

# SPECIAL SECTION

## Grammars of Religion: Talal Asad on Wittgenstein

### Introduction

#### On Seeing from “a Religious Point of View”

CHARLES HIRSCHKIND

**ABSTRACT** In the lead essay to this special section, Talal Asad explores some of the avenues opened up by Wittgenstein's work for students of religion. Highlighting some of the philosopher's key insights on the life of language, Asad argues that, instead of taking the opposition between belief and practice as a starting point, scholars should attend to the variety of ways language comes to be used in contexts of embodied learning, contexts wherein the abilities and aptitudes germane to religious life are developed and honed. Turning his focus to what Wittgenstein called the “grammar” of such key concepts as conviction, persuasion, and critique, Asad points to some of the ways that our secular understandings of these notions are inadequate for grasping their place within religious lives. In the latter part of the essay, Asad brings a Wittgensteinian perspective to bear on a key debate within the Islamic tradition concerning the “rationality” of divine speech. The article is followed by five commentaries that take up and expand on different themes found in Asad's essay and developed elsewhere in his work.

**KEYWORDS** Talal Asad, Wittgenstein, religion, secularism, critique, Qur'an

Talal Asad, whose essay “Thinking about Religion through Wittgenstein” anchors this special section, has over the last fifty years pursued a critical inquiry into the core concepts of secular modernity and, primary among them, the twin concepts of religion and secularity. From his earliest work in this field, it is clear that Asad, in contrast to most scholars of anthropology and religious studies, never took *religion* to designate an object of analysis. Already in his 1983 engagement with the work of Clifford Geertz, Asad argued (and here restates) that the quest for a definition of the term was misguided, that there was no defining essence to the heterogeneity

of practices we call religious that set them off from the rest of life. Rather than circumscribe an object, *religion* brings into our analytical purview practices and contexts that are particularly germane to the exploration of a range of important anthropological questions, perhaps key among them, and certainly foregrounded in the present essay, what kind of ethical lives we can create and sustain in light of the limits of language and the vulnerabilities of our embodied lives. In this sense, Asad has always thought *about* religion so as to become able to think through and with it, an approach nowhere more evident than here, where Ibn Taymiyya and Ludwig Wittgenstein are shown to reciprocally illuminate aspects of each other's thought, and both teach us something about the dangers of reason as reified and detached from our lives.

Reflecting on his own style of thinking, Wittgenstein famously noted to a friend (as Asad here reminds us) that he couldn't "help seeing every problem from a religious point of view" (408). In this current essay, Asad also claims a "religious point of view" for himself, telling us that he writes about the Islamic tradition here as both "an anthropologist and an informant . . . at once from inside and outside because the two positions cannot always be kept apart" (405). Indeed, instead of two positions, we find here and elsewhere in his writings a unique sensibility, as evident in his engagements with the Islamic tradition as it is in his writings on other traditions and topics. My point is not to suggest that we read Asad as a "Muslim thinker" but rather as someone for whom religion has not been so much an object to describe and study as a form of life—a "point of view"—from which to learn and through which to think.

As with many of Asad's writings, and perhaps more so, the essay presented here explores a constellation of interconnected arguments bound, we might say, by "family resemblances," but ranging far wider than the rubric "religion" could possibly contain. The commentaries that follow the essay highlight some (but far from all) of the fruitful lines of inquiry opened up by Asad's Wittgensteinian reflection.

---

**CHARLES HIRSCHKIND** is associate professor of anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. He is the author of *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (2006) and *The Feeling of History: Islam, Romanticism, and Andalusia* (2020) and coeditor (with David Scott) of *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors* (2005).