



On Limits: The Critiques of Homogeneity and the Disclosure of Traditions in Secularism Studies

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ABSTRACT

Several scholars have argued that the idea of religion homogenizes indigenous traditions in South Asia. This homogenization takes place through creating strict limits and internal boundedness to practices in a tradition. By extension, premodern traditions are narrated as loosely bound, internally plural, and thus heterogeneous. This article intends to offer a critique of how ideas of heterogeneity and homogeneity are understood and used by scholars of secularism, primarily in South Asia. We consider three major sets of arguments on religion made by different scholars over the past few decades as a case in point. We argue that the use of the categories of heterogeneity and homogeneity as dichotomous does not help to discern traditions and forms of life, as these categories are less internally related to a tradition than to the contemporary technique of describing it. Moreover, both ideas do not help us to adequately attend to the disclosures of a tradition. In fact, they conceal, rather than disclose, authoritative practices, attitudes, and sensibilities within a tradition. One of the linchpins of these arguments is the condemnation of the idea of limit. Following Talal Asad, Martin Heidegger, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, we argue that limit is a practice of power, not (only) a spatial imagery of a boundary, and tradition *discloses* those practices as part of *distinct* forms of life.

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“A tradition is in part concerned with the way limits are constructed in response to problems encountered and conceptualized”¹ (Talal Asad).

“The discovery of tradition and the disclosure of what it ‘transmits’ and how this is transmitted can be taken hold of as a task in its own right”² (Martin Heidegger).

INTRODUCTION

An increasing number of scholars of secularism in South Asia argue that the idea of religion is a modern construct incapable of fully capturing the life worlds of the indigenous population.³ To them, the life worlds of the indigenous population in South Asia, due to the supposed porousness of their religious boundaries, are already accepted as heterogeneous.⁴ This critique of religion, predicated on a prior and general critique of homogeneity, reproduces something of what Ashis Nandy once famously argued about the divide between faith and ideology. In his then-provocative essay, Nandy defined faith as a tradition that is “definitionally non-monolithic and operationally plural” and ideology as a religion that is “the sub-national, national, or cross-national identifier of populations contesting for or protecting non-religious, usually political or socio-economic, interests.”⁵ This proposition continues to inform the conversations on secularism, post-secularism, and religion in South Asia.⁶ Nandy’s critique of secularism, as it is widely known, is predicated on identifying secularism’s Western origin and, thus, on its sidestepping of the heterogeneous indigenous traditions that he calls faith. The incapacity of secularism, also explained by T.N. Madan as a “social myth,”⁷ to propose a comprehensive value of religious neutrality remains central to some of these arguments. In a long and somewhat tedious series of secularism debates in South Asia, Rajiv Bhargava argued that secularism is a concept that is subject to change, like any other concept, and thus it is useful to think about the problem of the state-religion relationship in India differently.⁸ Bhargava articulated the promise, in opposition to the crisis, of secularism continuously thence and formulated a much broader thesis on its usefulness by way of interrogating the idea of religion, as illustrated in his recent, rather short book titled *Reimagining Indian Secularism* (2023). In the following year, Nivedita Menon published *Secularism as Misdirection: Critical Thought from the Global South* (2024), advancing a refreshing argument on the construction of religion as a secular function of the state. Menon’s work, radically different from Bhargava, Nandy, Madan, and others, proposes to think about religion as co-constituted with the state, rather than as a pre-existing ontology.⁹

Our intention is not to offer a comprehensive survey of the interdisciplinary scholarship in secularism studies produced in South Asia over the decades. We would rather consider three important sets of arguments to map the scholarly trajectory of religion in South Asia. These arguments are respectively advanced by Nandy, Bhargava, and, recently, Menon, representing

1 Talal Asad, “Responses”, *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors* [ed. David Scott and Charles Hirschkind (Stanford University Press, 2006), 289.

2 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Macquarrie & Robinson (trans) (Blackwell Publisher, 2001) 41.

3 Triti Bhattacharya, “Religion as an Imperial Category: The Tragedy of Multiethnic Lifeworlds in India and Palestine” *South Asian Review*, (2025), 1–4; Nivedita Menon, *Secularism as Misdirection: Critical Thought from the Global South* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2024).

4 Rajiv Bhargava, *Reimagining Indian Secularism* (Kolkata, Seagull Books, 2023); Nivedita Menon, *Secularism as Misdirection* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2024).

5 Ashis Nandy, “The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Toleration” in Bhargava (ed), *Secularism and its Critics* (Delhi, Oxford Press 1998), 322.

6 For a recent, sustained critique of Nandy with respect to how his heterogeneity functions to appropriate non-relations in order to produce an invisible totality of the indic, see Rajbir Singh Judge, “The Invisible Hand of the Indic,” *Cultural Critique*, University of Minnesota Press, Number 110, 2021, pp 75–109.

7 Madan, “Secularism in its Place,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol 46, No 4. (Nov, 1987), 749.

8 Rajiv Bhargava, “What is Secularism For?” in Bhargava (ed), *Secularism and its Critics* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998) 491–494.

9 Scholars also analyzed the imperial construction of the category of religion against the secular, unpacking the imperial function of governance that religion aided. See, David Chidester, *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and ‘the Mystic East,’* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); Timothy Fitzgerald [ed], *Religion and the Secular: Historical and Colonial Formations* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

three diverse grounds for the critique of religion. The notion of religion, rightly interrogated by these scholars as a modern construct, however, triggers some questions about the methodological viability of their arguments. More specifically, we suggest that the critique of religion these scholars advanced exhausts at the problem of homogeneity while drawing a contrasting history of heterogeneity that is benign and unquestionable. In doing so, scholars, despite their mutual differences, assume that heterogeneity is a permanent property of premodern traditions. Central to this assumption is the notion of limit/boundedness, which is thought to fence one tradition off from another, thus hampering the potential of a subject to crisscross. Here, 'limit' often appears as a spatial imagery. In contrast, we argue, one must take the idea of limit beyond its spatial implications for thinking about tradition and subject differently. We thus propose that the idea of limit has a different conceptual register than that of homogeneity. We use the term limit in two ways: first, as a boundedness of a tradition, also implying its constraint; second, exhaustion of a practice in a tradition, also signifying the *excellence* of it in the Aristotelian sense. Here limit is considered as a *practice*, rather than a spatial imagery.

The critique of religion by way of interrogating *limits*, on the other hand, impedes the *discernibility* of a tradition. To discern a tradition, one must look at what it *discloses* through its authorized sensibilities, practices, and forms. The idea of *disclosure* comes from Heidegger, that is, to have a phenomenon *disclose* itself to us at the moment of encounter.¹⁰ The encounter with a phenomenon does not promise its full comprehension, unlike the categories of heterogeneity and homogeneity lead us to think.¹¹ The encounter with a phenomenon only implies that the *discernibility* of a tradition depends on its own *disclosure* of *authoritative* practices. Disclosure, for Heidegger, "never means anything like 'to obtain indirectly by inference.'"¹² It rather suggests "a characteristic of having been laid open."¹³ Therefore, tradition, for Heidegger, *discloses* itself and what it transmits, challenging the sovereignty of comprehension that the modern category of religion promises.¹⁴ This is because the very *disclosure* of a tradition is part of the tradition, since a tradition, according to Talal Asad, signifies "a process in which one learns and relearns how to do things with words, sometimes reflectively and sometimes unthinkingly, and learns and relearns how to comport one's body and how to feel in particular contexts."¹⁵ What, therefore, lies at the heart of a tradition is the question of authority on how to use language and perform things, which, precisely because of the same reason, *discloses* and encloses.¹⁶ A disclosure moves beyond historicism's deterministic approach that operates in creating instant causalities. Such causalities may not be able to capture how practices work in a tradition. The problem with the category of religion is not only that it homogenizes, unlike what scholars wanted to constrict it, but also that it obscures what a tradition *discloses*, which cannot always be designated as heterogeneous against homogenous. The very idea of heterogeneity against homogeneity is predicated on valorizing the unbounded against the bounded and the non-limit against the limit.

The article has two sections. The first section summarizes the three sets of arguments on religion, recognizing the fundamental difficulty of thinking with the categories of heterogeneity and homogeneity for writing a useful genealogy of a community or a tradition. The second section of the article makes an effort to theorize the idea of limit by way of Asad, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein.

10 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Macquarrie & Robinson (trans) (Blackwell Publisher, 2001), 105.

11 For an elaboration of the idea of encounter, see Muhammed Shah Shajahan, "Encounter, Agency and Feeling: Few Remarks on (the critique of) The Feeling of History: Islam, Romanticism and Andalusia (2020)" *Spectra*, 10, 1 (2020), 58-64.

12 Heidegger, 105.

13 Heidegger, 105.

14 Ananda Abeysekara describes such practices of comprehension as a sovereign decision on the part of the scholars because such comprehensions involve practices of definition. See Ananda Abeysekara, "The Untranslatability of Religion, the Untranslatability of Life: Thinking Talal Asad's Thought Unthought in the Study of Religion" *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 23 (2011) 259.

15 Talal Asad, "Thinking about Tradition, Religion, and Politics in Egypt," *Critical Inquiry* 42, (2015) 166.

16 Aaron Elridge writes, "This disclosure, they (Asad and Wittgenstein) teach us, countenances form of life in its hiddenness as much as its manifestation, in its dynamic stillness as much as its motion." Aaron Frederick Elridge, "Movement in Repose: Notes on Form of Life," *Qui Parle* Vol 30, No 1 (2021), 21.

Bhargava's argument, advanced in his *Reimagining Indian Secularism* (2024), is part of his long-standing position about the viability of Indian secularism, which was established through the narrative of the difference between the Western experience of the relationship between religion and state and its Indian experience. More importantly, Bhargava proposes an idea he calls "religionization" in this book, elaborating his argument that the existing critiques of secularism tend to ignore the native ethical tradition that he calls "sanatan sanskriti" and the social relation for its fulfillment, which he calls "marg" (*path*). According to Bhargava, these were subjected to a process of transformation into a "comprehensive category" called "religion" in modern times. Instead of offering a specific historical analysis of transition, he is focused on drawing a broader story of transition, which he calls "religionization", subsuming the "heterogeneous" traditions of "non-religions" respectively called "sanatan sanskriti" and "marg" into a homogenous and standardized category of religion that maintains a certain monotheistic character. Bhargava proposes four uses of the category of religion to think this transition conceptually. The first is "sanatan sanskriti," the distinct ethical system of life that is not necessarily rooted in the monotheistic conception of religion; the second is "marg," which means a way and is understood by Bhargava as a collective means of attaining "sanatan sanskriti"; the third is religion proper with the "propensity for intra and inter-religious domination" and the fourth is confessional or politicized religion.¹⁷ What he meant by "religionization" is the historical subsumption of the first two systems he calls "sanatan sanskriti" and "marg" labeled together under what he calls "non-religion" into the latter two, that is, "religion proper," which is predicated on a rigid and standard set of norms and regulations and its politicized articulation he calls confessional religion. Both critics and proponents of secularism, according to Bhargava, do not see the rich diversity of "sanatana sanskriti" and its "marg" or "non-religions" and, therefore, are confined to dealing with the latter two. Indian secularism, according to Bhargava, must be envisioned in such a way that recognizes the ethical potential of the "non-religions" while preventing the inter-religious and intra-religious dominations arising out of "religion." For him, secularism is then a "comportment of the state, whereby it maintains a distance from all religious and philosophical conceptions in order to promote a spirit of fraternity or a quality of sociability among religious communities, perhaps even inter-religious equality."¹⁸ This idea, he claims, is derived from what he calls Gandhian secularism and its later translation into the constitutional secularism wherein these values were rendered to be "rights" under legal protection.¹⁹

Bhargava's categorization of religions and their comprehensive transformation into a single religion is an argument worth paying attention to for his specific and interesting focus on the category of *religion*. What is noticeable is that this thesis maintains a crucial structural similarity with that of Ashish Nandy's thesis, in which Nandy's idea of faith is marked by a loosely bound and plural character, whereas ideology is rendered rigid and oriented to what he considers "non-religious interests." In distinguishing the desirable faith from undesirable ideology, Nandy writes, "one way of explaining the difference between the two is to conceive of ideology as something that, for individuals and people who believe in it, needs to be constantly protected and faith as something that the faithful usually expect to protect them."²⁰ The problem with secularism, Nandy pronounces, is that it does not have much to say about culture, and therefore it either prefers to work with or domesticate religion as ideology.²¹ Thus, for Nandy, religion acquires the character of interest, dissociating from the aspect of faith and thereby becomes a bounded structure by defying heterogeneous conceptions of life and self. The claims of plurality and heterogeneity, articulated in relation to Indian traditions, and the rigidity and homogeneity that characterize the category of religion mark this structural similarity between these two otherwise mutually rival positions on secularism.

The third argument, which finds the problems of the idea of religion in homogeneity, and thus calls for the recovery of heterogeneity, is advanced by Nivedita Menon in her recent book titled

17 Bhargava, *Reimagining*, 40, 41, 42.

18 Bhargava 62.

19 Bhargava 65.

20 Nandy, "The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance" in Bhargava, *Secularism and its Critics* (Oxford: Delhi, 1998) 322.

21 Nandy, *The Politics*, 324.

Secularism as Misdirection: Critical Thought from the Global South (2024). Menon's critique of secularism as a critique of capitalism by way of outlining how capitalism presupposes a normative and homogenous time of the secular that subsumes the heterogeneous life worlds of various communities is worth noting. The category of heterogeneity seems to centrally inform the way in which the critique of capitalism is outlined in this work. We contend that capitalism entails a moral argument about the teleology of life, which overrides every other teleology of traditions that requires passionate engagement with their disciplinary techniques. Traditions have their own practices of homogenization in the form of their mechanism to create a particular narrative unity in life, and thus a certain kind of subject against others. This subject may not always be harmonious with other subjects, nor in hostility.

Menon, in demonstrating her version of heterogeneity, describes the festival of Durga Puja, which was listed in UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list. Following Guha Thakurta's question of "Can a festival of Goddess be secular?" Menon reflects on Thakurta's assertion that the Durga Puja festival in Kolkata became the "constitutive ground in the dismantling of boundaries between artistic, religious, and secular practices."²² Menon writes, "the depiction of the goddess and her environs in the hundreds of neighborhoods *pandals* of Kolkata involves artistic practices varying from a replication of the Bhurj Khalifa Tower in Dubai and the Sistinic Chapel in Italy, to directly political depictions of Durga and her family as people disenfranchised by the NRC and as migrant labor desperately trekking back home after the grotesquely short-notice lockdown that was declared during the Covid pandemic."²³ This festival, according to Menon, allows other communities to present "a non-communal, culturally inclusive identity of Durga Puja."²⁴ This example, for Menon, provides for her vision of heterogeneity that is essentially defined by porous boundaries and fuzzy communities.

As it is obvious, the idea of limit, both as boundedness and boundary, centrally informs her critique of homogeneity. On the other hand, porousness and fuzziness remain untouched by power and history. Nandy's earlier argument against secularism fashioned a similar assumption about porousness, wherein he highlighted the 1921 census that identified a large number of Indians declaring to be 'Mohammedan Hindus.'²⁵ The critique of boundedness/limit thus seems to be at the core of these assumptions.

PART 2: RELIGION, HISTORICISM, AND THE *LIMITS* OF TRADITION

In all three arguments, religion appears to be a modern construct that either requires being domesticated by secularism (Bhargava) or beats the promise of secularism in the form of an ideology (Nandy) or itself was enacted as a homogenizing force by secularism (Menon). In this schematic history of religion, how do we think about tradition and its limits? Can we apply the same schematic history drawn for religion in *discerning* traditions under the power of secularism? Our effort in this section is to think more deeply about the discernibility of tradition while interrogating the kind of schematic history often drawn for religion in South Asian studies.

The critique of *religion* advanced by these scholars, upon the premise that the category of religion *limits* porousness and heterogeneities, entails a case of classical historicism, one which re-inscribes an ontology of religion across times and practices. To elaborate, the critique of religion, in this case either in favor or against secularism, is structured within a particular type of historicism that divides traditions as heterogeneous and homogenous. This effectively prevents any effort at a *discernibility* of traditions and the authoritative practices within themselves. A tradition *discloses* itself through authoritative practices, sensibilities, and forms, which therefore require *attentiveness* to a tradition's power at moments of encounter. Consider, for instance, what Bhargava understood as the problem of the category of religion: "if the term *religion* contains within itself not only intra but also inter-religious domination, then Indian secularism, unlike western secularism, becomes doubly anti-religious. This must be particularly true when "sanatan sanskrit" and "marg" (senses 1. and 2., non-religions) were converted by their spokespersons and leaders into strong secondary and eventually political religions

²² Menon, 89.

²³ Menon, 89.

²⁴ Menon, 89.

²⁵ Nandy, 323.

(senses 3. and 4). When they conformed to Western ideas of religion, Indian non-religions too became communal, i.e., began to view the interests of their community as necessarily opposed to others.”²⁶ The difficulty with this argument is the instant and almost indiscriminate causalities it proposes for a critical diagnosis of our present problems, which are termed “inter and intra-religious dominations.” For instance, the “non-religions,” prior to their transformation into the comprehensive category of religion, are supposed here to be untouched by power, and the formation of a subject in that tradition as natural, rather than constructed. Subsequently, non-religions are assumed to have no limits to draw and therefore no grammar to *disclose*, leaving us wondering where their legibility lies. The diagnosis of domination thus rests here in a particular interpretation of religion rather than in the conditions of power that enable particular interpretations of religion against others. That is, Bhargava’s account of inter- and intra-religious dominations does not *disclose* anything about the rival arguments in a tradition²⁷ in its changing historical trajectories.²⁸ Importantly, the legibility accorded to his idea of religion gestures to a causality of domination, revealing a certain type of deterministic historicism. This historicism, within which his scheme of causality plays out, comes to serve as his ultimate diagnosis for what he considers the problem of “inter and intra-religious dominations,” much like it does for Nandy and others. This shows a serious inability to *attend* to the authorized practices, sensibilities, and forms that inform, arrange, and *disclose* particular traditions, encounters, and moral arguments. Here, the deterministic historicism reproduces a certain kind of homogeneity, not marked by limit against the non-limit, but by translation of practices into causality. This translation of practices into causality (a secular function) does not capture what those practices disclose about their tradition and moral argument.

In questioning this historicism by way of Talal Asad, Aaron Eldridge writes, “Historicism promises to separate form (the metaphoric, ritualistic, textual expressions—all species of “belief”) from formless life, resulting in a network of emotions (effects) of the force of history. By this account, which invokes a universal medium of translation (“history”), forms of life fall within homogenous time and under a total interpretative frame rather than remain, as with Asad’s anti-historicism, the enjambment of forces articulated as a *Lebensform* and thus constitutive of temporality.”²⁹ Here, Eldridge perceptively notes how historicism operationalizes a separation between form and life, indicative of the homogenous time within which interpretative categories provide for theorizations. This homogenous time is not about standardization of the heterogeneous, as scholars often view it, but rather about abstracting practices from their traditions for a grand narrative of causality. What the attention to temporality helps us do is to identify discourses and power (e.g., secular) under which practices and moral arguments in a tradition transform and re-style themselves. Asad’s endeavor to make sense of the secular does precisely this. Basit Iqbal calls it the antihistoricist anthropology of secularism. He describes it this way: “his (Asad’s) anthropology of secularism, therefore, is not concerned with reconciling one defined temporal unit with another, or explaining how discourses and practices belong to their contexts. Instead, he considers how powers and desires, organized through forms of life, disclose simultaneous temporalities that are not grounded in a single history (e.g., the sum of all contexts) or referred back to natural time.”³⁰ The critiques of secularism and religion that we mentioned, in prioritizing certain analytical categories (e.g., heterogeneity against homogeneity, values of plurality, religion, and non-religion) about religion for the diagnosis of the present, are often evocative of a natural time they want to return to. The natural time, termed non-religion by Bhargava and faith by Nandy, notwithstanding their difference with respect to secularism, end up in the secular time for their consistent in-attention to the authorized practices, sensibilities,

26 Bhargava 47.

27 We use the idea of “rival argument” in the same way in which Alasdair Macintyre used it to describe tradition’s encounters. Macintyre writes, “traditions do on occasions founder, that is, by their own standards of flourishing and foundering, and an encounter with a rival tradition may in this way provide good reasons either for attempting to reconstitute one’s tradition in some radical way or for deserting it.” See Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press: Indiana, 2007), 277.

28 Navin Sinha and Mitul Dutta, “The Hijab Ban Verdict: A Case Note on Aishat Shifat Vs. The State of Karnataka,” *Journal of Law, Religion, and State*, Dec 11 (2023) pp 35–58; Keertana Kannabiran Tella, “Challenging Hijab Ban in India: Plural Embodiment and Secular Constitutionalism,” *International Journal of Law in Context*, Vol 21, Issue 1 (2024) 139–156.

29 Aaron Eldridge, “Movement in Repose: Notes on Form of Life,” *Qui Parle* Vol 30, No 1 (2021), 25.

30 Basit Iqbal, “Chronopolitics of Tragedy in the Anthropology of Secularism” *Anthropological Theory*, Issue 1, Vol 20 (2020) 11.

and forms of tradition that are arranged and re-arranged under conditions of power and thus disclose traditions and their shifts, rather than causalities (i.e., of domination)

Asad's critique of secularism is mindful of this particular aspect of its operation, which the theorists of secularism continue to misread. For several scholars, Asad is not considerate of heterogeneity and inter-connectedness between populations and geographies in his theorization of the secular. For example, Hadi Enayat, while noting Asad's attention to the Western genealogy of the secular, argues that Asad's approach "rests on a Eurocentric and *internalist* social ontology that overlooks the multiple and interactive character of social development. Consequently, it sets up an epistemological distinction between the 'West' and the 'Rest' as theoretically incommensurable and turns the study of the origins of secularism into an exclusionary process in which the agency of non-Western societies is overlooked or erased, particularly in understanding amalgamated sociopolitical and cultural-ideological forms such as secularism."³¹ This complaint about Asad seems to presuppose that Asad's critique of secularism is particularly concerned about secularism's Western origin. Asad's approach to secularism, to Enayat, is thus destined to lead to an *internalist* social ontology. He proposes a "way out of this impasse," which entails considering social development as "ineluctably multilinear, *causally* polycentric, and co-constitutive by virtue of its very inter-connectedness," which suggests to him that secularism must be seen beyond the critique of Western imposition.³² In this reading, Enayat finds Asad's critique of secularism similar to Nandy's!³³

This worrisome misreading of Asad squarely returns us to the problem of heterogeneity/homogeneity that some of the critics and proponents of secularism who recently discovered the modern origin of religion continuously reproduce. Enayat's characterization of Asad's project as about the "internalist social ontology" with the "consequence of the epistemological distinction between the 'West' and the 'Rest' as incommensurable" is, at best, a lazy overstatement.³⁴ For instance, Asad, in his discussion of secularism in the context of war and peace, notes that the difficulty with secularism in this context "is not that it is European (and therefore alien to the non-West) but that it is closely connected with the rise of a system of capitalist nation-states—mutually suspicious and grossly unequal in power and prosperity, each possessing a collective personality that is differently mediated and therefore differently guaranteed and threatened."³⁵ To Asad, therefore, what secularism wants to achieve is not (only) the homogenization of the heterogeneous, but its teleology of progress that provides for the translation of forms of life as either heterogeneous or homogenous in the service of capital. In this teleology of progress, achieved through authorized sensibilities and practices, traditions would not be non-traditions, but they transform along the line of the aspirations produced in this teleology. For Asad, therefore, it is not the origin (i.e., Western) that is crucial to secularism as an "embedded concept" but the forms of life that articulate it and the powers it releases or disables.³⁶ Eldridge continues, "to study form of life is not only to contend with an inability to 'get to the bottom of things,' as Wittgenstein would insist, but requires allowing that which already stands in appearance, that which has disclosed itself, to come to the fore."³⁷

31 Hadi Enayat, "Talal Asad and the Question of Islamic Secularities" in Leif Stenberg and Philip Wood (ed), *What is Islamic Studies? European and North American Approaches to a Contested Field*, (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2022) 64.

32 Enayat 64.

33 Enayat 63.

34 A similar argument was made by Gary Wilder in his recent discussion of Asad's idea of translation. After charging Asad with proposing "a civilizational divide between Western and Islamic traditions," he argues that Asad's analysis "does not attend to the heterogenous character—the process of cultural, religious, and ideological multiplicity and mixture—of societies in which Islam actually exists. It cannot easily accommodate, for example, Islamic Marxists or feminists who may challenge the same forms of conservative piety or political Islam that Western liberals do but on different grounds and for different aims" (Wilder 65). This reveals Wilder's negligence of a crucial lesson that no concept is mediated by a single use. In other words, every concept comes to mean certain things only through its rival uses in a historical time. What stabilizes a concept's singularity is the power under which one uses that concept in a specific history. For instance, if one proposes something called Islamic Marxism, it does not mean that Islam became, therefore, plural enough to include something other than itself as opposed to a singular interpretation of Islam. It, rather, only says about particular rearrangements in the grammar of a tradition that enable the respective use of its concept. See his *Concrete Utopianism: The politics of Temporality and Solidarity* (Fordham University Press, 2022), 65.

35 Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 2003) 7.

36 Asad, *Formations*, 17.

37 Eldridge, "Movement in Repose" 29.

More importantly, as Wittgenstein alluded, *discernibility* also depends on the *limits* drawn in a language. What makes a discourse *sensible* is precisely the *limit* it *discloses*.³⁸ The idea of limit has an interesting trajectory in Wittgenstein's thinking, especially as he moves from his proposition of "the world is a collection of facts" to "imagining a language means to imagine a form of life." In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein declares that his task in the book is to "draw a limit to the expression of thought."³⁹ The German term he uses for *limit* is 'Grenze,' which, according to James Klagge, only means 'boundary' in the sense in which Kant used the term.⁴⁰ Klagge quotes Kant by way of his *Prolegomena*, "Grenze presupposes a space existing outside a certain definite place, and inclosing it; limits [*Schranken*] do not require this."⁴¹ In other words, *Grenze* means a positive notion of limit with spatial connotations, unlike *Schranken*, and it thus helps Wittgenstein to have both sides of the limit, which he intended to draw in *Tractatus*, *thinkable*. The other side of *Grenze*, to Wittgenstein, is religion/ethics, or what he calls nonsense. Here, nonsense or ethics/religion (which he puts together in his lecture on ethics and elsewhere) is not a qualitative evaluation, but merely a propositional statement. It indicates nonsense as the other side of the *Grenze* or of the propositional logic as a primary site of sense. The limit for him is thus designated by his propositional logic of language, and therefore his declaration that to write or talk about ethics or religion is like running against the boundaries of language or running against the walls of our cage.⁴² Here, the distinction between *Grenze* and *Schranken* is only relevant in the context of his approach to language as a representation of reality and, therefore, his conviction that the problem of philosophy is the problem of the *correct representation* of reality. The drawing of the limit, for Wittgenstein, cannot be easily made possible in a terrain beyond the limit of the propositional language, and therefore, he held respect, not ridicule, for those who try to do it.⁴³

Veena Das invokes the idea of experience, to interpret Wittgenstein's proposition that "the subject is the limit of the world." Das writes, "Wittgenstein is proposing that the experience of being a subject is the experience of a limit."⁴⁴ In other words, according to Das, the subject is the condition of experience.⁴⁵ This, subsequently, means for her that the subject itself cannot locate its own limit and therefore the "subject is not closed nor done with."⁴⁶ Although Das wants to foreground the enormity of the ethnographic experience, especially the events of violence, that exceeds perceptions, Wittgenstein's proposition is equally about the limit of language in describing the *act of perceiving the world*. This is because the act of perceiving the world—in Das's context, the act of witnessing violence, rather than violence itself—for the perceiver, was not a sum of facts to be represented in language, Wittgenstein thought. As he famously abandons his propositional approach to language and philosophy in his *Philosophical Investigations*, the distinction between *Grenze* and *Schranken* would become no more relevant. The limit thus becomes recognized by Wittgenstein as something to do with the *performance* of language, rather than with the logical representation of facts. In the age of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein's philosophical inquiry primarily sought to address propositions by way of unpacking their logical deep structure in order to explain the surface structure. The logical deep structure was thus the site of clarifying the *correct representation* of language to reality. On the other hand, in the age of *Philosophical Investigation*, his diagnosis of philosophical problems became primarily oriented to the *practices* and *performances* presupposed in philosophical formulations. Thus, he wrote, "Frege compares a concept to an area and says that an area with vague boundaries cannot be called an area at all. This presumably means that we cannot do anything with it. But is it senseless to say: 'stand roughly there'? Suppose that I were standing with someone in a city square and said that. As I say it, I do not draw any kind of boundary, but perhaps point

38 See, Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, [D. F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness- trans], (London and New York, Routledge, 2001), 4.

39 *Tractatus*, 3.

40 James Carl Klagge, *Tractatus in Context*, (New York: Routledge, 2021), 127.

41 Klagge, 127.

42 Wittgenstine, *Lecture on Ethics* [ed. Zamuner, Lascio, and Levy] (Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 120.

43 Wittgenstein, *Lecture on Ethics*, 121.

44 Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 4.

45 Das, 4.

46 Das, 4.

with my hand, as if I were indicating a particular *spot*. And this is just how one might explain to someone what a game is.”⁴⁷ “To point with my hand” as a form of conveying sense, which does not necessitate a propositional statement about limit, something Wittgenstein learned from G.E. Moore, thus marks his shifting approach to language. Here, Wittgenstein challenges Frege’s propositional logic to show that the sense a *limit* generates is not confined to its logical deep structure, but to the form of life that enables it as well as disables it. This should not be misconstrued as a loosening of boundaries or the erasure of limits in a language, but its very construction and reconstruction as a *practice* within a particular *form of life*. The *practice* of drawing a limit, which remains fundamental to *sense* in a language, here became understood beyond its propositional dimension. Thus, Wittgenstein, instead of seeking the logical deep structure of a proposition, would ask what *consists in* the pronouncement of a limit.⁴⁸

The question of limit, therefore, is the question of the practices of drawing a limit, jumping across the limits, moving the limit from one space to another, obeying a limit, as well as limiting something. In other words, the idea of limit goes much farther than the liberal conception of boundary and transgression, which therefore should not lead us to think of heterogeneity as devoid of or the loosening of limits. To draw a limit by pointing with a hand in Wittgenstein’s example is not only to indicate the non-propositional aspect of a language-game, but also to indicate the *practices* of drawing a limit and thus the capacities and power in doing so. In fact, the capacity to draw a limit itself points to a limit of that capacity, which cannot easily be captured in the articulation of a limit. To elaborate, the capacity to draw a limit comes to its excellence (*τέλειον*) not through the excessive use of the language to articulate that limit, but rather, through the redundancy of the language in doing so. Wittgenstein’s example demonstrates precisely that. In other words, the excellent (*τέλειον*) act of drawing a limit *consists in* doing so without language, and that is what Asad calls tradition. In a tradition, the redundancy is achieved through repetition across time until the practices become inseparable from subjects, or what Asad calls embodiment. Thus, Asad writes, “embodied practices help in the acquisition of aptitudes, sensibilities, and propensities through repetition until such time as the language guiding practice becomes redundant.”⁴⁹ The drawing of a limit itself is limited within a tradition precisely because the drawing of a limit can be *recognized* as such only in a tradition.

Heidegger thinks about limit in terms of the Greek word *τέλος*, which speaks of what Aristotle understands as teleology. For Heidegger, *τέλος* functions as a determination of a limit. He writes, “this *limit-character* is to be apprehended as that beyond which there is nothing further, the end at which something stops.”⁵⁰ However, let us keep in mind that the *teleology* here does not refer to any consequences of an action, because in Aristotelian philosophy, the consequence of an action can only be thought in terms of the excellence (*τέλειον*) of that very action, not in terms of what that action might produce. Heidegger rightly cautions us about this when he wrote, “a path through a meadow stops at a garden fence. But the garden fence is not *τέλειον*. Being-the-path is not as such determined by the garden fence. That, at which the path stops, is itself a being which, in the same manner, is like that which stops at it.”⁵¹ *τέλειον* is a mode of being for Heidegger, as it envisions excellence as a moral teleology of an action in Aristotle, and that excellence does not refer to any outcome a practice may or may not generate. The *teleology* of practice is thus *limited* to the practice itself, but in its *excellence* rather than its mere carrying out. Here, the act of drawing a limit in Wittgenstein is not only gesturing toward the non-propositional aspect of drawing a limit, but also to the *redundancy* of language in drawing a limit, which thus demonstrates the aspect of *excellence* of the practice of drawing a limit. An excellent practice, or what Aristotle calls *τέλειον*, would not always need a propositional language; instead implies its *redundancy*. Heidegger’s *limit*, that is, excellence,

47 Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* [G.E.M. Anscombe- Trans] (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986), 34.

48 James Klagge considers Wittgenstein’s “consists in” or in German *darin besteht* as a concept in itself. Since we are not used to thinking about concepts in terms of verbs, it was easy to ignore this rather important idea from Wittgenstein’s oeuvre, suggests Klagge. He then proceeds to offer a rich exploration of “consists in.” See Klagge’s “An Un-Explored Concept in Wittgenstein,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, Vol. 12, 4 (1995) 469–486.

49 Asad, “Thinking about Tradition, Religion, and Politics in Egypt Today.” *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 1 (September 2015), 166.

50 Heidegger, *Basic Concepts in Aristotelian Philosophy* [Robert D Metcalf and Mark B Tanzer], (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2009), 61.

51 Heidegger, *Basic Concepts*, 61.

which he thinks through Aristotle, lies in the redundancy of the propositional language that Wittgenstein gestures to in his example of drawing a limit, not necessarily in the *limit* that was drawn there. Despite the different ways in which both Heidegger and Wittgenstein use and theorize the idea of limit, the notion of limit as *practice*, rather than spatial imagery, resides at the core of their efforts.

The drawing of limit (*τέλειον*) as well as the limit itself (*τέλος*) are practices of power in a tradition that encounters counter argument. Asad writes, “there is always a tension between this construction of limits and the forces that push the tradition onto new terrain, where parts of or all of the tradition ceases to make sense and so needs a new beginning.”⁵² Thus, a tradition, consisting of not only the drawing of a limit and the boundedness of tradition, but also subjecting oneself to the power of such a limit, is not static but constantly shifting. Here, as Asad clarifies, power is not only about the external forces violently imposed on a subject, but also about the capacities a subject acquires through processes of subjection (e.g., ritual).⁵³ A tradition is a network of enabling conditions for such a subjection and thus the acquisition of capacities. As such, power cannot be reified as subjection against capacities nor capacities against subjection. Therefore, as Asad taught us, one must look at the grammar of a practice to understand how the relations of subjection are configured in it. The practice, as Asad goes, is not external to the self, but rather embodied,⁵⁴ and it is therefore plausible that Heidegger called *τέλειον* a mode of being. The limit of a practice, both in terms of excellence as well as of boundedness, cannot be disclosed through the categories of heterogeneity against homogeneity. If heterogeneity is considered to be a benign character of a tradition, and if it means the limits of a tradition are not properly marked, presupposing subjects as participating in various traditions and practices at the same time, it does not help us to see how excellence and power are co-constituted in a tradition, nor to discern how the subject is the construction of particular traditions rather than traditions are subject’s choosing. Put differently, it wrongly imagines that a subject does pre-exist outside a tradition and its boundedness. Therefore, a [heterogeneous] subject is not a tolerant subject nor neutral to any power and tradition, but an *embodied* subject, deeply made up of a structure of power that the subject then reproduces within the temporality of a tradition. In short, heterogeneity is a narrative construct enacted at the secular time of the present to describe traditions and practices which may not always be what those traditions and practices disclose.

In Menon’s example of Durga Puja’s shift to what she understands as an accommodation of heterogeneity, it must not be read as a shift from its original ritual constraints to the loosened public performance. If the goddess Durga marks the *limit* of Puja within a particular discourse of devotion and faith, the seemingly political topics it was recognized to express in contemporary times only describe its shifting grammar, shaped by its relationship with the new government, not a *collapse* of the limit. The author’s privileging of one shift in a practice over another must therefore be explained in terms of the internal grammar of the very practice, rather than its external good.⁵⁵ In other words, the temporal shifts in a specific practice cannot be explained in terms of the difference between homogeneity and heterogeneity.

Asad, discussing the anthropology of Islam, once clarified that the “heterogeneity in Muslim practices is not necessarily an indication of the absence of an Islamic tradition.”⁵⁶ It rather indicates the diverse reasoning in its tradition and its shifting grammar. This diverse reasoning, in the context of a tradition, primarily pertains to what constitutes a clear limit. On the other hand, the category of heterogeneity, which continues to inform a range of seemingly disparate positions on secularism, reveals an impasse. The impasse is not only concerned with

52 Interview with David Scott, “Trouble of Thinking” in *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and his Interlocutors* (Stanford University Press, 2006), 289–90.

53 Talal Asad, “Responses” in David Scott, Charles Hirschkind, *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and his Interlocutors* (Stanford University Press, 2006), 213.

54 Asad, “responses” 213.

55 We owe to Alasdair MacIntyre for the notion of internal goods and external goods of a practice. The internal goods, as MacIntyre describes it via Aristotle, evolve out of the very practice itself and what subject that practice creates. In contrast, external goods are goods that are not intrinsic to the proper conduct of a practice. The internal goods and the arguments over them constitute the internal grammar of a tradition. See MacIntyre’s elaborate exposition of this idea by way of Wittgenstein. See, MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 187–189.

56 Asad, “The Idea of Anthropology of Islam,” *Qui Parle*, Vol 17, No 2 (2009), 23.

understanding distinct forms of capacities and temporalities evoked by particular practices in a tradition, but also with the grammar of the concept of heterogeneity as such. The grammar of the concept of heterogeneity is part of the technique of anthropological narratives and descriptions, rather than the moral teleology of a tradition. The secular operation of homogenization through producing the idea of religion, rightly recognized by scholars of secularism studies, cannot subsequently presuppose that homogeneity is always secular. In other words, neither heterogeneity nor homogeneity, as categories of explanation, do not disclose anything about the shifting grammar of practices in a respective tradition. In fact, as a technique of description, both heterogeneity and homogeneity are part of the same family resemblance within the language game of the secular. For Wittgenstein, the concept of family resemblance defies the assumption of essence, and therefore, he asks us not to look at what a concept essentially *means* in order to understand its similarities and differences with other concepts, but rather to understand the games involved in creating certain families.⁵⁷ Both heterogeneity and homogeneity must be understood from the present time of their enunciation; from the language game within which they are enacted, and the form of life that warrants their uses and availability. This language game is what we call secularism.

To conclude with an example, in adjudicating a case in the Indian state of Maharashtra on the alleged violation of the Representation of the People's Act, which criminalizes election campaign that invokes religious sentiments, the Supreme Court of India held that campaigns that invoke Hindu sentiments cannot always be qualified as a violation of the RPA. This is because "no precise meaning can be ascribed to the terms 'Hindu,' 'Hindutva' and 'Hinduism'; and no meaning in the abstract can confine it to the narrow limits of religion alone, excluding the content of Indian culture and heritage."⁵⁸ This is because, according to the court, 'Hinduism' is *not* a religion, but a heterogeneous way of life and culture that cannot be confined to a narrow definition of religion. Here, the Court thinks that heterogeneous culture is opposite to a religion. In other words, heterogeneity is supposed to exceed the limit set by religion, as religion must only refer to a singular definition. Here, the court wants to foreground the ambiguity in what Hinduism *means*, in order to foreground its heterogeneity. Does that mean that heterogeneity does not have any conceptual limit and thus is uncertain in nature? Wittgenstein might ask us to consider not only whether uncertainty can act as a ground for arriving at a *certain* conclusion about a concept, but also, perhaps most importantly, what such a pronouncement of ambiguity *consists in*.⁵⁹ In other words, the certainty lies not in what a concept means, but in what *consists in* the pronouncements of the meaning of a concept.

CONCLUSION

The three specimen arguments we considered for reflection are indeed different from each other, conceptually and methodologically, and therefore important to keep in sight the nuances of their positions on secularism. Similarly, the concept of religion, accurately understood as a modern construct in these arguments, albeit on different grounds, pushes the critique of secularism in the right direction as well. However, the concerns we raise in this article are related to a methodological strand running through the differences of positions articulated in these arguments. That methodological strand to religion, constituted by the assumption about the detriment of homogeneity and the virtue of heterogeneity, remains weak and unhelpful. Moreover, such an approach does not help to discern anything about the temporal trajectory of traditions, the shifts in sensibilities, and the changing grammar of practices.⁶⁰ In fact, it misrecognizes the disclosure of a tradition by way of establishing essences to heterogeneity and homogeneity upon the presupposition of limit. This approach, we argued, is indicative of

57 See his *Philosophical Investigation*, 32.

58 Shajahan, "Hinduism and the Genealogy of Culture: Sovereignty, Religion and Authority in India." *ReOrient* 8, No. 2 (June 2024), 177.

59 Wittgenstein writes, "what is a relationship between name and thing named?—well, what is it? Look at language game (2) or at another one: there you can see the sort of thing this relation consists in. This relation may also consist, among many other things, in the fact that hearing the name calls before our mind the picture of what is named; and it also consists, among other things, in the name being written on the thing named or being pronounced when the thing is pointed at" (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, 37).

60 For a similar line of argument in the context of Indian Anglophone literature, see Musab Abdul Salam. *Forthcoming*, "Against Pluralism: Rethinking Religion in South Asian Anglophone Literature", *Ariel, A Review of International English Literature*, Accepted April 17, 2025.

a certain type of historicism that not only overlooks the temporal disclosure of a tradition but also refuses to unpack the very tradition of the concept of heterogeneity itself. We argued such a description of a tradition as heterogeneous as opposed to the homogeneity of the concept of religion, not only misrecognizes the disclosure of a tradition, but also re-subscribes to the secular framework in that tradition appears as a hollow concept without any discernibility about its moral teleology. We then offered an argument about *limit* as a first step to understand what a moral teleology may look like. The *limit*, as recognized by both Wittgenstein and Heidegger, is not to be dismissed as the permanent property of homogeneity nor to be understood as a spatial imagery only within the sole framework of secular law. The limit, often condemned in the arguments that operate on the assumption of the virtue of heterogeneity and the evil of homogeneity, *consists in* practices that seek to fulfill the moral teleology of a tradition. For Asad, the multiplicity of opinions in a tradition is not intended for the loosening of that tradition's limits, rather, is aimed at a better and clearer articulation and enforcement of the same. We thus attempted to recover this overlooked aspect of *limit* to propose a way into the disclosure of a tradition, moving therefore beyond the paradigms of heterogeneity and homogeneity in understanding traditions and forms of life.

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