle East. You know, what the motivations are for that intensification is of course an interesting question. To a great extent, the wider interest is simply an extension of the so-called war against terror. This provides more jobs in academia, and that may be a good thing for those who get them, but I don't think self-reflection had much to do with this new interest. There was little evidence of a desire to look critically at our own societies, at our

cultural assumptions about pain and cruelty, for example. In fact, I think that the worldly success of Western societies—their *sense* that they are historically successful—has to some extent become an obstacle to fundamental rethinking. In my view, anthropology *in principle* affords an opportunity for fundamental questioning of our dominant assumptions. But this opportunity is not always taken, even by anthropologists themselves.

Watson I would like to hear more about your current work on human rights. According to your CV, you are completing a book titled “Are Human Rights Secular? European and Islamic Traditions.” What is the connection between secularism and human rights? Is this a departure from the previous focus on religion?

Asad Well, my interest in religion as well as subsequently in secularism comes from a wish to understand our modernity, our present. I think human rights is clearly a part of our present. In my optimistic moods, I think I should write a book on this topic. I have published a little on human rights, but of course there is much, much more to be said on that subject. On the one hand, the project of human rights is an attempt to grapple with various kinds of cruelties in our modern world; and on the other hand, it is connected with imperial projects. What particularly intrigues me about human rights talk is its punitive aspect. Thus health and food are regarded as basic human rights, and their absence clearly causes much suffering and violates human rights, yet that receives far less attention than the atrocities committed by dictators and military men. To some extent this is connected to the well-known debates about positive and negative freedoms, but I think there’s something more at stake here. It raises the question: what does the human desire to punish tell us about human rights? I want to reconcile the way in which the project of human rights is rooted in a compassionate concern, in a very humane concern to protect people against torture and murder, and also in the recognition that they have rights to the basic conditions of life and health; and I want to reconcile all this with what seems to me a frightening desire to punish! This makes it much more difficult to deal with cruelties than triumphalists think. I find it interesting that the desire to punish, to hurt someone, seems to be stronger than anything else, stronger even than the need to reach out to the person who is harmed by deliberate cruelty or casual neglect, in order to heal them. In fact I have written a lot of notes on this question, but I can’t decide whether what I have drafted should be parts of a long article or a short book!

Quite apart from the difference between cruelty and neglect, what intrigues me is the way in which compassion for humans and the desire to inflict pain on them both feed into each other. This has also led me to delve into the history of sadism and masochism as aspects of our collective life. It's all very well, you know, being Pollyannaish about the development of humane sensibilities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as many historians have done, but there is much more to the story than is generally recognized. Wasn't the French Revolution—one of the “origins” of human rights—at once enormously cruel and liberating? With regard to human rights, to come back to your question, what I can say rather is that they are at once absolutely necessary and impossible in our time. Anyway, I am still thinking about this. Secularism, it seems to me, is very closely connected to the idea of human rights. For both of them, history, a certain kind of triumphant history, is absolutely central. For both, there is the need to recognize the transitoriness of things (including how people value things), the ephemeral character of collective lives—and yet for both, there seems to be the need for asserting some kind of transcendent, ahistorical principles that ask to be universalized.

Watson It would seem that your interlocutors have changed over time. As you mentioned, since *Genealogies of Religion* you have been invited to speak to religious studies departments. Your name appears on the masthead of a book-length published dialogue with Judith Butler, Wendy Brown, and Saba Mahmood. Have you been surprised?

Asad Have I been surprised? No, not really. Should I be surprised? I mean, I've known these people and have talked with them for years. In fact, I've known Saba ever since she was a student at Stanford, as well as her husband Charles Hirschkind, who was a student of mine.

Watson Butler has become very political. *Gender Trouble* was certainly political too, but her current work engages more directly in the political sphere proper.

Asad Yes, absolutely. She has taken a very strong political stand. She went recently to the West Bank and wrote on the occupation, and I am enormously impressed by her courage and integrity. Apart from being brilliant (she has sharpened our understanding of the fragility of life), I think she has fundamentally decent instincts—which is not something that can be said of all academics. And her attempt to marry subtle analysis with political commitment is something I find

impressive. I have nothing but admiration for her, and I really also love Wendy. Perhaps I have bumped into Wendy a little more often, in various places.

I think that most of the time my interlocutors have been writings by people I haven't met. I have learned a lot from my students, but I have basically learned from books, especially books by people I didn't know personally, or didn't know very well. For example, there's the English theologian John Milbank, whom I met briefly many years ago, but it's largely his writings that I have read with very great interest and great profit; and more recently, the writings of Stanley Hauerwas. Hauerwas wrote me a long letter after *Suicide Bombing* came out. And he sent me several papers he'd written, which I found thought provoking.

I am trying to think of your question about my interlocutors. I don't know—I don't think of interlocutors, not because I don't have people I argue with or learn from but because the word sounds too formal to my ear. For example, I have known both Wendy and Judith for several years, and there are lots of ideas I share with them, but there are other things that I am not sure I go along with. My relationships with intellectuals and their books are often fluid: I keep rethinking about what they have said, or what could be made of what they've said, and sometimes I change my mind. It is a word used quite often, "interlocutors," but I am not absolutely sure how to answer your question. There are lots of people I have learned from. There is, for example, David Scott, who teaches anthropology at Columbia, a very subtle thinker. And then there is Gil Anidjar, who teaches in the religion department, who I think is a very original scholar. There are people like that here with whom I talk.

Watson There's also Michael Taussig at Columbia.

Asad Yes, but I haven't talked with him for years, for some reason. He is obviously a very talented person. But for some reason we've somehow not come into contact much. I think it must have been about eighteen years ago that I met him last, before he moved to Columbia and I moved to Johns Hopkins. In fact I have very little contact with the anthropology department at Columbia.

Watson Do you still think of yourself as an anthropologist?

Asad Yeah, I suppose I do. Well, I think of myself—it doesn't worry me too much what label I should put on myself. I recognize my anthropological background has been profoundly important for me

in various ways. It has helped me to raise certain kinds of questions that would have been different if I hadn't studied anthropology. Yes, I think of myself as an anthropologist, but not so that I would be offended if somebody thought I wasn't one. Yes, I suppose I do, but at the same time I think that ethnography has been fetishized for a long time. There are lots of people who do excellent ethnography who are not trained as anthropologists. I think the point about ethnography is that it is suggestive in ways other techniques aren't. But then so is psychoanalysis, and when you do an analysis of someone you get an understanding of human beings that no other way could yield. And then there are other valuable techniques like statistics. But techniques shouldn't define disciplines. Techniques are by definition means to ends. Anyway, I suppose since I'm in an anthropology department, and they ask me to teach anthropology students, and others ask me to give talks in other anthropology departments, I must be an anthropologist!

Watson You will be spending the spring 2011 semester in Egypt. Could you talk about your project? It has to do with human rights?

Asad I started two years ago. I had research leave for a semester, and I went to Egypt. I wanted to look at the debates that were taking place after 1948 on the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights in Egyptian papers and journals and books. These debates were between Islamists and secularists—self-declared secularists—and I wanted to analyze them. I found virtually nothing for the early years—the first two decades or so—and what I found for later years was rather uninteresting. So I was rather frustrated. In the meantime, I was talking to various friends, including some very talented young historians who had been trained in Egyptian archives. One of them I became very friendly with was a specialist in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Egypt, and he'd done a lot of work on Sharia courts in that period. So we talked about his research, and then we went off to the national library. That was how I became interested in indigenous ideas about liberty, equality, humanity, et cetera, that had been embodied in various institutions, in a wider cultural and social context, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These ideas might be seen as anticipating the arrival of human rights language in 1948. So I thought: why not write a history of these ideas? At present, apart from scattered notes on premodern aspects of Egyptian history, what I have is a lot of material written more or less coherently on Western history from the eighteenth century onwards, largely based on secondary

sources. I mean I don't go into archives, I'm not trained to do that, but there's been an enormous amount of published stuff on the history of human rights, so I can deal with that. And of course novels and plays from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the period that many historians see as crucial for the "origin" of human rights because (so it has been argued) that was when humane sentiments, including social compassion, emerged as preconditions of human rights. But the eighteenth century is also the period when sadism is articulated, and sadism is, as Foucault says, part of the great shift in the collective imagination of the modern West. And in the nineteenth century you get the development of masochism. And then there's the growth of European empires, and various European projects for the improvement and education of "native peoples." And native peoples leap into what they come to see as a more civilized way of life. All of this must be included as part of the story of human rights in the West. So at the moment I have two projects, one dealing with Western European history and the other with Middle East history. I would like to find a way of bringing them together. I don't know where it is going to lead, quite honestly. We'll see. This is basically why I am going to Egypt again.

Watson Is there anything else in our discussion today that you would like to go back to?

Asad Go back to? I find it very difficult to go back to things that I have published. I just can't stand going over my stuff unless it is twenty-five years old; then it becomes so foreign that I can read it again. Every phrase seems to me to require some emendation or elaboration, and this is helped by having computers.

Watson Because it is so easy to revise.

Asad Yes. I used to drive our secretary mad in the anthropology department in Hull when we still had typewriters. I'd give my revised paper to her and she'd say rather crossly, "Now look, this is the fifth time you are bringing this paper to me." And I'd say, "Look, if you have time to retype it, do it, and if not, then leave it on one side." She'd then say, "What is this? How many times do you want to go over this?" My answer was, "Forever, because that's the way I think." Even my wife, Tanya, keeps telling me, "You've done enough revision of this article! Send it in, for God's sake!" But I find that what I am doing is not really polishing it but thinking through it. And thinking never stops . . .