

FORMATIONS OF THE BODY: TALAL ASAD AND THE SECULAR

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FORMATIONS OF THE BODY: TALAL ASAD AND THE SECULAR

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I, Ömer Faruk Peksöz, certify that

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ABSTRACT

Formations of the Body: Talal Asad and the Secular

The present study aspires to read Talal Asad's *Genealogies of Religion* and *Formations of the Secular* not as works of anthropology of religion, but as one major contribution to body studies. The novelty of this thesis lies in its argument that Asad's reflections on the religious and the secular in two separate works comprise in fact one theory of the body. Asad's critique of the concepts of the secular and the religion is the ground upon which his theory of the body is constructed. His genealogy of the attitudes towards the body via the changing juridical practices in the European Middle Ages is Asad's treatment of bodily pain in the economy of truth. Asad's theory of the body is complemented with the examination of modern conceptions of agency, pain, and cruelty with regards to the concept of the secular and secularism. Accompanying this reading of Asad, this study is to maintain that "the religious" and "the secular" as opposites are but the products of modern thinking; that "the secular" precedes "secularism"; and, most importantly, that Asad deconstructs the binary opposition of "the religious" and "the secular" within the horizon of the body. Reading the shifts in the attitudes towards and understandings of the body especially in the history of Christianity, Asad develops a theory of the body. I attempt in this thesis as a consequence to introduce body studies to Talal Asad's theory of the body.

ÖZET

Bedenin Biçimlenmeleri: Talal Asad ve Seküler Kavramı

Bu çalışma Talal Asad'ın *Dinin Soykütükleri* ve *Sekülerliğin Biçimlenmeleri* adlı eserlerini din antropolojisi çalışmaları olmaktan ziyade beden kuramına yaptığı önemli katkı açısından inceleyecektir. Bu tezin getireceği yenilik, Asad'ın dini olan ve seküler olanı ayrı ayrı inceler görünen iki eserinin aslında birlikte okunduğunda tek bir beden kuramı ortaya koyduğunu iddia etmesidir. Asad'ın beden kuramını üzerine kurduğu temel seküler ve din kavramlarını eleştirir. Avrupa Orta Çağlarındaki değişen hukuki uygulamalar çerçevesinde beden anlayışlarının soykütüğünü çıkarması ise bedeni hakikat ekonomisi bünyesinde ele alış biçimidir. Seküler ve sekülerizm kavramlarıyla ilişkileri açısından modern kavramlar olarak faillik, acı ve vahşeti incelemesi kuramsal düşüncesinin son ayağını oluşturmaktadır. Asad'ın eserleri bağlamında bu çalışma, birbirini dışlayan kavramlar olarak “dini” ve “seküler”in modern düşüncenin bir icadı olduğunu; “seküler”in “sekülerizm”e takaddüm ettiğini ve en önemlisi, Asad'ın “dini/seküler” ikili zıtlığını beden üzerine düşünerek yapbozuma uğrattığını iddia ediyor. Bilhassa Hıristiyanlık tarihindeki bedene bakışlarda ve beden anlayışlarındaki değişimler üzerinden, Asad bir beden kuramı geliştiriyor. Sonuç olarak bu çalışmada, Talal Asad'ın beden kuramını, beden çalışmalarına takdim etmeyi amaçlıyorum.

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Last but the most important, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my wife, Rumeysa Çavuş, without whose unconditional support this thesis would never be complete.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Intellectual interest in the body has been one of the most prevalent themes in the social sciences since the beginning of the twentieth century. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler are among many thinkers who reflected on the different aspects of the body. Thinking on the body within an intellectual context in Turkey, however, has been a recent trend. Critical and Cultural Studies Program at Boğaziçi University is, in this sense, among the pioneers in the introduction of Turkish thought to body studies with several conferences, theses, and publications. The way this institution – the very institution within which I am writing this study – approaches “the body” is marked with a special emphasis upon femininity, masculinity, sexuality, queer, transidentity, and LGBTI studies. Although I consider these studies valuable to the understanding of the body in Turkey, I think that new theoretical tools are needed to further this understanding. I intend therefore to think about the body in relation to one of the binary oppositions that prevails Turkish thought, that of “the religious” and “the secular” in their making within European history. In this regard, I ask this question: How can the body relate to the concepts of “the religious” and “the secular”?

This question is the reason why I am attempting a reading of Talal Asad in this thesis. Although Asad is an anthropologist of religion who is famous with his critique of the concept of religion, and for his inauguration of the anthropology of the secular, I think what he achieves in his works comprises a theory of the body. To be clearer, I should say that in his *Genealogies of Religion* (1993) and *Formations of the Secular* (2003), Asad investigates into the ways the concepts of “the religious” and “the secular” are constructed in the history of European thought beginning from the

Middle Ages. Asad conducts his investigations into these concepts always within the horizon of the body. That is, Asad takes the shifting sensibilities towards and understandings of the body as the foundational elements of the concepts of the religious and the secular. To be able to develop an answer to the question above, I will, in the present study, read Talal Asad's reflections on the body to demonstrate the ways the body relates to the religious and the secular.

I now need to reformulate the question I asked and restate what I am trying to do in the present study. The reformulation of the question is as follows: How can we employ the concept of "body" and "body studies" with regards to the dichotomy of religious and secular – a dichotomy which determines to a considerable extent our understanding of the world? As for what I want to achieve in this thesis, I would like to show through Asad's theory that the investigation into the shifts in the conceptions of "the body" is crucial to grasp and deconstruct this dichotomy. Although Asad does not say this anywhere in his works, I venture to read Asad from a different point of view than his various interlocutors, and focus on his writings on the body. As a result, I will argue that the difference between a religious disposition and a secular disposition lies in a difference in bodily dispositions.

Before moving on with Asad's relevance to body studies, I would like to mention a few words about body studies in Turkey. In Turkish intellectual arena, body studies is rather a new phenomenon which almost entirely belongs to twenty-first century if we except Emre Işık's *Beden ve Toplum Kuramı* (Theory of Body and Society) (1998) in which he mainly discusses French feminist thought on the body.

Body studies has perhaps been introduced to Turkish public rather "violently" by a 2004 conference at Boğaziçi University within Critical and Cultural Studies

Department: “Queer, Türkiye ve Transkimlik” (Queer, Transidentity, and Turkey).

This is not to say that body was first studied within this program, but rather means that this program made these studies public with a shocking event on the “queer”.

Queer, which is the main subject of this conference, reveals the general tendency of body studies in Turkey and especially Boğaziçi University. More recently, this department organised another conference with the title “Müstehcenlik ve Beden” (Obscenity and the Body) in 2013. In this conference, too, the main focus was upon sexuality and the queer. As for the theses prepared within the same department, we realize that those theses contributing to the body studies are focused on the sexuality and the queer. That is the reason why this present study aims to go further in body studies by introducing a new dimension as exemplified in the work of Talal Asad.

Son of Muhammad Asad who is widely-known for his works as a writer on Islam and as a diplomat, Talal Asad was born in 1932, in Saudi Arabia, but he was brought up in Pakistan. Although he began studying architecture in England, he chose to pursue his studies in anthropology at the University of Edinburgh.

Following his master’s in Edinburg, he began his doctoral studies at Oxford with the famous E. E. Evans-Pritchard. With him, Asad conducted his doctoral studies on the Kababish of Sudan. (Eilts, 2006) In his academic life, one of his main concerns has been the relations between the West and the non-West. Postcolonialism, in this sense, is one of his areas of interest.

Yet, his major works *Genealogies of Religion* and *Formations of the Secular* are Foucauldian genealogies of the concepts of religion and secular within European context. Asad’s anthropology of European history is one of his most important features. As a method, he privileges the history of European thinking to understand the concepts that govern our understanding today. Non-Western critical theories – in

Turkey, for example – may adopt Asad’s method to better grasp the concepts with which they are preoccupied. Asad’s eurocentrism is not a celebration of the “achievement” of European powers in their historical development. However, he accepts that these powers have been dominating the world for quite a long time, and shaped the mentalities worldwide to a considerable extent. Therefore, to be able to grasp the uses of the concept of religion or the secular, in Turkey for example, Asad would begin with an investigation into the prehistories of those concepts in European context.

After a brief note on the body studies in Turkey, we might return to our introduction to Talal Asad. As Asad’s major works are compilations of his several articles, this thesis is to focus on certain chapters from his two major books. These are “Pain and Truth in Medieval Christian Ritual” and “On Discipline and Humility in Medieval Christian Monasticism” from *Genealogies of Religion* (1993), and “Thinking about Agency and Pain” and “Reflections on Cruelty and Torture” from *Formations of the Secular* (2003). While these chapters are the core of his theory of the body, Asad’s critique of the concepts of religion, ritual, and the secular in different chapters are crucial to understanding him.

In his contribution to David Scott and Charles Hirschkind’s *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors* (2006), the author of *Why I am not a Secularist* (2000) William E. Connolly, in describing Asad’s way of thinking, argues that:

Talal Asad complicates terms of comparison that many anthropologists, theologians, philosophers, and political theorists receive as the unexamined background of thinking, judgment, and action as such. By doing so, he creates clearings, opening new possibilities of communication, connection, and creative invention where opposition or studied indifference prevailed. The

Asad slogan might be, Where simple or fixed opposition appears, let numerous connections across subtle differences emerge. (p. 75)

This is what Asad mainly does in his anthropology of European thought. First in *Genealogies of Religion*, he takes up Clifford Geertz definition of religion, and complicates this term and shows that the modern content of this concept is very much affected by the political history of Europe (mainly by the religious wars).

Formations of the Secular, which is an attempt of an anthropology of secularism, begins with a question as to “the connection between ‘the secular’ as an epistemic category and ‘secularism’ as a political doctrine.” (Asad, 2003, p. 1) Asad argues that the secular is not identical to secularism, as it is clear from this question. Between them lies a categorical difference. Asad also argues that “‘the secular’ is conceptually prior to the political doctrine of ‘secularism,’ that over a time a variety of concepts, practices, and sensibilities have come together to form ‘the secular’” (p. 16).

He examined the ways how the attitudes towards the body are related to the concepts of the religious and the secular. Institutions of discipline and humility in medieval monasticism which is directly related to bodily dispositions are among his major areas of investigation. Medieval juridical thinking is another major area in which Asad reflects upon the bodily pain in the economy of truth. The transition from duels and ordeals to confession under torture as methods of determining guilt is one of the foundational shifts in juridical thought. This shift again is immediately linked to attitudes towards the body, as the bodily pain plays an imminent role both before and after this transition.

I should note here that in these two investigations into perhaps the prehistories of the modern concepts of religion and the secular, Asad’s “resort to

genealogy obviously derives from ways it has been deployed by Foucault and Nietzsche, although it does not claim to follow them religiously” (p. 16). In a more general sense, Talal Asad is a Foucauldian thinker. To put in a different way, he revisits the territories once visited by Foucault. Monasticism and medieval juridical practices are at first reminders of Foucault, and Asad in his own investigations properly credits Foucault’s work. Besides Foucault, there are other thinkers to whom Asad refers. On the subject of pain, Asad refers to Elaine Scarry to oppose her idea that “pain is necessarily a private experience” (p. 80). The notions Asad engages with and the scope of his work may also remind us of Giorgio Agamben, to whom Asad refers shortly in a footnote. In this thesis, I concentrate solely on Asad, because I think that Asad brings forward an authentic reading of the relation between the body and the concepts of religion and the secular, although he draws on many other contemporary thinkers.

Following Michel Foucault’s pronouncement of “the mode of reflective relation to the present” as “the basis of an entire form of philosophical reflection” (Foucault, 1998, p. 313), I acknowledge the necessity to relate my thinking to the present to be able to think within the field of critical and cultural studies. In this regard, I think that the recent story of theory has witnessed “the return of the religion” and the proliferation of “body studies.” Talal Asad, in my view, has for more than two decades come to epitomize these two tendencies - notably in his *Genealogies of Religion* and *Formations of the Secular* - through a problematization of the concept of the secular “within a biopolitical horizon.” In this line of thought, I intend, in the present study, not only to read and discuss Asad’s reading and critique of the concept of the secular from and within the body, but also to demonstrate how the body is crucial to the understanding of the religious.

In “What is Enlightenment?”, Michel Foucault observes that the way Immanuel Kant responds to the question of Enlightenment is entirely different from his predecessors because Kant is not “seeking to understand the present on the basis of a totality or of a future achievement. He is looking for a difference: What difference does today introduce with respect to yesterday?” (p. 305). Later in the same text, after emphasizing the “complex historical processes” that comprise the Enlightenment, Foucault names “the mode of reflective relation to the present” as “the basis of an entire form of philosophical reflection” (p. 313).

Such a reflective relation to our present – or to the contemporary – has therefore the potential to be the area where one might begin to think. A question would come in handy for a beginning: How does critical and cultural theory relate to the present, or to the contemporary?

Two recent instances in the story of the critical theory seem convenient to begin. In the first instance, the relation between the secular and the critique has recently been brought into question within a symposium titled “Is Critique Secular?” to which Talal Asad, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood contributed. In her introduction to the book with the same title which brings together the essays of that symposium, Wendy Brown tells the reader that

[T]he symposium was conceived as the inaugural public event for a new research and teaching program in critical theory at Berkeley, a program that aims to bridge conventional divides between modern European critical theory and non-Western and post-Enlightenment critical theoretical projects.
(Brown, 2009, p. 7)

Brown moves on and says that “presumed secularism of critique seemed an especially promising way to launch a program with such ambitions” (p. 7). The objective of the research program which may be roughly summarized as the ambition to bridge the Western and non-Western critical theories and the promising way to

start this program, that is, “the presumed secularism of critique” are worth emphasizing. This first instance attracts my attention because its methodical preference fits into Turkey’s position in that it aims at bridging “the Western and non-Western critical theories.” The examination of the secular, then, might be a good way to start thinking about the contemporary.

In the second instance, I would like to mention the methodological judgment posed by Giorgio Agamben in his seminal *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. In his introduction to his work Agamben asserts that:

[O]nly within a biopolitical horizon will it be possible to decide whether the categories whose opposition founded modern politics (right/left, private/public, absolutism/democracy, etc.) ...will have to be abandoned or will, instead, eventually regain the meaning they lost in that very horizon. (Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 1998, p. 10)

In this instance, the uniqueness of biopolitical horizon as a reference point in such a crucial question merits careful attention.

Two common points might be noticed between these instances. Firstly, they both address a methodological question concerning a beginning. Brown submits that the relation between the critique and the secular is a promising way to start thinking about the Western and non-Western together. Agamben, however, sees the promise in what he calls “biopolitical horizon”, that is, basically the human body as the target of discipline and power.

Second common point is, for me, disguised as “etc.” in the quotation from Agamben. Amidst the categories that founded modern politics Agamben does not openly include – only in the form of “etc.” – the binary “secular/religious”, yet it is common knowledge that this binary is central to modern politics and thinking. The common point of both Brown’s and Agamben’s remarks reveals itself therefore in

the category “secular”. Yet, while Brown tends to start with its relation to critique, Agamben would prefer to read this category and others with their relations to body, discipline, and power.

I venture somehow to make a common sense out of these two instances in what follows. In an intellectual atmosphere where the meaning of “the secular” is no more taken for granted, and again where “the body” is taken as the horizon from which all the accumulation of modern sensibilities and conceptions are to be questioned, I find that the relation between the secular and the body merits meticulous examination.

Such an examination, I argue, has been the capital concern of Talal Asad’s works since *Genealogies of Religion*, a study in which Asad examines the ways the body was conceived in the Christianity of the Middle Ages. In his more recent *Formations of the Secular*, however, Asad takes the modern conceptions and sensibilities of the secular as they relate to the body, discipline, and power.

In “Landmarks in the Critical Study of Secularism”, Matthew Scherer (2011) takes Asad’s *Formations of the Secular* and William E. Connolly’s (1999) *Why I am not a Secularist* as the “landmarks in the emergence of a new critical study of secularism” (p. 621). According to Scherer “these interventions have shifted the course of key debates about the nature and value of modern secularism that have standing a hundred years or more” (p. 621). Asad’s work which Scherer describes as “the call for an as-yet-unattempted anthropology of the secular” (p. 621) is thought to have paved the way into a new field of thinking about the secular.

As is noted in the beginning, what distinguishes Asad as a landmark is that his work reads the secular from the horizon of the body, that is, criticizes the taken-

for-granted understandings of the secular with their relation to different sensibilities towards and conceptions of the body. One such example is Asad's comments on Marcel Mauss.

In "Remarks on the Anthropology of the Body", Asad (1997) summarizes the ways anthropological studies approach the body, and differentiates his own understanding with a reference to Marcel Mauss. "Anthropologists" begins Asad "have long been interested in ideas about the body" (p. 42). Beginning from the nineteenth-century, Asad mentions two prevalent approaches towards the body. First, "in nineteenth-century anthropology the centrality of the notion of 'race' involved detailed studies of the bodies of 'primitives'" (p. 42). The anthropology of the body in 1800's, for Asad, is directly related to European imperialism and evolutionary theories of progress.

Second, "from the end of the nineteenth-century there appeared studies of the 'symbolic' aspects of the body in 'primitive cultures'...: the cosmological significance of death, the structure of sacrifice... etc." (p. 42-3).

More recently in the symbolic studies of the body, Asad notes, "*representations of the body*" and "*the body and its parts as representations*" gained importance. "The body as image – in advertisement photographs, on television, and in the flesh – whether named or unnamed, famous or ordinary, is one aspect of that tendency" (p. 43).

To define clearly his position amidst many a great approaches towards the body, Asad refers to Marcel Mauss' "Techniques of the Body", a much cited founding text from which, Asad argues, "problems about the formation of the body have received less attention than those relating to its representation" (p. 43).

In Mauss, Asad finds an authentic approach to body, which is very different from those of the symbolic anthropologists who also cited Mauss. In Mauss' thinking, the human body is neither "the passive recipient of 'cultural imprints', nor "the active source of 'natural expressions' that are 'clothed in local history and culture'" (p. 43). The importance of Mauss in Asad's work is directly related to Mauss' understanding of the human body "as the *self-developable* means for achieving a range of human objects – from styles to physical movement... through modes of emotional being... to kinds of spiritual experience" (p. 47-8).

Concluding his statements on Mauss, Asad directs our attention to the final paragraph of Mauss' essay, which, Asad argues, "carries perhaps the most far-reaching implications for an anthropological understanding of the body" (p. 48). I quote Mauss' paragraph:

I believe precisely that at the bottom of all our mystical states there are body techniques which we have not studied... This socio-psycho-biological study should be made. I think there are biological means of entering into "communion with God". (as cited in Asad, 1997, p. 48)

As Asad himself notes in the tenth footnote in that text, this is what he attempted in *Genealogies of Religion*. This is a possibility for Asad, to examine how "embodied practices" are preconditions for religious experiences. And, in this religious sense, if one cannot enter into communion with God, this is because his or her body is not trained and taught enough (p. 48).

Asad's comments on Mauss and understanding of Mauss' work with its ground-breaking implications pertaining to body are crucial to a clear understanding of Asad's former and later texts. In the following chapters we will see that Asad attempts to read and criticize the concepts of the religious and the secular from the horizon of body as a *self-developable* means. These reading and critique will be

directed to different economies of truth with regard to bodily pain in the history of Christianity.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I will focus on the ways Asad problematizes the concept of “the secular.” To be able to pave the way to this problematization, I will examine Asad’s critiques of anthropological concepts of history-making, ritual, and religion. These three critiques will be crucial not only for the first chapter but also for the remaining chapters as well. In the later part of the first chapter, I will look into the ways Asad deconstructs the concept of the secular. Among which stands out his argument that the secular as an epistemic category precedes secularism which is a political doctrine.

In the third chapter, which I see as a second introduction to this study, I briefly touch Michel Foucault’s and Giorgio Agamben’s writings so as to provide a background for my reading of Asad. There is a great interest in Asad for the medieval Christian monasticism, and for the concepts of “the religion” and “the secular.” Foucault’s (1982) “Technologies of the Self” is to serve as an introduction to medieval Christian monasticism. While, Agamben’s *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* prepares the way to understanding Asad’s critique of the modern concepts of the religion and the secular.

In the fourth chapter, I will concentrate on Asad’s engagement with medieval Christianity in *Genealogies of Religion*. In the first part of the third chapter, we will see how certain rituals and religious experiences in Christian Middle Ages are related to bodily pain and practices, and the transformations within the conceptions of these pain and practices. In its every step, we will be demonstrating the transformations of the bodily pain within the economy of truth. The change from “trial by ordeal” to

“judicial torture”, and then to “sacramental confession” will be the focus of the third chapter. These changes will concern us to the extent they are employed by Asad in explicating his theory of the body.

In the second part of the fourth chapter, we will move on with medieval Christianity, but this time focusing on the concept of discipline in the monastic life to reach humility which was the highest virtue in the Christianity of the time. We will see how monastic discipline constructed religious selves through practices that created the will to obey. This creation is to be shown as a process of organization and regulation of desires in the way that they could be directed into the service of God.

Fifth chapter will be a reading of *Formations of the Secular* to the extent that it relates to the subject of this thesis. In this regard, we will first look at how Asad formulates his own anthropology of the secular. Then we will see how he reads the concept of the secular from the horizon of the body in today’s world. As part of this reading, we will first see how Asad criticizes the modern concept of agency through its connection to bodily pain. Second, we will concentrate on the concepts of torture and cruelty as they are connected to bodily pain.

In all these three chapters, I will attempt to demonstrate as clear as possible that Talal Asad’s work provides us with theoretical tools with which we can enhance our understandings both of the body and of the secular. This in two senses. First, Asad shows us how the body was and has always been an active part in the history of Christianity. The moulding of religious selves was possible through bodily pain and practices. Asad concerns himself mainly with the history of Christianity in Europe, because he thinks that “Western history has had an overriding importance in the making of the modern world and that must be a major anthropological concern”

(Asad, 1993, p. 1). To prevent any misunderstanding, I must add that what should be a major anthropological concern here is not the western impact on the modern world, but western history itself. Therefore the understanding of the non-Western is only possible via a clear understanding of Europe. Second, modern binary of religious versus secular can best be deconstructed by reading both of them as relational to the changing sensibilities towards and conceptions of the body. Such a way to deconstruct this binary has been a major event within recent critical and cultural theory.

CHAPTER 2

FOUCAULT AND AGAMBEN: DISCOURSE ON THE BODY

In this second introductory chapter, I will reflect upon Michel Foucault's "Technologies of the Self" and Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* with a view to providing an introduction to Talal Asad's two main themes: medieval Christian monasticism and the religious/secular binary. In this chapter, with the reading of Foucault and the notion of "care of the self", we will see the features of Christian monasticism in the making beginning from Plato. While, with Agamben's investigations into the term *sacer* (sacred) via the archaic Roman legal figure *homo sacer* (sacred man), and how this term lost its original meaning – which was not related to the religious – and came to become a term within the sphere of religion in the nineteenth century.

2.1 Technologies of the self

I would like now to reflect on one of Foucault's latest conceptualizations: Technologies of the self. This conceptualization is at the same time the name of his seminar at University of Vermont in 1982. I chose this specific seminar for two reasons. First, as it was given shortly before his death in 1984, this seminar both manifestly and latently includes all of his work and thinking on western traditions concerning the self and the body. Second, the way this conference was published renders its reading quite easy and accessible. One might even say it is a summary of his corpus on this specific subject.

To provide a context for the understanding of the technologies of the self, Foucault refers to his twenty-five year long work on envisaging "a history of the different ways in our culture that humans develop knowledge about themselves:

economics, biology, psychiatry, medicine, and penology” (Foucault, 1988, pp. 17-8).

In relation with these ways of developing knowledges, Foucault enumerates four different technologies. These are technologies of production, of sign systems, of power, and of the self. The main subject of investigation in this seminar, technologies of the self is the one

which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (p. 18)

Technologies of the self, the definition of which might be given as “the history of how an individual acts upon itself” (p. 19), is investigated in this seminar in two chronologically subsequent contexts. First one is the “Greco-Roman philosophy in the first two centuries A.D. of the early Roman Empire” and the second one being the “Christian spirituality and the monastic principles developed in the fourth and the fifth centuries of the late Roman Empire” (p. 19).

The key element in Foucault’s investigation is the Greek concept of “*epimelesthai sautou*, ‘to take care of yourself,’ ‘the concern with self,’ ‘to be concerned, to take care of yourself’” (p. 19). This precept was “for the Greeks, one of the main principle of cities, one of the main rules for social and personal conduct and for the art of life” (p. 19).

Despite its crucial importance for the Greek mentalities, another principle has come to be more popular in Western thinking: *gnothi sauton* (know yourself), a maxim which was not an abstract principle governing the lives of people, but a “technical advice”, according to Foucault, regarding the ritual of consulting oracles (p. 19). The reasons for this shift should be looked for in the Christian asceticism and modern theoretical philosophy, which in their own ways promoted the knowledge of

the self – for asceticism this knowledge was a prerequisite for the renunciation of the self, while modern philosophy placed the knowledge of the self (the thinking subject) at its centre (p. 22).

Foucault begins with a study of Plato's *Alcibiades I*, a text which was, for the Neoplatonists, to be first Platonic dialogue to be read and studied. In this regard, it was understood as the beginning point in the education of virtues. And the first principle of this dialogue was "taking care of oneself" (p. 23). Alcibiades is a young man who aspires to be a powerful man in his city to dominate other people. But his education is defective according to Socrates. He must "take care of himself" to be able to "apply himself to knowledge" (p. 24).

This care of the self is related to the care of the soul as concerns its activities. Foucault tells us about the content of this care as follows:

One must know of what the soul consists. The soul cannot know itself except by looking at itself in a similar element, a mirror. Thus, it must contemplate the divine element. In this divine contemplation, the soul will be able to discover rules to serve as a basis for just behavior and political action. The effort of the soul to know itself is the principle on which just political action can be founded, and Alcibiades will be a good politician insofar as he contemplates his soul in the divine element. (p. 25)

In this explication of "the care of the self", we see that in the world of ancient Greeks, this care was directly related to the education of the young in learning to live and rule in a just way - which reminds us of Plato's *The Republic* which includes the same concerns. *Paideia* was the specific term in ancient Greek to signify this educational processes, and we will concern ourselves with this concept again while thinking on medieval *disciplina*.

For the sake of brevity and be to the point as much as possible, I would like to continue my explication of Foucault's "Technologies of the Self", with its insights on

askesis in Stoicism – a school of philosophy which was prevalent in Hellenistic period until the advent of Christianity as the ruling religion of the Roman Empire. Stoic *askesis* seems to be the point of transition from Socratic “care of the self” to Christian asceticism.

In the philosophical tradition dominated by Stoicism, *askesis* means not renunciation but the progressive consideration of self, or mastery over oneself, obtained not through the renunciation of reality but through the acquisition and assimilation of truth. It has as its final aim not preparation for another reality but access to the reality of this world. The Greek word for this is *paraskeuazo* ("to get prepared"). It is a set of practices by which one can acquire, assimilate, and transform truth into a permanent principle of action. *Aletheia* becomes *ethos*. It is a process of becoming more subjective. (p. 35)

As it is clear from this passage that *askesis* is a way of “caring for the self.”

Foucault’s argument “*aletheia* becomes *ethos*” is crucial to understand the proximity of *askesis* to Socratic *epimelesthai sautou*. Technical details aside, in both cases, the purpose is to reach a principle of right action.

Askesis involves in a programmatic preparation for possible future events and situations. This preparation is comprised of two different exercises. These were meditation and training the body.

The Greeks characterized the two poles of those exercises by the terms *melete* and *gymnasia*. *Melete* means "meditation," according to the Latin translation, *meditatio*. It has the same root as *epimelesthai*. It is a rather vague term, a technical term borrowed from rhetoric. *Melete* is the work one undertook in order to prepare a discourse or an improvisation by thinking over useful terms and arguments. You had to anticipate the real situation through dialogue in your thoughts... One judges the reasoning one should use in an imaginary exercise ("Let us suppose ... ") in order to test an action or event (for example, "How would I react?"). Imagining the articulation of possible events to test how you would react - that's meditation. (p. 36)

Meditation was one part of the Stoic *askesis*. Later in this chapter we will turn to this concept within the context of Christian monasticism. As for *gymnasia*, we can say that it differs from meditation in that it is literally a training of the body, and includes “sexual abstinence, physical privation, and other rituals of purification” whose

“function is to establish and test the independence of the individual with regard to the external world” (p. 37).

Although they differ in style and scope within Stoic and Christian contexts, both *melete* and *gymnasia* passed into Christian monasticism. Stoic *askesis* may therefore be grasped as the transition from Socratic “care of the self” to the Christian asceticism.

Christianity is both, as Foucault asserts, a salvational and a confessional religion. It is salvational in the sense that it guides “the individual from one reality to another, from death to life, from time to eternity. In order to achieve that, Christianity imposed a set of conditions and rules of behavior for a certain transformation of the self.” On the other hand, it is confessional in that “it imposes very strict obligations of truth, dogma, and canon, more so than do the pagan religions” (p. 40).

For Foucault, the truth obligation in Christianity is not just having faith. Each and every Christian must

know who he is, that is, to try to know what is happening inside him to acknowledge faults, to recognize temptations, to locate desires, and everyone is obliged to disclose these things either to God or to others in the community and hence to bear public or private witness against oneself. (p. 40)

This definition of the duties in Christianity will - later in this study and with reference to Asad’s work - be shown to be at odds with the modern conception of religion and Christianity, which was reduced to mere faith. In these excerpt, we see that “truth obligation” and “self” are correlated in a way that renders “self-knowledge” inevitable for the intended purification (p. 40).

Foucault analyses the ways first Christians dealt with this truth obligation which requires them both to inspect and make public their selves. Foucault calls this

“the disclosure of the self”, and he is not concerned with “the sacrament of penance” and “confession of sins”, which he calls “rather late inventions” – and which is the main area of investigation in Asad’s work (p. 41).

There were two main forms of this disclosure in the early Christianity. First one is “*exomologesis*, or ‘recognition of faith’”, and “a dramatic expression of the situation of the penitent as sinner which makes manifest his status as sinner. The meaning of *exomologesis* had two dimensions. First it simply means the public recognition of the truth of Christian faith. The other dimension concerned the vocabulary of penance. It was “a ritual of recognizing oneself as a sinner and penitent” (p. 41).

The other one is called *exagoreusis* and it is “an analytical and continual verbalization of thoughts carried on in the relation of complete obedience to someone else. This relation is modelled on the renunciation of one's own will and of one's own self” (p. 48). This is a perpetual self-examination and at the same time renunciation of the self.

The renunciation of the self is what is important here, according to Foucault. Because this renunciation is common to both *exomologesis* and *exagoreusis*, although they may differ in their applications (p. 48). Renunciation is also noteworthy in that it is what differs the practice of the Christian “technologies of the self” from its predecessors in Socratic or Stoic contexts. Foucault also argues that “[T]he inauguration of penance in the thirteenth century is an important step” in the reawakened this practice (p. 48). In the following chapters of this study, along with other things mentioned, we will be dealing with the institution of penance with reference to Asad.

2.2 *Homo Sacer*: Bare Life and sacredness

The Greeks had no single term to express what we mean by the word “life.” They used two terms that, although traceable to a common etymological root, are semantically and morphologically distinct: *zoē*, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and *bios*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group. (Agamben, 1998, p. 9)

Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* begins with this note on the ancient Greek language. This differentiation between two kinds of lives corresponded to a particular difference between the spheres of *polis* (city) and *oikos* (home). “In the classical world...simple natural life is excluded from the *polis* in the strict sense, and remains confined – as merely reproductive life – to the sphere of the *oikos*.” (p. 9) For Agamben, Aristotle’s “opposing the simple fact of living (*to zēn*) to politically qualified life (*to eu zēn*): ...‘born with regard to life, but existing essentially with regard to the good life’” is a founding statement for the Western political thinking (p. 9).

The importance of what Aristotle argued about life and man is also acknowledged by Foucault, with a comment on the change that took place in modern period: “For millennia man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics calls his existence as a living being into question” (as qtd. in Agamben, 1998, p.10). And as Agamben suggests, Foucault “summarizes the process by which, at the threshold of the modern era, natural life begins to be included in the mechanisms and calculations of State power, and politics turns into *biopolitics*” (p. 10).

Agamben takes up what Foucault suggests regarding the birth of biopolitics, and argues that “the entry of *zoē* into the sphere of *the polis* – the politicization of the bare life as such – constitutes the decisive event of modernity and signals a radical

transformation of the political-philosophical categories of classical thought” (p. 10). In so doing and further arguing that “*the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power*” (p. 11) Agamben finds the beginning of the biopolitics at the very beginning of the Western politics. Agamben maintains that *zoē* (bare life, or the mere presence of the body on this world) is included in what Aristotle called “good life” by way of exclusion. “In Western politics, bare life has the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the city of men” (p. 12).

In arguing so, Agamben opposes Foucault’s thesis which Agamben paraphrases as the “inclusion of *zoē* in the *polis*”. This is not what modernity brought to the Western politics according to Agamben. “Instead the decisive fact is that, together with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule [Agamben refers here to the “state of exception” which means the suspension of law by the hand of the sovereign], the realm of bare life...gradually begins to coincide with the political realm... and *bios* and *zoē*...enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction...the bare life that dwelt there frees itself in the city and becomes both subject and object of the conflicts of the political order” (p. 12).

Agamben calls this exclusive inclusion the “essential structure of the metaphysical tradition”, and further argues that “[T]he fundamental categorical pair of Western politics is not that of friend/enemy but that of bare life/political existence, *zoē/bios*, exclusion/inclusion” (p. 12). This is where the “bare life, that is the life of *homo sacer* (sacred man), *who may be killed and yet not sacrificed*” appears in Agamben’s work. Such an “ancient meaning of the word *sacer* presents us with the enigma of a figure of the sacred that, *before or beyond the religious* [emphasis added], constitutes the first paradigm of the political realm of the West” (p. 12).

We may continue with Agamben's reflections on *homo sacer* who is "a figure of archaic Roman law in which the character of sacredness is tied for the first time to a human life as such" (p. 47). *Homo sacer* is the person who is accused of a crime by the people of a city, and cursed with the expression *sacer esto* (May he be sacred). As a result of this curse, the criminal who becomes *homo sacer* earns a contradictory status. According to this status, it is prohibited to sacrifice this man in a ritualistic manner. But if he gets killed, his murderer will not be accused of homicide (p. 47).

Although Agamben's project in *Homo Sacer* has far-reaching implications concerning the very foundational principles of Western politics, and their surviving traces today regarding the juridico-political status of the bare life and the body, I will limit my reading of Agamben to the originary meaning of the word *sacer* and the way it underwent changes. So far I tried to relate the main problematic Agamben has in his *Homo Sacer* project. I understand by "bare life" the mere bodily existence on this world and I will use the word "body" and "bare life" interchangeably in my reading of Agamben as an introduction to Talal Asad.

The word *sacer* in the term *homo sacer* cannot be understood, if we conceptualize the sacred as a *religious* term. As I quoted above, Agamben refers to the meaning of *sacer* in this context as "before or beyond the religious" (p. 12). Agamben attaches particular importance to the clarifying of the word *sacer* and spares a subchapter titled "The ambivalence of the Sacred" to reflect on the nineteenth century anthropological thinking that obscured the original meaning of the word *sacer* by loading it with such meanings as to oppose it to what is secular. The same is valid for the term "the secular" as it will be shown in the later chapters.

An enigmatic archaic Roman legal figure that seems to embody contradictory traits and therefore had to be explained thus begins to resonate with the

religious category of the sacred when this category irrevocably loses its significance and comes to assume contradictory meanings. Once placed in relation with the ethnographic concept of taboo, this ambivalence is then used – with perfect circularity – to explain the figure of *homo sacer*. There is a moment in the life of concepts when they lose their immediate intelligibility and can then, like all empty terms, be overburdened with contradictory meanings. For the religious phenomenon, this moment coincides with the point at which anthropology – for which the ambivalent terms *mana*, *taboo*, and *sacer* are absolutely central – was born at the end of the last century. (p. 51)

It is clear from the passage that the nineteenth century anthropology, too, had a negative effect on the intelligibility of the word *sacer*. Originally, the meaning of the word *sacer* was directly related to a particular disposition of the body, which manifests itself in the example of *homo sacer*. Nineteenth century anthropological thought, however, filled this word with a religious meaning. This concept of religion and also religiosity, as I will demonstrate in my reading of Asad, are themselves the constructs of this same anthropological thought. “An assumed ambivalence of the generic religious category of the sacred cannot explain the juridico-political phenomenon to which the most ancient meaning of the term *sacer* refers” (p. 51).

CHAPTER 3

TALAL ASAD: PROBLEMATIZATION OF THE SECULAR

Acquiring a better understanding of Talal Asad's problematization of the concept of the secular necessitates immediately contemplating his critique of anthropological understandings of history-making, religion and ritual. Underlying these critiques is Asad's argument that "socially identifiable forms, preconditions, and effects of what was regarded as religion in the medieval Christian epoch were quite different from those so considered in modern society" (Asad, 1993, p. 29). In other words, in medieval Christian era, the distribution and the effect of religious power, the legal and institutional role played by religion, the mentalities it fashioned and addressed, and the relation of religion to knowledge were different from what Christians of our century are familiar with (p. 29).

The correct understanding of the meaning of the secular can only be grasped if our quest is liberated from the conceptualizations of the modern age, and especially those of the nineteenth century anthropological thought. The universal idea of agency within anthropology which has implications of an endeavour to eliminate pain, and thereby liberating the actions of human bodies has problems regarding its universality. Also, our modern way of looking at religion as a system of symbols, devoid of any historical content, and ritual, as only a symbolic behaviour without any practical function, are both ahistorical definitions. The critique of these three obstacles is to pave our way to grasping the secular in a historical context. To escape the danger of this misunderstandings, one must resort to the Christianity of the Middle Ages where the religion and rituals were the major organizers of the community and life therein.

3.1 Critique of the concept of history-making

In his introduction to *Genealogies of Religion*, Talal Asad begins with two assumptions concerning his method. He assumes firstly that “western history has had an overriding importance in the making of the modern world and that must be a major anthropological concern.” On the other hand, he argues that “the conceptual geology of the Christian and post-Christian history has profound implications for the way non-European traditions grow and change” (Asad, 1993, p. 1). These two assumptions might be summarized in the concept “methodological eurocentrism.” I call it “methodological” in the sense that Asad’s concern in such utterances is not to praise European powers for their historical “success” in dominating the world, but to take part in a methodological debate in anthropology.

This debate is the relation between the notion of “history making” and its implications in anthropological literature to which Asad also is a contributor. Moving on from these two assumptions, Asad opposes to the motto “everyone making their own history” which is quite fashionable in the modern anthropology as Asad suggests in his introduction to *Genealogies of Religion*. His methodological eurocentrism stands against this motto. Anthropologists who are in favour of this “history-making” motto hold that the “local people” had the ability to interpret the modern effects of the capitalist juggernaut (p. 5). In other words, these scholars are against the concepts like “world system” and “international division of labour” which implies that the West determines the ways of living of the local people; and that the local people do not enjoy the possibilities to construct for themselves an authentic way of life under the Western domination. Asad comes up with a relatively extreme example of life in Auschwitz and states that “if so, even the inmates of Auschwitz

were the authors of their own history, for they had a way of constructing a certain kind of life in the camps” (p. 4).

Asad elaborates his critique of this motto as he reflects upon the fieldwork as a method, the binary of locality/universality, and the question of agency which are crucial to the professional existence of modern anthropology.

The fieldwork is one of the signatures of anthropology. E. E. Evans-Pritchard calls this method as “the final, and natural, stage of development, in which observations and the evaluation of them are made by the same person and the scholar is brought into direct contact with the subject of his study” (as cited in Asad, 1993, p. 8). Asad contests the idea that fieldwork-based analysis is a distinctive viewpoint in social sciences in that it allows the researcher to deal with “real” people and the society in question from “ground level”. “Real people” and “ground level” are problematic concepts, for such an understanding of reality is based on an “old prejudice to suppose that things are real only when confirmed by sensory data” (p. 6). In this regard, the concept becomes loaded with the implication that “the systems” are unreal only because one cannot see them.

As for the “ground level” by which the common folk of a certain people is meant, the concept presupposes other levels of inquiry over which it claims superiority, thereby confirming “the theoretical autonomy as well as the distinctive contribution of fieldwork-based anthropology” (p. 7). Asad brings up at this point the question concerning the relation between “systematicity” and “capitalism” reminding us of the power relations: “When quantitative data relating to a local population are aggregated... the results can be used to inform particular kinds of systematic practice directed at this population” (p. 7). Asad concludes that what the champions of this

“history-making” motto want to say is that “world capitalism has not homogenized the cultures of local people” (p. 7), and that brings us to the question of locality.

The term “local” which is more or less the politically correct form of “primitive” is unpacked in Asad via its relation to power. Local implies being “attached to a place” and being “limited”, while not being local bears two different implications. In its negative sense it might mean “displaced, uprooted”, whereas positively it invokes the words “unlimited, cosmopolitan, universal, belonging to the whole world (and the whole world belonging to them).” “Immigrants who came from South Asia” argues Asad “to settle in Britain are described as uprooted; English officials who lived in India were not... the former become subjects of the Crown, the latter its representatives” (p. 8).

The question of locality conjures up that of mobility, when the twentieth century is taken into consideration. In this line of thought, the celebration of mobility for all human beings transcends the binary of locality/universality. Asad maintains that this hasty celebration is yet another defect in anthropology. Such a celebration of mobility essentializes this feature for all human beings – a predicament whose synonym might be globalism – and thus renders it transhistorical and cuts its relation from the domain of power. Asad, however, resorts to two writers who approached the matter from the horizon of power: Hannah Arendt and Stephen Greenblatt. Drawing on Arendt, he formulates the question as follows: “the problem of understanding how dominant power realizes itself through the very discourse of mobility” (p.10). That is, once the human beings or peoples are made uprooted, they are “easily rendered physically and morally superfluous.” Modern power penetrates into these structures, deprives them of their content and construct a new one (p. 11).

Departing from Daniel Lerner's concept "mobile personality", Greenblatt attributes this personality the quality of improvisation which he defines as "the ability to capitalize on the unforeseen and to transform given materials into one's own scenario" (as cited in Asad, 1993, p. 11). At this very moment, Asad returns to the beginning of his problematic with a question: "to the extent such power seeks to normalize other people's motivations, whose history is being made?" (p. 12).

3.2 Critique of the transhistorical definition of religion

In the introduction to *Religion*, to historicize "anthropology's theoretical focus on human diversity", Asad treats "Renaissance Europe's encounter with the savage" as a critical point from which sprang the theological problems concerning the Mosaic account of Creation. The concept of human nature which was considered to belong to all human beings as a common denominator was a solution to those problems. This was a concept of human nature which is supposed to occupy different levels on their way to maturity, those of Europeans taking the lead (pp. 19-20). It can be inferred from this that since the Renaissance, and as a result of the encounter with the "savage", to solve the problem of differences among various peoples on earth has become a major preoccupation of European thinking.

Within this very preoccupation emerges the need to define religion in early modern Europe. The transition from the medieval to modern Christianity takes place in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries which were the times of utter social and political instability in European history. Hence the need to define the major organizer of the society in the widest sense possible.

It was in the seventeenth century, following the fragmentation of the unity and authority of the Roman church and the consequent wars of religion, which tore European principalities apart, that the earliest attempts at producing a universal definition of religion were made. (p. 40)

Asad cites Basil Willey's *The Seventeenth-Century Background* (1934) in this regard to give Lord Herbert as an example, "who goes behind Christianity itself, and tries to formulate a belief which shall command the universal assent of all men as men." And "it was a pioneer interest in these religions [of the East], together with the customary preoccupation of Renaissance scholars with the mythologies of classical antiquity, which led Lord Herbert to seek a common denominator for all religions" (as cited in Asad, 1993, p. 40). Herbert's search for a common denominator becomes a "substantive definition of what later came to be formulated as Natural Religion – in terms of beliefs..., practices..., and ethics..." (p. 40).

Immanuel Kant was the philosopher who pronounced, in Asad's words, "a fully essentialized idea of religion": "There may certainly be different historical confessions... [B]ut there can only be one religion which is valid for all men and at all times" (as cited in Asad, 1993, p. 42). These historical confessions are of course different religions like Christianity and Islam, while, for Kant, they share one essential, which is the belief in God. The essentialization of religion by emptying its historical content was a way to deal with one of the major problems of the history of Europe, that is, the wars of religion. The solution was later to be produced as a difference between the natural and positive religions.

The ideas of human nature and natural religion as attempts of common denominators are not unrelated. Referring to the opposition between natural and positive religions in Hegel's philosophy of history, Jean Hyppolite writes that

[T]his opposition is presented because it is presupposed that there is a human nature and a natural religion corresponding to it, whereas we recognize in history a multitude of various religions that all diverge more or less by their institutions, ceremonies, and fundamental beliefs. (Hyppolite, 1996, p. 21)

As the construction of human nature is directly related to that of religion, we can say with Asad that

...the idea of Natural Religion was a crucial step in the formation of the modern concept of religious belief, experience, and practice, and that it was an idea developed in response to problems specific to Christian theology at a particular historical juncture. (Asad, 1993, p. 42)

In this sense, Asad emphasizes that the definition of religion which became taken-for-granted in our century within the academies belongs to the solution of a theological problem in the history of Christianity. There is yet another thing with this definition: the withdrawal of religion from the domain of power. "From being a concrete set of practical rules attached to specific processes of power and knowledge", argues Asad, "religion has come to be abstracted and universalized" (p. 42). Asad reads this change within a Foucauldian terminology and sees a general change "in the modern landscape of power and knowledge" which "included a new kind of state, a new kind of science, a new kind of legal and moral subject" (p. 43).

The difference between the Victorian and the twentieth century anthropological approaches to religion is to help us enhance our understanding about the history of this concept. While the Victorian thinking saw religion in evolutionary terms, that is, "an early human condition from which modern law, science, and politics emerged and became detached", the latter regarded it as "a distinctive space of human practice and belief which cannot be reduced to the other" (p. 27). The religion is attributed a distinctive space and therefore constructed as an essence in itself. For Asad, this essentialization of religion obliges us to produce a transhistorical definition of religion which is to be outside the domain of power. This definition in the meaning of this "separation of religion from power is a modern Western norm, the product of a unique post-Reformation history" (p. 28).

3.3 Critique of ritual as a universal category

In the beginning of his genealogy of the concept of ritual, Asad directs the reader's attention to the changing definitions of the concept in the subsequent editions of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. In the first edition (1771), ritual is defined as "a book directing the order and manner to be observed in celebrating religious ceremonies, and performing divine service in a particular church, diocese, order, or the like" (as cited in Asad, 1993, p. 56). The brevity of this definition should be noted in comparison to the 1910 edition which is five columns long and is divided into five subheadings. "A crucial part of every religion," writes Asad "ritual is now regarded as a type of routine behaviour that symbolizes or expresses something and, as such, relates differentially to individual consciousness and social organization" (p. 57). The transition is therefore from "a book directing the order of religious ceremonies" to an "interpretable symbolic behaviour" which is not necessarily religious. Symbolic means here that the ritual is an "activity to be classified separately from practical, that is, technically effective, behavior" (p. 58).

The story of the definition of ritual which becomes universalized at the end resembles to a considerable extent that of the definition of religion. The need to change the definitions was rendered necessary by encounters with non-Christian and non-European worlds. Even in the third edition of the *Encyclopaedia*, the definition was enlarged to include the religions of the classical world (p. 56). And, as a result of the accumulation of anthropological knowledge in the nineteenth century, the 1910 edition is at once much longer than the previous ones and includes a universalized definition of ritual as part of every religion on the earth (p. 57). While the religion, in its process of essentialization, was deprived of its relation to politics, the mandatory relation of ritual to religious practice was rendered contingent. Ritual has come to

stand for any symbolic behaviour which is open to interpretation and lacks practical use.

The task of an anthropologist of religion, therefore, may roughly be reduced to two parts. First, she is to decide which behaviours are symbolic (i.e. pertaining to a ritual) and practical. Then comes the interpretation as the second step. “The idea that symbols need to be decoded” observes Asad “plays a new role in the restructured concept of ritual that anthropology has appropriated and developed from the history of Christian exegesis” (p. 60). The transition mentioned above from a “book” to an “interpretable symbolic behaviour” has its core such kind of an interpretation. “Anthropologists have” Asad suggests “incorporated a theological preoccupation into an avowedly secular intellectual task – that is, the preoccupation with establishing as authoritatively as possible meanings of representations...” (p. 60). This remark however does not secure the difference between the meanings of ritual from medieval Christian monastery to anthropological thought. Asad therefore elaborates on this difference with a view to reach a clear distinction between the two conceptions.

In medieval Christianity, the observance of liturgical services and their meanings according to the “ritual” were prescribed and regulated by the authority of the church. The monks in those monasteries had to master the performance of these rites. “Ritual is therefore directed at the apt performance of what is prescribed, something that depends on intellectual and practical disciplines that does not itself require decoding...it presupposes no obscure meanings, but rather the formation of physical and linguistic skills” (p. 62).

3.4 Problematizing the concept of the secular

3.4.1 Secularism and the secular

Formations of the Secular opens with a critical question that prevails (or maybe haunts) the rest of the book: “What is the connection between ‘the secular’ as an epistemic category and ‘secularism’ as a political doctrine?” (Asad, 2003, p. 1). In positing this distinction, Asad argues that the understanding of the concept of “the secular” cannot be guaranteed unless it is contemplated without the new epistemological domain constructed by “secularism”. Our concept of the secular needs to be shown “in the making” in the same way as that of the religion which was related early in this chapter. Attempts to define “the secular” as it opens itself in an age of “secularism” therefore cannot secure an adequate understanding.

Attributing different categories (epistemic and political) to concepts that look like almost synonymous today (secular and secularism), Asad escapes the danger of grasping the secular within secularism. The secular as an epistemic category, Asad asserts, “is conceptually prior to the political doctrine of ‘secularism,’ that over time a variety of concepts, practices, and sensibilities have come together to form ‘the secular’” (p. 16).

In an effort to read the secular as it comes prior to secularism, Asad deploys the method of genealogy “as a way of working back from our present to the contingencies that have come together to give us our certainties” (p. 16). With regards to its ubiquity in our contemporary world, Asad refrains from approaching the secular immediately, but he reads the concept “through its shadows”. It should also be noted that Asad is not famous for producing definitions of the concepts, but for problematizing them through their “epistemological assumptions”.

The secular, in Asad's grammar, is not the successor of religion in a chronological order, or in the history of European thought. Nor is it an essence that stands in full opposition to religion. Asad sees "the secular to be a concept that brings together certain behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life" (p. 25). It needs therefore to be observed that Asad does not answer a "What?" question on the secular. Rather a relational understanding of the concept might be said to exist in his work. That is, the secular is not an essence, and one cannot so easily name something as essentially secular. Instead, "to be secular" is a quality of certain relations.

3.4.2 Sacred and profane

A dichotomy that comprises mostly our understanding of what is secular or religious, the binary opposition of "sacred and profane" as it is conceived today, is shown, by Asad, to be a nineteenth century anthropological construct. Referring to Oxford English Dictionary, Asad relates that the word "'sacred" in early modern English usage generally referred to individual things, persons, and occasions that were set apart and entitled to veneration" (p. 31). The examples like "sacred to the memory of Samuel Butler" or "your sacred majesty" however do not imply a certainty and singularity in the meaning of the word "sacred" (p. 31).

As for the French language, Asad indicates that

... the word *sacré* was not part of the language of ordinary Christian life in the Middle Ages and in early modern times...The word and the concept that mattered to popular religion...was *sainteté*, a beneficent quality of certain persons and their relics, closely connected to the common people and their ordinary world. (p. 32)

Still more striking is the democratization of the word *sacré* within the “*Déclaration des Droits de l’homme* (1789) that speaks of ‘droits naturel, inaliénables et sacrés’” (as cited in Asad, 2003, p. 32). The word becomes a constitutive adjective of the new *human* and the *society* in the modern configuration of politics. A unique essence was carved out of disparate uses of the word by way of universalization. “The sacred” argues Asad “was at once a transcendent force that imposed itself on the subject and a space that must never under threat of dire consequence be violated...” and it constitutes “the focus of moral and administrative disciplines” (p. 33).

Like the concepts religion and ritual, for Asad, our notion of “the sacred” is a result of “late nineteenth-century anthropological and theological thought that rendered a variety of overlapping social usages rooted in changing and heterogeneous forms of life into a single immutable essence, and claimed it to be the object of universal experience called ‘religious’” (p. 31). Modern conceptions of the sacred and the profane did not occur before modernity. In the Middle Ages the opposition was between “the divine” and “the satanic”, both of them, needless to say, are metaphysical entities. The antinomy was not in medieval Christianity “between a supernatural sacred and a natural profane” (p. 32).

To further concretize the way Asad problematizes the secular, we might look into his reading of two modern texts on the secular: Paul de Man’s “The Rhetoric of Temporality” and Walter Benjamin’s *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Although Asad compares and contrasts these two to show us that “they indicate that even secular views of the secular aren’t all the same” (p. 62), we find a hint in this comparison to demonstrate Asad’s reading of the secular with the body. Although this comparison is very fruitful, I will refrain from a whole summary of it. Rather, I

prefer to think over the example given by Benjamin. Asad maintains regarding the aspects of secularity in Benjamin's text as follows:

Another less obvious aspect is displayed in the emblematic character of Socrates' death. The legend of Socrates' judicially imposed suicide, Benjamin maintains, constitutes the secularization of classical tragedy, and hence of myth, because it substitutes a reasoned and exemplary death for the sacrificial death of a mythic hero. (p. 64)

This aspect of secularity is crucial to Asad's problematization of the secular. Early in this chapter, a caution sign was given on the secular/religious dichotomy, as it is a product of the nineteenth century anthropological thought. Here, in the example of Benjamin's thought, we can see an understanding of secularity without an opposition to the religious.

Death is immediately related to the finite existence of the body. Our conception of life and death is always at the same time pertinent to our understanding of our material existence. In this regard, we might see in this example a secularity regarding the shift in our understanding of the body. In this shift, as it is given as an example by Benjamin, one might not see elements belonging to the taken for granted stories of secularisation. We are not talking about here a secularisation which gains power against a religious entity or thought. All the story in this sense of secularity revolves around the different conceptions of the body through changing understandings of the tragic death.

Reading the secular as it precedes secularism and the modern age is to give us a clearer view of its direct relation to the conceptions and formations of the body. In the upcoming chapter, therefore, our focus is to be located on the premodern European history along with Asad's examination of pain and truth in medieval Christian ritual, and discipline and humility in Christian monasticism.

CHAPTER 4

BODILY PAIN IN THE ECONOMY OF TRUTH

In this chapter, I will investigate into the ways Talal Asad engages with the medieval Christianity. In the first part of the chapter, our concern is to be following Asad's reading of "the ways in which particular rituals in the Christian Middle Ages reflect on pain depended on the inflicting of physical pain, and with how their transformation enabled discipline to take effects" (Asad, 1993, p. 83). In the second part, we will concentrate upon Asad's examination of the "*disciplinary practices*, including the multiple ways in which religious discourses regulate, inform, and construct religious selves" (p. 125).

To clarify my position I must immediately state that although Asad's critique of the universal definitions of religion and ritual, and his writings on the "anthropology of secularism" are of capital importance to a complete understanding of his thought, what is indeed crucial to his work is his reading of the "secular" through the "body" - especially in "Pain and Truth in Medieval Christian Ritual", "On Discipline and Humility in Medieval Christian Monasticism", "Thinking about Agency and Pain", "Reflections on Cruelty and Torture".

The last brief introductory note to this chapter should remind us of Asad's reading of Marcell Mauss' "Techniques of the Body". In "Remarks on the Anthropology of the Body", Asad (1997) argues that Mauss' concept of *habitus* "is not about the body as symbol of something, or about things that symbolize the body." For Asad this concept "invites us to analyse 'the body' as an assemblage of embodied aptitudes not as systems of symbolic meanings." (p. 47) To instantiate his argument Asad quotes a key sentence by Mauss: "I think there are biological means

of entering into ‘communion with God’” (as cited in Asad, 1997, p. 48). “The inability to enter into ‘communion with God’”, for Asad, “becomes a function of untaught bodies” (p. 48). This rereading of Mauss is to help us enhance our understanding of Asad’s reflections on the medieval Christian Monastic discipline in the following pages.

4.1 From trial by ordeal to judicial torture

Regarding the history of Europe, Asad brings out the idea that two seemingly distinct developments are actually parallel to each other. The first development is the shift from *accusatorial system* to the *inquisitorial system* around eleventh century. In the *accusatorial system*, if someone accuses another person of a guilt, the legal decision is given by ordeals or judicial duels. If the accused wants to prove that she is innocent, she subjects herself to trial by ordeal. There is also the judicial duel in which the accuser and the accused fight and try to kill each other to determine the righteous one. In both cases, the aim is not to find out the reality, but to find the guilty. In this type of judicial process, the divine judgment is the determining element.

In the *inquisitorial system*, however, the purpose of the process is to extract the reality from the mouth of the accused by application of judicial torture. The verdict is not given as a result of the divine judgment, but by the confessions of the tortured. Here is where the difference lies. There is a shift from divine judgment to the human proof.

Commenting on this shift, Asad is hesitant to celebrate the so-called rationalisation of the judicial processes. “The shift from ordeal to torture in the Middle Ages” he observes “was not simply a change in the direction of looking for

the truth about transgression. It signified a different practice of reaching that truth, in which physical pain played a very different role” (Asad, 1993, p. 90).

Asad defines three differences in the way judicial torture produces truth from trial by ordeal. “First, it produced information, facts about things done and said, where, what, and to whom, facts quite distinct from the conclusion to be drawn from them” (p. 92). The difference reveals itself in its relation to pain. “In trial by ordeal the defeated body showed its guilt directly by its position and its marks...The pain...was in the past” (p. 92). In the judicial torture, however, as the accused confesses for fear of pain, the pain is always in the future (p. 92).

Second, for Asad, the system of judicial torture enjoys more complicated techniques for finding the truth. “It was not a matter of finding a victim for revenge (as in the feud) but of finding the truth” (p. 94). It is clearly seen here that the “truth” itself became the major target of the judicial system.

Third difference is a part of the techniques for finding the truth. It is not enough for the accused to confess her guilt in the process of torture. The guilt must be confessed again before the court. The declaration of guilt under violence is not accepted. Violence was accepted only as the facilitator of “the emergence and capture of the truth – not, as in the ordeal and the duel, the condition defining its very being” (p. 94).

It seems clear so far that Asad does not approach this shift in the judicial system from the angle of the advancement of rationalism. Nor is he entirely concerned with the reality that the direction of looking for truth changed from “divine judgment to human proof.” Rather, Asad puts forward the idea that there is a change in the understanding of accessing the truth. In general terms, it may be said

that we are dealing here with an economy of body and truth. Asad then turns to the Christianity of the Middle Ages only to focus on the “Christian institution of penance, bodily pain and the pursuit of truth” (p. 97).

4.2 From judicial torture to sacramental confession

Asad detects a development in medieval Christianity that corresponds to this great shift in the judicial system. On the socio-political context of judicial torture, Asad informs us that “[T]he Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, which proscribed ordeals, also prescribed mandatory annual private confession for all Christians.” Later in the same paragraph, Asad asserts that “[T]he church knew full well that confession... [was] a unique process that linked the idea of bodily pain...with the exchange of question and answer in the pursuit of truth” (p. 96). He sees a parallel between the ways judicial torture and sacramental confession operate over and within the bodies in relation to reaching the truth about transgression.

In this line of thought and in interpreting the resemblance between the introduction of mandatory annual private confession and judicial torture, Asad continues to work on the relation between “bodily pain and the pursuit of truth.” Asad declares that he is to “trace the main stages in the religious history of penance in which the concern for truth, physical pain, and confession (...elements...central to the practice of judicial torture) was played out” (p. 97).

Confession under torture and sacramental confession are at first sight quite different in that the former is involuntary, while the latter is voluntary. But, Asad claims that “[A]fter all, both kinds of confession, as modes of establishing the truth and as techniques for dealing with the danger of transgression, are set in motion and regulated by authority” (p. 97). Moreover, in Christianity “bodily pain and the

pursuit of happiness have been connected since the earliest centuries” (p. 97). Asad examines two practices in medieval Christianity in this regard. One of them is “penance” and the other one is “monastic asceticism”. In what follows, we will see how Asad outlines a certain understanding of “body and truth” that recurs both in judicial torture and religious practices of medieval Christianity.

The institution of penance was a major part of medieval Christian life, as it played a crucial role in dealing with and regulating the transgression of “the Truth.” Penance meant “a period of exclusion from the fellowship...was prescribed. The sinner was readmitted only after she had performed the severe rites of penance” (p. 98). Only through such a process of penance could the sinner reconcile with the Truth.

In what ways, then, the institution of penance operated within the same economy of body and truth as the judicial torture? Asad tells us about two ways. First, we should remember that in the judicial torture, the accused used to confess for fear of more pain under the torturer. Hence pain in the future tense. As for the penance, according to Asad, “[A] major justification of undertaking penance was that by so doing the sinner avoided the greater pain due in purgatory” (p. 103). Second, in judicial torture, the violence applied to the bodies of the accused was accepted as a facilitator in reaching the truth. In the practice of penance, similarly, “bodily pain (or extreme discomfort) was linked to the pursuit of truth – at once literal and metaphysical” (p. 103).

Asad employs here the notion of “medicinal metaphor” regarding the body in pain. The sinner admitting her guilt resembles the sick admitting her sickness. The priest diagnoses the illness and tells her how to get healed. The two ways related to

the discipline of penance show us that one of them is pain as punishment, and the other pain “conceived of as a purging, as the salutary effect of treatment to restore the sinner... to spiritual health” (p. 105).

The medicinal metaphor stands out as the most important element in connecting the practice of penance to judicial torture. The obligation to tell the truth about one’s own condition is the critical point here. It is this very moment of telling the truth, for Asad

... that makes possible the accumulation of specific types of information, the putting into practice of certain kinds of knowledge-based expertise, the exercise of distinctive forms of authority (of the judge, the physician, and the priest), and the characteristic justifications for applying – or threatening – pain in the confrontation of guilt, sickness, and error. (p. 105)

From this quotation by Asad, it can be inferred that the mentalities that underlie both “the system of judicial torture” and “the discipline of penance” are governed by the same economy of body and truth.

Another medieval Christian institution, according to Asad, that operated within the same economy was “monastic asceticism”. In the history of western Christianity, the centuries between the sixth and the twelfth were named after St. Benedict as “Benedictine Centuries”. What was understood by religious life was the life in a monastery under the Rule of St. Benedict. “That religious life was based on ascetic discipline whose basic principles had been laid by the early Church Fathers” (p. 105).

The point upon which Asad focuses regarding monastic asceticism is the central role of “self-punishment”. He refers us to Michel Foucault’s reading of Cassian whose opinions are thought to have been the ground on which the Rule of St. Benedict was constructed. “The importance of Cassian’s texts, according to Foucault,

consists in their articulation of a technology of the self, which plays a crucial part in a distinctive production of truth” (p. 107).

Central to the ascetic practice is the constant struggle against “the fornication” (lust) which is different from other sins in that it is “based on an urge at once natural, physical, and innate (like gluttony), and yet it must be completely eliminated (unlike gluttony, because the need for food must never be totally denied” (p. 107). In Foucault’s analysis of Cassian, what interests me most, and probably Asad (for he quotes Foucault in full), is Foucault’s conclusory remarks and the similarity of ascetic discipline to the judicial torture within the economy of body and truth.

There are two points in Foucault’s conclusion that I want to stress in relation to the similarities to the torture. First, for Foucault, the ascetic discipline “is not a code of actions allowed or forbidden”, but rather “it is an entire technique for analysing and diagnosing thought... and all the obscure forces which may be hidden under the aspect which it represents” (as cited in Asad, 1993, p. 109). We learn here that ascetic discipline, like judicial torture, is a technique to discover and regulate the thoughts of oneself. In the torture, the aim is to make the accused confess the guilt, while the objective of asceticism is to unearth the most hidden fragments of sins, first to admit and then eliminate them. “The questioning should be posed always in such a way that it flushes out all secret ‘fornication’ which may be hidden in the deepest folds of the soul” (p. 109). If we substitute the word “fornication” with “heresy” and read this sentence again, we will be reading a directive for an inquisitorial torturer.

Second point is the relation to others in the search for truth. According to Foucault’s reading of Cassian’s texts, the ultimate chastity can only be reached by

divine grace. It is beyond the capacity of one single Christian. In this regard, we should turn to the ascetic's relation to the others in the monastery. We find that one of the most important practices in the way to chastisement is confession. "Confession to others, submission to their advice, permanent obedience to directors, is indispensable to this combat" (p. 110). We encounter again with the practice of confession in the quest for truth. Both before and after this confession, bodily pain plays a major part in asceticism. "If Foucault's analysis is correct" deduces Asad, "then pain inflicted on the body may be seen as a crucial part of a monastic technology of the self" (p. 110).

A word of caution would suit here. Asad does not agree with the conception of body as the obstacle the truth;

...but was primarily a medium by which the truth about the self's essential potentiality for transgression could be brought into the light, so that it could be illuminated by a metaphysical truth, a process in which pain and discomfort were inescapable elements. (p. 110)

As for the ascetic pain, Asad continues, we should pay attention to "the place occupied by bodily pain in an economy of truth" (p. 110).

In order to summarize what has been related so far, we may turn, along with Asad, to the Lateran Council of 1215. We have seen, until now, that the practice of confession and sacramental penance were major parts of Christian life almost from its beginning. The importance of this council, in this sense, is its introduction of mandatory confession and penance for the common people. We could name this a kind of democratization of the monastic discipline (p. 115).

Between the ninth and the thirteenth centuries there was a change in the meaning and content of the penance. Now, the practice of penance was not as

difficult as it had been before. It was no longer the main way to reaching the truth. Contrition substituted the penance in this respect (p. 116).

That the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 brought mandatory annual confession for each Christian has been mentioned above. So, how can these changes be accounted for meaningfully in the economy of body and truth on which Asad reflects? We see a decrease in the pain in the practice of penance and an increase in the verbal acceptance and confession through contrition. The question here for Asad is to grasp “the maturation of a new ritual of truth in which interrogation plays the central part, in which truth and guilt is no longer inscribed on the body but extracted from it and invested in it...” (p. 117).

In the expression just quoted, Asad tells us about “a new ritual of truth in which interrogation plays the central part”, a phrase that reminds us of the institution of judicial torture. As a concluding statement, Asad ties the arguments which have been put forward so far:

In medieval Christianity, it was the full development of the ‘rational’ practices at the heart of sacramental penance (with its distinctive economy of pain and truth) which formed an ideological precondition for rejecting the ordeal system as superstition and for rationalizing judicial torture. (p. 123)

So far in this chapter, we have been thinking over the history of Western Christianity. And, we witnessed the centrality of body to all the institutions pertaining to the medieval Christian life. The relation between bodily dispositions and “the Truth” prevail, as we see, the Christian mentalities from its beginning. Yet, the economy of body and truth is not restricted to the minds of the Christians. The judicial system, the organization and regulation of the lay population and religious institutions were all subjected to this economy. We are now to move with Asad to the

question of “formations of the self” in medieval Christianity through an analysis of the medieval concept of “*disciplina*”.

4.3 Discipline and humility

Following his account of the place occupied by bodily pain and truth within the heterogeneous universe of medieval Christianity, Asad continues his investigations in the same direction, this time into “*disciplina*” as the term describing the medieval religious life in monasteries; and into “humility” as the highest virtue in medieval Christianity. In the pages to come, we will see how monastic discipline constructed religious selves through practices that created the will to obey. This creation is to be shown as a process of organization and regulation of desires in the way that they could be directed into the service of God.

“A remarkable feature of monastic discipline” according to Asad “is that it explicitly aims to create, through a program of communal living, the will to obey” (p. 125). It must be admitted that the creation of the will to obey is an utterly un-modern notion. We are accustomed, in today’s world, to think that our wills solely belong to us, and obedience to a superior power is the effacement of our wills.

For the Christian monks, however, to be able to earn the will to obey was not a negative thought. It was the whole aim of the monastic program. “The obedient monk” asserts Asad “is a person for whom obedience is *his* virtue... a Christian virtue developed through discipline” (p. 125). This program is very much concerned with the economy of desire. “Force (punishment), together with Christian rhetoric, guided the exercise of virtuous desires... virtuous desires had first to be created before a virtuous choice could be made” (p.126). This sounds awkward today as our modern world thinks that “choices are *sui generis* and self-justifying” (p. 126).

In the former chapter, I outlined Asad's critique of the concept of ritual. In short, I argued that Asad is strictly opposed to the ahistorical definition of rituals as the symbolic behaviour in opposition to instrumental behaviours. In this regard, he analyses the monastic rites "in relation to programs for forming or reforming moral dispositions... in particular, the disposition to true obedience" (p. 130). And, as Asad shows, the end result of this disposition to true obedience is the virtue of humility.

In another objection directed by Asad to the prevalent understanding of the ritual, Asad finds "observation and imitation" insufficient to define the work of rituals. He again emphasizes the disciplinary program that is needed to create the necessary effect. "The rites that were prescribed by that program" according to Asad "did not simply evoke or release universal emotions." The bodies of the monks are not passive objects whose hidden and ready-made emotions are brought forth by the power of certain recitations. The rituals in the monastic program deliberately works to "construct and reorganize distinctive emotions – desire (*cupiditas/caritas*), humility (*humilitas*), remorse (*contrition*) – on which the central Christian virtue of obedience to God depended" (p. 134).

4.3.1 *Disciplina*

It is generally accepted that medieval Christianity inherited concepts and ways of thinking from the classical Greek and Latin world. Early Church Fathers who lived approximately between the first and the fifth centuries were learned men both in classical Greek philosophy and Christianity alike. The classical concepts travelled via their texts to the medieval Christianity. Among these concepts, *disciplina* stands out as one whose scope encompasses all the religious life. The formation of the meaning of *disciplina* can be traced into three different levels: Latin *disciplina*,

Greek *paideia*, and *disciplina* as translation of *paideia* within the context of Bible.

We should note, of course, at the end, the word gains the meaning of the government of the Christians.

First, in the classical Latin world, along with its other meanings, *disciplina* meant “all the virtues and obligations that were expected from every member of the family... this included absolute obedience to the father as empowered by the law of *patria potestas*, but also modesty, fidelity, the practice of sound economy...”

(pp. 135-6). Second, going back to the classical Greek, Asad gives us the definition of the Greek equivalent for *disciplina*. “In the Hellenic world, *paideia* meant the physical, intellectual, and moral cultivation of the person.” Third, Asad elaborates on the complex which came to be the Christian sense of *disciplina*. I quote in full:

In the Bible, *disciplina* is the normal Latin translation of the word *paideia*... In the old testament context it was used to convey a very different notion of education – divine education directed not at an individual but at an entire people and achieved through submission to God’s law, to the trials imposed by him, and to the exhortations of his prophets. Hence *paideia* – or *disciplina* – acquired a strong sense of chastisement, correction, and the penalty inflicted for a fault. (p. 136)

The concept of *disciplina*, as it can be inferred from this long quotation, corresponds all what Asad has said so far about the medieval Christian religious life. Perhaps a contribution to what Asad argued on the economy of bodily pain and truth would be quoting Werner Jaeger’s (1961) *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia*. In this work, a great authority on the Greek *paideia*, Jaeger very briefly notes that *paideia* had also a meaning related to “truth”. “Plato in his *Republic*” says Jaeger “had rejected Homer and Hesiod not as poetic fiction but as *paideia*, which for him meant the expression of truth” (Jaeger, 1961, p. 48). The expression of truth is central to the story Asad constructs. We are still in the domain of reaching the truth via disciplining the body.

To be able to reach a full understanding of the *disciplina* (religious life) of the medieval Christianity, one misunderstanding must be corrected. The notion of disciplining the body does not presuppose a rupture between the body and the soul. “Disciplined gesture [bodily disposition] is thus not merely a technique of the body varying from one culture or historical period to another, it is also the appropriate organization of the soul – of understanding and feeling, desire and will” (Asad, 1993, p. 138). Understanding the role of the bodily pain in the economy of truth in medieval Christianity as it has been outlined here – and in the way Asad theorizes – entails the deconstruction of one of the bestseller clichés of body studies: that body/soul dichotomy is a founding part of Christianity.

The oneness of body and soul is best exemplified in the virtue of “humility” – which was the highest virtue attainable in the monastic program. For Asad, humility is “a virtue that is not a simple behavioural feature of subordinate social status but an inward condition to be cultivated progressively by ascetic discipline...” (p. 139). This means that the attainment of humility cannot be seen from outside, and therefore not provable. Body, as it is clear, is not an obstacle to the access to the virtues, but, on the contrary, is the only medium that renders this access possible through disciplinary practices.

4.3.2 Rites of humiliation

These practices are the exercises of sacramental rites. In defining rites, Asad refers to the twelfth century leading theologian Hugh of St. Victor. The definition given by Asad as a result of his reading Hugh of St. Victor is that:

...a sacrament, from its moment of authoritative foundation, is a complex network of signifiers and signifieds which acts, like an icon commemoratively. What this icon signifies is already present in the minds of

participants. It points backward to their memory and forward to their expectations as properly disciplined Christians. (p. 154)

As it is clear from this passage, and in the light of Asad's critique of the concept of ritual, medieval understanding of sacramental rites are by no means similar to the modern concept of ritual. There is no reference to the rite "as an expression or representation of inner states", nor is there a "'restricted code' bearing cultural meanings" (p. 155).

In his reading of Hugh of St. Victor, Asad tells the reader about three purposes of the sacraments. These are "humiliation", "instruction", and "exercise." For Asad, these are not separate exercises; and they work in a single process.

Humiliation is needed as a penance for "disobeying God through pride." The purpose of instruction is to teach the monks to recognize the value of the education they are receiving. And, continuous exercise is needed to be able to see the truth of invisible things. "Because, explains Hugh, man's erring flesh, which is the very principle of blind desire, cannot grasp the virtue that lie in perceptible things in a single moment" (p. 156). Only as a result of a long and constant exercise can man learn the difference between right and wrong.

We can make a quick turn to what we have said above about "penance". The institution of penance was the way to correct the misbehaviours of the monks who failed to abide by the monastic program of disciplinary practices. "The open announcement of faults, the formal humiliation of the transgressor, and his public chastisement all took place in... the general assembly of monks" (p. 161). These punishments played such an important role that *discipline* became "the common term for legally prescribed flogging" (p. 161).

In his conclusory remarks, Asad defines the aim of monastic program as “the appropriation (as opposed to the suppression) of dangerous desires in the cause of Christian virtue” (p. 165). Asad defines monastic rites as a kind of disciplinary program in Christianity, and tells us that discipline took various forms in the history of Christianity to the extent that this religion governed social and political domains.

We have learned so far that the medieval monastic life, as the highest form of religiosity, was based on fashioning religious selves and bodies through disciplinary practices that work over and within the body. From now on, we will be dealing with the next part of our investigation, in which I will try and demonstrate that the concept of the secular can be understood in our times, only if it is read through and within different conceptions of body. Or, in Giorgio Agamben’s phrase “from a biopolitical horizon”. We will be focusing on the changing patterns of thinking over the body. Asad’s conclusion to the chapter on discipline and humility facilitates this transition from medieval world to modern times. “Thus, humility in the form of self-abasement is no longer admired in ‘normal’ Christianity, and modern secular thought and practice classify it as one of the standard personality disorders” (pp. 166-7). In the following chapter, we will read with Asad the modern conception of “agency” and its relevance to the economy of body, along with Asad’s investigation into different aspects of secularity.

CHAPTER 5

THE SECULAR AND THE BODY

In the last part of the introductory chapter to his *Formations of the Secular*, Talal Asad formulates several questions the answers of which operate as the starting point for an anthropological understanding of secularism and the secular. The core of the question is of utmost importance to this thesis: “How do attitudes to the human body (to pain, physical damage, decay, and death, to physical integrity, bodily growth, and sexual enjoyment) differ in various forms of life?” (Asad, 2003, p. 17).

I would like to reformulate this question and ask it in a specified historical context: How did the attitudes to the human body differ in various periods of European history (from medieval Latin Christendom to modern times)? The crucial point in dealing with such a question is that the question is more important than the answer. The dominant discourse over secularism has a triumphalist emphasis on the eliminating religion from political and social domains. The secular, however, as noted earlier, precedes secularism and is in grave need of a proper understanding. Following Asad, what I am trying to indicate in this study is that this understanding is only possible with a focus on the different attitudes towards the body.

To end any probable doubt that this can still be understood within the secular/religious binary, I should mention an example Asad gives. “What the Christian believes today about God, life after death, the universe” Asad cautions “is not what he believed a millennium ago – nor is the way he responds to ignorance, pain, and injustice the same now as it was then” (Asad, 1993, p. 46). Here Asad is reflecting on the difference between two different Christian understandings of religious convictions and body. He then goes on to concretize this argument: “The

medieval valorization of pain as the mode of participating in Christ's suffering contrasts sharply with the modern Catholic perception of pain as an evil to be fought against and overcome as Christ the Healer did" (p. 46). This, here, is not an example of the difference between the religious and secularist points of view, but rather of the transformation in the attitudes towards the body within Christianity.

In this chapter, I will read Asad's reflections on the contemporary understandings of the body through the concepts firstly of "agency" and then of "cruelty". Bodily pain and different attitudes towards it in the contemporary context are the foundations upon which the concept of agency and cruelty are constructed. This reading is to bear in mind what we have said in the previous chapter of pain, discipline, humility, and truth.

5.1 Agency: Responsibility and representation

In *Formations of the Secular*, Asad detects and examines different aspects of secularity. His examinations of "agency and pain", and "cruelty and torture" are to be analysed in this chapter. We begin with Asad's exploration of the secular "through the concept of agency, especially agency connected to pain" (Asad, 2003, p. 67).

The reason for the selection of this area of investigation for Asad is that "the secular depends on particular conceptions of *action* and *passion*." Action here corresponds to the "agency." Agency corresponds to and is in a close relation with the idea of history-making of which Asad is highly critical. While pain first "in the sense of passion" argues Asad "is associated with the religious subjectivity and often regarded as inimical to reason; second... in the sense of suffering it is thought of as a human condition that secular agency must eliminate universally" (p. 67).

Anthropological studies of body, according to Asad, does not cover “the limits of the human body as a site of agency.” The position of an agent regarding pain and suffering has not been the interest of these studies. Also, in this regard, the use of the word “body” is restricted to the meaning of individual “whose desire and ability to act” are taken for granted (p. 68).

When Asad formulates the contemporary definition of agency as “a completed personal action from within an indefinite network of causality by attributing to an actor responsibility *to power*”, one more time we find ourselves in the judicial system: “Paradigmatically, this means *forcing* a person to be accountable, to answer to a judge in a court of law why things were done or left undone. In that sense agency is built on the idea of blame and pain” (p. 74). This is, for Asad, related to a different understanding of personhood. “At least as far back as John Locke, ‘person’ was theorized as a forensic term that called for the integration of a single subject with a continuous consciousness in a single body” (p. 74). Such an essentialization of “human” makes it “an object of social discipline” (p. 74). Modern understanding of agency, in this regard, takes as its basis a judicially invented concept of “personhood” that was constructed in the service of capitalist property law. Agency as responsibility is one side of the concept of agency, which is, in the context of responsibility for the intentional behaviours and absolute power to act, in relation to history-making.

The other side of agency is put forward as representation. Of agency as representation, Asad reflects on the theatrical representation. The paradox of representation as being “both absent and present at the same time” is exemplified in the theatrical performance. This should be thought with the notion of self-empowerment that is attributed to agency.

In theatrical representations, self-empowerment is problematized in that these performances are based on “*disempower* one self for the sake of another” (p. 75).

One cannot argue that actors and actresses are passive objects of the plots or characters they represent. On the contrary, they create an authentic subjectivity by repressing their selves.

The issue of representation of course is not limited to the theatrical stages. As for the representation in the judicial and political contexts, Asad demonstrates that “law courts and political arenas, domains in which the self must be disavowed... in the act of representing a client or ‘the law’ state laws *disempower* as well as enable the active citizen” (p. 77).

Exemplifying the agency as representation raises questions about the taken-for-granted notion of empowerment and self-empowerment. “‘Empowerment,’ a legal term referring *both* to the act of giving power to someone *and* to someone’s power to act, becomes a metaphysical quality defining secular human agency, its objective as well as precondition” (p. 79). That also means that the concept of secular human agency requires of a human subject to enjoy the absolute power to act, and again escape all the obstacles before this power (like bodily pain, or state law which empowers this human subject) to be able to act as a responsible agent. According to Asad, “cultural theory tends to reduce” different areas of use of the concept of agency “to the metaphysical idea of a conscious agent-subject having both the capacity and the desire to move in a singular historical direction: that of increasing self-empowerment and decreasing pain” (p. 79).

5.2 Pain

According to a secular view held by many, one is either an “agent (representing and asserting himself or herself) or a victim (the passive object of chance or cruelty)” (p. 79). Someone who is in pain is not considered to be an agent by the secular view. To suffer pain connotes being the passive of pain, or some other external factor. Pain can be considered as a stimulator for some actions, like a reaction to pain in the form of eliminating the cause. But, Asad argues, we do not conceive of pain itself as an action. And he proposes to think pain “as itself agentive” (p. 79).

Secular conception of pain as an obstacle to being agent and the *telos* of eliminating pain belong to a certain progressivist historical model. In the judicial context, Asad defines this mentality as “[T]he secular emphasis on the integral human body as the locus of moral sovereignty” (p. 84). From this point of view, the human subject is supposed always already to be an agent without any infliction of pain on their bodies to be able to act and be responsible for their actions before a court of law.

Following his critique of the understanding of pain as a state of passivity, Asad moves to his exploration of examples of agentive pain. But, already in the former chapter, we have indicated that pain in the medieval Christian context was utterly agentive through disciplinary practices and sacramental penance. Later in this chapter, I am to attempt a comparison between premodern and secular conceptions of body, while I summarize what has been related so far. I therefore quote one example of agentive pain from Asad.

In early Christianity, martyrs comprise a considerable place within Christian imagination. There is even a literature called as martyrologies that relate the stories

of good Christians who are killed by their enemies in the course of their gospel spreading activities. Asad suggests that martyrs “[F]ar from shunning physical suffering, the martyrs actively sought to live it. Like Christ’s passion on the cross, the martyr’s passivity was an act of triumph. *That* openness to pain was precisely part of their agency as Christians” (p. 85). This example, without doubt, is again a reference to a different conception of pain. As suggested in the former chapter, seeing bodily as constructive and agentive of Christian selves was a prevalent mentality in early and medieval Christianity. Christian attitude toward pain and suffering was not negative in early Christianity. “Where sickness could not be healed, Christians insisted that pain could be understood as valuable” (p. 86).

A word of caution is needed here. We should not be deceived by the chronological difference between early and medieval Christianity and modern times. These are differences that occur with the intermingling and differentiation of several traditions. While Christians had a positive attitude towards pain, sickness, and suffering, contemporaries of early Christians did not enjoy the same mentality: “Stoic moral philosophy (with its emphasis on self-mastery, its denials of externals such as suffering), and Galenic medicine (that regarded pain as a bodily condition subject to appropriate technical intervention)” (p. 86).

Following Asad’s exploration of the secular conception of agency, we find again that “the body” plays the major part in an investigation concerning the aspects of the secular. Taken-for-granted notions of secular viewpoint are complicated with questions regarding the body. Here, it is not my aim to accuse this secular viewpoint of inadequacy. What I propose here is a complication of the secularist notion of the secular, which positions itself as the opposite of religion. Both of these concepts (secularist understanding of secular, and religion) are the products of certain

processes in European history. From the horizon of the body, these modern definitions and categories are shown to be without foundation through their historical analysis – in this case, the analysis of medieval Christian understanding.

5.3 Cruelty

Asad suggests that “a major motive of secularism has clearly been the desire to end cruelties... that religion has so often initiated and justified.” Asad’s definition of cruelty is as follows: “the deliberate infliction *in this world* of pain to the living body of others, and the causing of distress to their minds.” This notion of religion as the source of cruelties dates back to “Western Europe’s experience of religious wars and in the complex movement called the secular Enlightenment” (p. 100).

In his examination of modern-day conceptions of cruelty through torture, Asad’s emphasis is upon the difference between premodern and modern attitudes towards the deliberate infliction of pain to others. While torture in our world is deemed unacceptable, “in premodern societies of the kind Foucault called Classical, ‘torture’ was carried out unapologetically and in public.” This difference is “linked to a liberal sensibility regarding pain” (p. 105).

The difference does not directly stems from an irreligious point of view. As we noted earlier, modern-day Christianity is also at odds with pain. According to a modern theologian Asad quotes, “[I]t is a man’s job... to enter into this cognitive analysis of the meaning of suffering, in order to be able to affront and conquer it.” And as an example of secular conception of Jesus Christ, he asserts that “[T]hrough his works, even before his words, Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed the goodness of life and of health, as the image of salvation. For Him pain is negativeness” (as cited in Asad, 2003, p. 106).

The answer to the question as to how make a sense out of this shift, within the European and Christian histories towards the deliberate pain inflicted on others, leads us again to the judicial context. According to Asad's readings on the history of torture, the essential shift occurs within the understanding of reaching the truth about guilt. "Roman canon law of proof – which required either confession or the testimony of two eyewitnesses to convict – declined in force in the seventeenth century." "Circumstantial evidence" replaced Roman canon law of proof.

What is more interesting in this regard is that "the moral truth about judicial torture was linked to a prior construction of a new concept of legal truth" (pp. 107-8). This new concept of legal truth was the idea that torturing the accused to gather information or confession takes too much time and is less useful than circumstantial evidence like gathering evidence from the scene of a crime. The moral judgment regarding pain therefore is not the production of a kind of enlightenment, but rather a moral justification of a new application of law.

Within the scope of this thesis, the crucial point in this shift is not a critique of the secular understanding regarding cruelty and torture of insincerity. Two things are crucial to the cause of this thesis. First, one of the most apparent aspect of secular view is within the economy of body and pain. Second, the shift did not occur in the context of denouncing religion, thereby once again complicating the secular/religious binary. On the one hand, this shift was within the judicial context, on the other (more important) hand, it was a shift directly about the relation between body and truth.

Instead of a conclusion to his investigation into cruelty and torture, Asad briefly touches sadomasochism with a view to further complicating secular attitudes towards pain. We noted earlier that secular viewpoint operates within a progressivist

understanding that aims to replace pain by pleasure. At this point, Asad asks a question as to “what happens when individual self-fashioning embraces the difference between ‘pain’ and ‘pleasure’ within an aesthetic whole” (p. 119).

Two examples are employed by Asad. First, a “theatrical” performance in which a man portrays Jesus Christ’s crown of thorn with real needles penetrating into his head, in which the difference between reality and representation is effaced through a positive experience of pain. Second, Shi’a Muslim flagellants who mourn for Hussain every Muharram month. This differs from the first example in that this time what we see “is not a secular act that borrows a religious metaphor to make a statement about political prejudice” (p. 121).

The important point here is that, be they religious or secular, such engagements with pain “both strike against the modern sensibility that recoils from a willing, positive engagement with suffering” (p. 121). For sadomasochists and ascetics alike – unlike modern secular viewpoint –, “pain is not merely a means that can be measured and pronounced excessive or gratuitous in relation to an end. Pain is not calculated action but passionate engagement” (p. 121).

Asad makes use of these two examples to prevent a probable misunderstanding that the secular attitude is against the religious attitude towards pain. The opposition does not lie within the secular/religious binary, but within positive or negative engagements with pain. First example above is not likely to be denounced by the secular view as religious. Nor does it accord with the secularist attitude. The reason of this complexity is that that performance has a positive engagement with suffering and experiencing pain.

5.4 Talal Asad on the secular body

Instead of a formal conclusion, I would like to end this chapter with a very brief reading of one of Asad's recent articles "Thinking about the Secular Body, Pain, and Liberal Politics" (2011), which although published eight years later, might nevertheless be read as a supplement to *Formations of the Secular*. Strange though it may be, this article is the only text by Asad where he directly addresses the secular and religious bodies. While in the former chapters we saw that almost all his work is dedicated to reading the secular from the horizon of the body, such directness was absent.

In this article, the way Asad treats his subject is similar to the ways he followed in *Genealogies of Religion* and *Formations of the Secular*. Asad approaches "the 'secular body' as the site of sensibilities and convictions, and the ways in which it may or may not be distinguishable from the 'religious body.'" Upon explaining his purpose, Asad comes again to his recurring conceptual tool of examining the relations between the body and the secular "by paying special attention to pain because it directs us to the human body as a finite organism" (Asad, 2011, p. 657).

Beginning with the painful body, Asad takes "hypochondria", which he defines as "[a] firm conviction about the pain as more than itself – as a clue to some hidden meaning – in the absence of 'real' evidence", as the example of a different way to engage with the bodily pain. "Hypochondria" suggests Asad keeps us conscious of "the fact that relations between the self and the objective world – or between the mental and the physical – are often accidental, post hoc, recursive, and practical" (p. 658).

First of all, hypochondria as a medical term, notes Asad, is modern and secular. For “it is a product of biomedicine, of an institutionalized practical knowledge that presents itself as rational and progressive, and sometimes as an epistemological model that can be opposed to theological definitions... of unwellness” (p. 658).

However, Asad immediately gives up on this idea of “analysing the institutional conditions within which ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ are cultivated.” Instead, as former chapters have repeated several times, one should look into the ways living bodies themselves engage with and response to pain. “[i]t is not pain as such that is secular or religious but the way it is lived by the subject” (p. 658).

All in all, at the end of this article, Asad declares his methodology in thinking about the secular and the body. Perhaps this declaration is Asad’s clearest mention of what he has been doing for at least two decades – since *Genealogies of Religion*. Asad does not want to essentialize “the secular” and “the secular body” by attributing them fixed meanings. Instead he “propose[s] a more modest endeavour: An inquiry into what is involved when ‘the secular’ is invoked... In brief, I think it is more useful to inquire into how its historically shifting grammar identifies ‘the healthy body’ and ‘the body that is sick’” (p. 673).

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This study was set out as a close reading of Talal Asad's *Genealogies of Religion* and *Formations of the Secular* to the extent these two books bear on the relations between the secular, the religious, and the body. I attempted to demonstrate, through his texts, that the understanding of what is religious and what is secular, and the deconstruction of this binary opposition is only possible within the horizon of the body. From the monastic discipline of the medieval Christianity to our modern world, Asad traces the changing sensibilities towards the body and bodily pain to be able to deconstruct the taken for granted positions towards the concepts of the religious and the secular.

In the chapter following the introduction, I attempted to focus on certain themes elaborated by Foucault and Agamben. In Foucault's case, this is one of his latest contribution titled "Technologies of the Self." In this seminar, Foucault elaborates on the classical notion of "care of the self" from Plato, via Stoics, and to Christian asceticism. This paved the way for us to read Asad on medieval Christian monasticism. As for Agamben, I briefly introduced his *Homo Sacer*, with a special emphasis upon the meaning of the word *sacer* to serve us as an introduction to Asad's discussion of the concepts of the religion and the secular – as they are understood today – as anthropological constructs.

In the third chapter, I explored firstly Asad's critiques of the anthropological concepts of history-making, ritual, and religion. Then I moved on to the analysis of Asad's problematization of the concept of the secular. Asad's critiques revealed that all these concepts that play major roles in contemporary thinking are the constructs

of the field of anthropology. That the concept of religion, as we understand it today, is an invention of Enlightenment thinkers, and that the concept of the secular is not an essence and not the opposite of the religious are Asad's major theoretical contributions to contemporary thinking.

In the fourth chapter, I strived to demonstrate how Asad is restructuring the story of religious imagination and concepts of medieval Christian life. With a narrative of changing conceptions of body and bodily pain within an economy of truth throughout the history of Christianity, Asad suggests that the religious and the secular are not opposite essences. Rather, they are two different dispositions and relations which surprisingly coexist in the world of the living. Historical investigation in this chapter also contributes to the understanding of the body in the history of Christianity. Voluntary self-infliction of pain to the bodies in monastic life is seen by Asad as a way to train and develop religious dispositions within the body which may be regarded as a self-developable means.

In the fifth chapter, the focus shifted towards today's world, and looked into the ways how the concept of the secular gets structured via the concept of agency. Eliminating bodily pain was almost a motto of the secularist endeavour, thereby affecting the modern notion of agency. In the same direction, contemporary positions against deliberate cruelty and torture were examined by Asad to suggest the changeability of the conceptions of and sensibilities towards the body.

In two senses, this study aimed at corresponding to a theoretical need in Turkey. First, although Talal Asad's major works are all available in Turkish (*Genealogies of Religion* and *Is Critique Secular* were published in Turkish more than a year after I had begun this thesis), no thesis was written on his thought in

Turkey. Second, although studies on the body and its history are abundant with regards to Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, the relation of the body to the religious and the secular is for the first time examined here with reference to Talal Asad.

I also regard this study as a contribution to Talal Asad scholarship in that, for the first time in this thesis, Asad's work is read with a special emphasis on the body. Asad's work has elsewhere been commented on many times for its contribution to anthropological theory, postcolonial studies, and understanding of religion. However, no study was attempted to show that what his work is mainly about is deconstructing the concepts of the religious and the secular - which are the nineteenth century anthropological constructs – by reading and criticizing these concepts with regard to their position vis-à-vis the history of the changing conceptions of the body and bodily pain within an economy of truth. With the analysis of the body in Asad's work on the religious and the secular, I ventured to contribute to the area of body studies.

Remembering our departing point in the introduction, which is about the relation of the body to the concepts of the religious and the secular, we can say that we are far from a clear and concise answer. What has been related so far further complicates our subject. However, we can still talk about some important theoretical gains. Perhaps these gains might be employed in future studies of body in Turkey.

Talal Asad, who follows Marcel Mauss in his understanding of the body, reminds us of one of the long forgotten main features of our body. This feature is its being a self-developable means. That is, through the techniques of the body, one may teach his/her body to feel and desire in a specific way. A medieval monk, according

to Asad, used to develop desires in himself/herself to obey God through bodily practices. This, of course, as noted earlier, is bizarre to our modern understanding of action as a successor of desire. While we think that desires causes action, Asad suggests that in medieval monastic life there were certain actions to produce certain desires.

This theoretical gain, I think, opens a new area of investigation for the Turkish scholars who work on the body. The way Asad approaches Christianity can be adopted to approach Islam and Islamic practices. Islamic daily prayers and Ramadan fasting are two immediate examples of the relation between the body and the observance of Islam. These are the two very first examples that occur to me as the body as a self-developable means in Islam. I think, in this sense, a wide scope of Islamic discourse on these “rituals” and others concerning the body merit careful attention of those who think on the body.

Our second theoretical gain is to learn about the relation of the body to the Christian juridical system. Asad’s stance towards this relation reveals that the shifts in Christian understanding finding guilt and truth both took place within the boundaries of the body. Either the marks of guilt are visible on the bodies of the losing side of the duels or the ordeals, or the bodies are tortured in a disciplined way to extract the truth. This kind of extracting the truth becomes a discipline in Christianity, as it is seen in the institution of “Confession.”

This second gain is also applicable to the Turkish context with regards to Islam. Islamic Law, which is known as *şeriat* in Turkish, is a loaded concept in Turkey over which political and intellectual figures produce various discourses. A study concerning the relation of the body to the *şeriat* in its historical development

would be a prolific endeavour to understand the place of the body in Islam, and in Turkey.

Third theoretical gain is the one about the concepts of the religious and the secular. Asad suggests in a convincing way that the concept of “religion” as we understand it today is an outcome of the theoretical divide between the natural religion and positive religion in the Enlightenment. This divide, of course, is a response to a major political problem in early modern Europe. So, we see that the concept of religion that we use today is actually a product of a different history. The concept of “secular” as we understand it today, too, is a product, as Asad indicates, of European history and thought.

The meanings of these two concepts are generally taken for granted in Turkish context. What Asad does with the history of Christianity can be done here with the history of Islamic thought. One may want to investigate into the ways the concept of *din* (religion) takes shape in the Islamic thought and Turkish thought together and separately.

I would like now to present a brief reading on the Turkish reception of modernization through the changes in the understandings of time and of the body. Ahmed Hâşim’s (1921) “Müslüman Saati” (Hours of the Muslims) is a short and good example of how an Ottoman intellectual conceived of Westernization on the eve of the modern Turkey. I am willing to put an emphasis upon the role of the body in this response to Westernization.

“Müslüman Saati” is a very brief essay on the change in the understanding of time, after Muslim way of engaging with time began to collapse when – in the course of modernization – Ottomans took up the Western way of regulating time. The essay

begins with a remark on the crucial importance of the change in the understanding of time: “The most sinister and effective invasion that modernize Istanbul, and confused its inhabitants has been the intrusion of foreign hours into our life” (Hâşim, 2004, p. 19). Hâşim then moves on to define the time according to Muslims which begins with the first lights at dawn and finishes with the lights of the sunset. In the old days, the hours were known with clocks which did not tell the exact hour, but only approximately informed their owners. The day was not comprised of 24 hours. It was only 12 hours, which made it “a short, light, and easy-to-live life” (p. 19).

Hâşim refers to the Muslim’s understanding of time as the “sacred hour of memories.” This is where he begins to exemplify in a literary style the way he conceives of this past time: “The past times were the hours of the deaths of our fathers, the marriages of our mothers, the days we were born, and the caravans set off, and the days the armies entered the cities of the enemies” (p. 20).

This sentence, at first sight, seems to be – and I think it is - a requiem for the glorious past of Muslims. However, what is more important for me here is not this relation to the glorious past, nor the use of memory. I would like to argue that the body is central to this sentence. And Hâşim’s definition of Muslim’s understanding of time as the “sacred hour of memories” includes the centrality of the body, because what he call “memories” are comprised of the death, the marriage, the birth, and the soldiers in a war.

Ahmet Hâşim’s essay whose main theme is the different engagements with the time within Muslims and in the West becomes highly preoccupied with several bodily dispositions. The preoccupation with the body continues as Hâşim tells us about the new understanding of time: “This is not one of the Muslims’ happy old

days. This is the bitter and endless day great civilizations which have a great many drunkards, homeless, thieves, and murderers, and countless slaves to employ them underground” (p. 20).

The glorious deaths, marriages, births, and fighting are compared and contrasted to the marginal and abject bodies of the Western way of life. As Hâşim earlier called the former events as “sacred memories”, the latter characters may connote secularity. We must immediately caution that the sacredness or secularity are not attributed here to certain people or certain things because of their position vis-à-vis religion. The decisive point here is the way the bodies engage with the world, and the way they are represented in this essay.

Hâşim goes on in his essay to tell us about the different roles “the dawn” plays in two different engagements with time. “The dawn, for the Muslims, is the end of a sleep without dreams, the beginning of washing, prayer, mirth, and hope. The face of the Muslim is one of the most beautiful reflections of dawn along with sounds of the bird calls and scents of flowers” (p. 21). In these sentences, we witness a particular way of defining body with respect to its relation to time.

In the last part of the essay, Hâşim depicts another body which is in a different relation to time. “For most of us ‘the dawn’ became the night; and the sun finds most of us in the fever of a new and bizarre sleep, our hands locked, mouths crooked, legs trapped in the disordered sheets in an agonising way” (p. 21). If we read this excerpt as a contrast of the previous depiction concerning the Muslim face, it will further be clear that the way Hâşim handles the issue of time and modernization is very much connected to a particular understanding of body. Here again, if we think about the essential difference between the Muslim face who got up

at dawn and the other person who kept on sleeping after sunrise does not have something to do with being religious or secular. What differs them is their relation to and position towards time.

In this very brief note on Ahmet Hâşim's "Müslüman Saati", in fact, aimed at introducing a new way of reading of the classical texts on secularisation in Turkey. Although Hâşim may not be aware of his constant preoccupation with the body, his main theme ended up being "the body" here. The time that is the main subject of this essay is only understandable by way of a certain reference to the status of the body. The ways Hâşim depicts the "glorious" and "abject" bodies are directly related to his handling the issue of the body.

Fourth theoretical gain, though not being as original as the former ones, might be what Asad does generally in his works: anthropology of European thought. Examining Europe closely enhances our understanding of our contemporary world in that modern world is mostly given shape by the Europeans. A genealogy of European thinking, religion, daily practices, and languages are likely to provide us with a better understanding of Turkey, a country which has for more than 90 years aspired to become modern.

To conclude I consider Talal Asad a key thinker for body studies in Turkey. Both the theoretical tools with which he provides us and his method are potent to increase the scope of body studies in Turkey which focus mostly on sexuality and the queer.

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