

REVIEW ARTICLE

Peter van der Veer

The modernity of religion

Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (1993), 335 (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, £35.00, paperback £13.00).

The study of the production of knowledge about colonized peoples received a considerable boost from the publication in 1978 of Edward Said's *Orientalism*.¹ The reason for this was not that Said's ideas were entirely new. In fact, much of what Said had to say could already be found in earlier work by Raymond Schwab and (with a more political edge) in an essay by Anwar Abdel Malek.² Some years before the publication of Said's book, Talal Asad edited a volume that opened a debate on colonialism and anthropology.³ Nevertheless, it was only after Said's *Orientalism* that not only anthropologists and historians became interested in these issues, but also students of literature and the arts.

One of Said's main arguments in *Orientalism* was that western knowledge about the Orient was a 'systematic discourse by which Europe was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and even imaginatively'.⁴ According to Said, western views created a reality in which the 'Oriental' had to live. In the book under review, Asad has a related problematic. He examines the ways in which western modernity have become of universal importance and, more specifically, how a western category such as religion has come to be applied as a universal concept. A major objection to Said's argument has been that it neglects the important ways in which the so-called Orientals not only shaped their own views but also the orientalist views criticized by Said. His argument seems to deny the agency of the colonized by focusing on the force of colonial discourse.

Although he does not refer to Said's work, Asad takes up the issue of agency in the introduction of his new book. Asad emphasizes that, although people are to some extent

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978); James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, 1988); Gyan Prakash, 'Writing post-orientalist histories of the Third World: perspectives from Indian historiography', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, xxxii, 2 (1990); Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (eds), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament* (Philadelphia,

1993); Nicholas Dirks (ed.), *Colonialism and Culture* (Ann Arbor, 1993).

² Raymond Schwab, *La Renaissance Orientale* (Paris 1950); Anwar Abdel Malek, 'Orientalism in crisis', *Diogenes*, XLIV (Winter 1963).

³ Talal Asad (ed.), *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (London, 1973).

⁴ Said, *op. cit.*, 3.

agents in their own history, they are also, to an important extent, 'patients' in a history that happens to them. Like Said in the passage quoted above, Asad is interested in how the project of modernization, which is crucial to the spread of colonial power over the world, provides new forms of language in which subjects understand themselves and their actions. He is against deconstructing 'the West' out of existence, since post-Enlightenment practices and discourses of progress and development have indeed become dominant. In that sense western history has shaped world history, including what is understood as 'history'. Actions which cannot be seen as significant within the modern conceptualization of history are thus not part of 'history'. And one could add that it is almost impossible to escape from categories of western history, such as 'public' and 'private', 'religion' or 'history' when writing the history of other societies.⁵ This problem is particularly dramatic in the heroic efforts to make 'history' out of 'myth' in the writing of pre-colonial African history.⁶ As Asad (19) observes, anthropology is the discipline which grapples with the non-westerners as non-moderns, generally from an evolutionist point of view.

Asad's argument is that anthropologists need to understand the West if they want to understand the ways in which modernity makes the world in which non-western peoples have to live. Therefore, although his early work dealt with the anthropology of Islam, and one essay in this collection focuses on Islamic debates in Saudi Arabia, the bulk of the essays try to define western historicity and, especially, the place in it of Christianity. It is very much a conceptual history, not so much in the sense of a pure history of ideas, but in that of a Foucaultian history of the power of discourse and disciplinary practice in 'making history'. One does not find narrative history in these pages, but a highly sophisticated account of the genealogy of knowledge and power. Asad is much more interested in the larger conceptual issues than in stories about actors. That actors and agency take second place in comparison to discursive traditions and the workings of disembodied 'reasons of power' follows from his approach.

The book is divided into four sections, entitled *Genealogies*, *Archaisms*, *Translations* and *Polemics*, each containing two essays. These essays are all very densely argued, real miniatures of a highly complex nature. Most of them could be developed in book-length arguments and I will not even attempt to summarize them. Rather, I would like to outline some of Asad's theoretical positions which I see as crucial for the development of a mature anthropology and social history of religion. In the section *Genealogies*, Asad examines the anthropological conceptualization of religion and ritual. To illustrate his views he examines medieval Christianity. In the subsequent section, *Archaisms*, he develops his ideas about medieval Christian discourses and practices in full detail. The section *Translations* takes up the issue of the cultural translation of other people's discourses and practices. This is illustrated in the only essay that deals specifically with Islam. The final section, *Polemics*, does what it says it does: Asad takes a polemical stance in what has come to be called the 'Rushdie Affair'. Both in the essay on Islam in Saudi Arabia and in the two essays on Rushdie, issues of religion and politics today are addressed. The other essays are more or less historically and/or theoretically oriented.

⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Postcoloniality and the artifice of history: who speaks for "Indian" pasts?', *Representations*, xxxvii (1992).

⁶ J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (London, 1985).

The first essay in *Genealogies* deals specifically with Clifford Geertz's celebrated essay on 'Religion as a cultural system', which is one of the most influential definitions of religion in current anthropology and history.⁷ Asad explicitly does not want to write a full critique of Geertz's ideas on religion, but uses these ideas as a starting point to argue against universalist definitions of religion. In his view the modern understanding of religion, of which Geertz's essay is an example, is very different from what medieval Christians would have regarded as religion. It is Asad's strategy to illuminate the specific historicity of western 'universal' concepts by showing that a definition of religion which draws from modern Christianity cannot be applied to pre-modern Christianity. What I see as a major theoretical issue which divides Geertz and Asad concerns the concept of symbol. Geertz argues that 'religion is a system of symbols' and he defines symbol as 'any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception – the conception is the symbol's "meaning"'.⁸ Asad, on the other hand, argues that a symbol is 'a set of relationships between objects and events uniquely brought together as complexes or as concepts, having at once an intellectual, instrumental, and emotional significance'.⁹

This may seem a rather arcane difference of opinion, but it has immense consequences for the kinds of research questions that can be asked. While Geertz sees a system of symbols in place, which has to be decoded by the researcher, Asad is interested in the question of how (under what conditions) symbols come to be constructed and accepted as natural and authoritative, while others are opposed. Where Geertz, following Durkheim and ultimately Talcott Parsons, argues that religious symbols act as models of and models for reality, Asad rejects the implied isomorphism and raises the question of how religious power creates religious truth. Here Asad has a particularly helpful reference to Peter Brown's work on Augustine, which shows that Augustine thought that men had to be disciplined to experience the Christian truth, a *per molestias eruditio* ('learning by inconveniences').¹⁰

This raises the question of *disciplina*, which Asad examines in the essays on ritual and monastic practice. Asad insists that the idea that ritual is essentially symbolic, signifying behaviour is entirely modern. In his view anthropologists and historians are performing a theological task when they establish a master meaning of representations by declaring that the (often conflicting) explanations offered by the performers of rituals are inadequate. Another issue is the distinction between religious and secular dispositions. Briefly, Asad's position is that the boundary between secular and religious has been constantly redrawn in Christianity, but that a major shift occurred when, in the seventeenth century, the Roman church lost its authority to make these distinctions. What comes to be called 'religion' is now both universal in the widest sense, as in the ideas about Natural Religion, existing in every society, and individual in the deepest sense, that is really in the inner beliefs of individuals. Geertz's understanding of 'religion' belongs firmly to this modern period and, Asad argues, would not be understood in medieval Christianity (nor, for that matter in a number of non-western societies).

Asad's position is certainly convincing and important. It asks for a social history of religion, with an emphasis on the social conditions of particular discourses and practices.

⁷ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), 87–126.

⁹ Asad, *op. cit.*, 31.

¹⁰ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (London, 1967).

⁸ Geertz, *op. cit.*, 91.

However, he devotes only three pages to the construction of religion in early modern Europe and, while Lord Herbert, Locke and Kant are mentioned, there is little attention paid to the expansion of European power to the rest of the world. Clearly, this essay – like the book as a whole – is programmatic, but while social history is the programme, its focus is on intellectual history. A related problem is that it reproduces the dichotomy between modern and what precedes it, because it does not pay attention to the social history of modern religion in Europe. In his presentation modernity becomes much too secular and of one cloth. The huge religious activities in nineteenth-century Britain, Holland and Germany, for instance, cannot be explained by it. It is precisely the expansion of missionary societies in this period which escape – wrongly, in my view – from Asad's analysis.¹¹

An example of Asad's textual rather than social orientation at some points is in his essay on 'The concept of ritual'. Asad tries to trace the modern distinction between the feelings of the private self and outward behaviour to the power games in the Renaissance courts. It is telling that he refers here to work by Edward Burns on drama in the English Renaissance rather than to the historical sociology of Norbert Elias, which tries to explain the sociogenesis of the rules of etiquette in court society.¹² One imagines that Asad would object to the Eurocentric evolutionism in Elias's work, but there can be little doubt that Elias has something important to say on the very subject Asad addresses here.

Asad follows Marcel Mauss by proposing to look at ritual as embodied practice, as learned 'Body techniques'.¹³ This opens up the possibility of enquiring how people learn body techniques to acquire religious experiences. I think this is an absolutely crucial question to be asked when one is interested in the history of ascetic and mystical disciplines. One does not learn from Asad, however, that Mauss's essay on 'Body techniques' focuses on the techniques of swimming and warfare (digging trenches and military marches) which were thoroughly modern, and modelled on technology. Mauss's essay, therefore, not only addresses a methodological issue, but also a historical one, namely the making of a habitus appropriate to a certain modernity.¹⁴ One would have expected Asad to take up the issue of how these disciplinary powers, related to the modern state, spread over the world through colonialism, as has been done for nineteenth-century Egypt by Timothy Mitchell.¹⁵ Instead, Asad chooses to look at pre-modern, medieval Christianity.

In two beautiful essays in the ironically entitled section *Archaisms*, Asad explores judicial torture as part of the Inquisition's search for Truth, and monastic disciplines as practices aimed at the construction of religious subjects. In the first of these Asad asks himself how and why the ordeal becomes replaced by judicial torture. He refuses to

¹¹ Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago, 1991).

¹² E. Burns, *Character: Acting and Being on the Pre-Modern Stage* (New York, 1990); N. Elias, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (Basel, 1939).

¹³ Marcel Mauss, 'Body techniques', in M. Mauss, *Sociology and Psychology: Essays*

(London, 1979).

¹⁴ This was pointed out by my colleague, Patricia Spyer, at a seminar devoted to Asad's work in June 1994 at the University of Amsterdam.

¹⁵ Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (Cambridge, 1988). Mitchell, however, ignores Islam.

interpret this shift as a triumph of rationality, as argued by medievalists such as Southern.¹⁶ Instead, he proposes to see torture as a ritual practice to pursue verbal truth by inflicting pain which was closely related to another ritual practice, the sacramental confession. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, which proscribed ordeals, also prescribed mandatory annual private confession for all Christians. Asad's view that it was the development of theological views and of the authority of the church which led to the abolition of the ordeal is, incidentally, supported by Robert Bartlett's more detailed research which Asad does not cite.¹⁷ Following Foucault's discussion of the texts of the monk Cassian (c. 360–435), he shows that in monastic practices penance, the infliction of pain on the body, was part of the monk's search for religious truth. This theme is further developed in the other essay on 'Discipline and humility in Christian monasticism', in which Asad examines Benedictine and Cistercian programmes to construct humble, obedient Christian selves. It is not so much 'force' which motivates monastic subjects to obey, but the 'will to obey' to authority. It is Asad's argument that the monastic 'technologies of the self' are extended to the population as a whole through the connected development of a new system of confession and of the establishment of judicial torture in ecclesiastical as well as lay courts. In a somewhat unsubstantiated extension of his argument Asad sees the connection of pain with the objectifications of truth as an essential feature of European history. The enlightenment secularizes this Christian tradition by linking progress with punishment.

The third section, *Translations*, gives in the first essay a detailed critique of a text by Ernest Gellner on the interpretation and translation of the discourse of alien societies. Asad shows the inconsistencies and mistakes in Gellner's text in a very critical manner. His major argument here is that, contrary to Gellner's denunciation of 'excessive charity' towards incoherent statements, anthropologists need to look for consistency when translating discourses from other societies. The main reason for that is the inequality of languages and the relations of power involved in translating from a 'weak' Third World language into English. This inequality also encourages the British anthropological practice of reading another culture's implicit or unconscious meanings, which Asad identifies as a theological exercise. It is not very clear from this essay what Asad considers to be a fruitful engagement with an alien culture, since the search for implicit meanings is often also one for a coherence which cannot be found on the surface. For an example of his own approach we might turn to the second essay in this section, which examines Islamic public argument in Saudi Arabia.

Asad's starting point is a familiar one in anthropology, namely that each cultural tradition has to be considered in its own terms. Traditions have characteristic ways of reasoning which have to be described before they can be compared and contrasted to others. From Kant to Habermas there is a liberal Enlightenment tradition in the West which emphasizes the public use of reason as the arbiter of true knowledge. In this tradition religious arguments are seen as disruptive in the public sphere and thus to be relegated to a private sphere. In Saudi Arabia, on the contrary, reasoned criticism is expressed publicly by religious leaders who presuppose the concept of an orthodox Islam

¹⁶ R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (London, 1959).

¹⁷ Robert Bartlett, *Trial by Fire and Water: The Medieval Judicial Ordeal* (Oxford, 1986).

and disagree on what that is. Asad is particularly concerned here with the possibilities of criticizing the government, which take a particular, discursive form of *nasiha*, that is 'advice'. Especially after the Gulf crisis Saudi 'ulama have become more openly critical of the government by publicly giving them 'advice'.¹⁸ Asad shows that the tradition of *nasiha* allows for a continuous moral criticism that tries to establish orthodoxy in times of radical change, and that it is therefore mistaken to see this as 'fundamentalism' in the sense of an outright rejection of change. The Islamic tradition of public criticism is a religious one, but not therefore irrational; it is coercive, but not more so than secular beliefs and practices. The conclusion is that the Islamic tradition is different from the Enlightenment tradition, but that this difference has to be explored by careful translation without resorting to orientalist imagery like 'oriental despotism'.

In the final section of the book, entitled *Polemics*, Asad engages one of the most challenging political and intellectual issues of the last few years: the 'Rushdie Affair'. In the first essay he examines a document, entitled 'On being British', written by the deputy home secretary, John Patten, in 1989. According to Asad this document, which was published in the press, exemplified the moral panic of a liberal English ruling elite at the sight of the political mobilization of Muslim immigrants in Britain to get Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* banned. In Asad's view the perceived danger, which caused extraordinary outbursts in the liberal press, had neither to do with law and order nor with freedom of speech. The disturbing issue was rather the public, political manifestation of a religious tradition coming from the former colonies. At stake is the definition of Britishness in the debate about the assimilation of immigrants and multiculturalism. The protest of South Asian Muslims shows that they are neither assimilated nor satisfied with the aestheticization of cultural difference (in clothing, music, festivals). Their demand that their religious difference has a political significance runs counter to the secular project of the modern, British nation state and is therefore felt to be threatening. The 'Rushdie Affair' has, in that sense, much in common with the recent 'veil' issue in French schools.

The final essay gives a detailed analysis of *The Satanic Verses*. Asad reads the book as a political novel which has to be understood in the context of Muslim immigration in post-colonial Britain. Asad's position is quite simply that the passages about the growth of Islam and about the Prophet in the novel lampoon the beliefs and practices of already marginalized South Asian Muslim immigrants. The book's emphasis on the sexual behaviour of the Prophet follows an old Christian tradition of vilification and degenerates into a sneer.¹⁹ As we know, Muslims in Bradford responded to this sneer by burning the book, which provoked an immense outrage in Britain and has caused a considerable setback in race relations. This outrage had to do with the fact that *literature* was burned; in bourgeois culture literature fulfills the role previously performed by sacred books, according to Asad – and, indeed, *The Satanic Verses* compares explicitly religious and literary inspiration. Both the novel and the Qur'an turn out to be sacred, either to liberals or to Muslims.

¹⁸ This has very recently, in August 1994, led to the arrest of one preacher, Sheikh Salman al-Audah, and several of his followers in the Saudi city of Buraida.

¹⁹ For a very different interpretation of these issues, focusing more on Iran, see Michael M. J. Fisher and Mehdi Abedi, *Debating Muslims* (Madison, 1990).

Asad's book is of extraordinary importance for the development of an historical anthropology of religion. What has to be developed further than he is able to do in these essays is a social history which examines religious movements and their resources, which produce discourses. Both in the essays on Britain and on Saudi Arabia it is striking that we do not get a firm idea of the political arena in which debates take place, although we do receive a very astute reading of texts that are produced in at least some segments of the arena. Asad's theoretical programme has to be endorsed and should be able to revitalize the social analysis of religion by making religion and society a focus in the comparative, historical anthropology of modernity.

Research Centre for the Study of Religion and Society, University of Amsterdam