

Response to Danilyn Rutherford's "The Enchantments of Secular Belief"

Danilyn Rutherford's paper is thought-provoking: it reflects on a set of examples of seemingly diverse sorts, all demonstrating belief deployed in the secular world rather than within the circumscribed sphere of religion. She underlines the "secular appeal to belief," a belief that has efficacy in the world in the sense that it "gets things done" and therefore is itself active. Her piece is a contrapuntal reading of – rather than a counter argument to – Talal Asad's idea that in the modern liberal western world religion designates a circumscribed sphere not reducible to other domains, in which "belief" – as private and individualized – is a central feature. Indeed, Danilyn Rutherford does not seem to be putting directly into question Asad's specific assertion about the modes of construction of religion in the modern Western liberal world. Rather, she seeks to analyze forms of belief that exist and work beyond the sphere of "religion" or "religiosity." Hence, she tackles the question of belief not by starting with a reflection on religion, which she nearly shuns from her reflections, but with the analysis of human acts that are not necessarily spoken about as "religious" but involve uncertainty. Therefore, she dissociates, at least for a moment, belief and religion, hence assuming, as Talal Asad does, that religion is self contained, and is not reducible to anything else than itself. However, she also recovers belief within the secular, re-enchanting the secular by coining the phrase "secular belief." She shows that if religion might be "restricted," or circumscribed to a self-contained domain, belief is not, and hence gains a larger sphere of existence. If religion is not implicated in secular belief, and if Danilyn Rutherford's

reflection is a way to think about belief in a context that is not that of “religion,” several questions arise: what are the larger implications of the existence of secular belief for our comprehension of the “secular” itself as well as of the very practices through which we seek an understanding of it? What is the difference between secular belief and non secular belief? Does the secular/non secular dichotomy still have a meaning? She seems to implicitly relate secular belief to religion when she writes: “By extending this line of inquiry to *seemingly non-religious texts* and contexts (emphasis is my own), I hope to enlarge our understanding of what secular belief – or more specifically secular *appeals* to belief – might mean or do.” Hence, does the recovery of belief in texts and contexts that are “seemingly non religious” confer to these texts and contexts an actual religious quality? Should we necessarily think that the recovery of belief in the secular reintroduces us to religion?

Let us put aside the questions raised by the notion of “secular belief” and follow the incursions into a secularity that is not devoid of belief. Danilyn Rutherford shows that the secular is not definable solely as the domain of “strategies in the pursuit of pre-existing interests,” or even as a probabilistic network of inferences depending on past events. Her idea of “active belief” is of particular interest and helps thinking about constructions of secularity beyond Western examples. The idea of a secular efficacy of belief resonates with what I have found in my work on political mobilization of Islam by post-colonial regimes in the Middle East. Some of these states appeal to the secular efficacy of religious belief in order to define the character of their people (what they believe in, and therefore their *mentalités*) and to shape the ways in which they act and

mold the future of their “nation” in domains such as education, science, or in the ways to practice or abstain to practice religious rituals. They present the effects of “belief” to have consequences in the world and hence define Islam as “secular,” which is the reason why many scholars interpret the nature of these states as “secular,” an adjective that needs to be reconsidered. Hence, Danilyn Rutherford’s unsettling of the secular can be translated to other contexts and logics. This interaction between secularity and belief is important, not so much because it sheds light on the relations and the porosity between the religious and the secular – an interaction Talal Asad clearly brought to light – but rather because on the one hand it allows us to understand the central role that persuasion by oneself or others – in brutal and less seemingly brutal, in more or less institutionalized forms – can play out in domains such as politics, everyday life, economics, or religion. On the other hand, it opens up the possibility to reflect more broadly on religion, secularity, and belief as properties of societies that are not necessarily Delft, Hume’s Europe, or the NPR program’s places of production. Not that these categories should be “universalized,” but rather understood in other contexts and logics, where they also have a strong and long presence that could be uncovered and interpreted beyond their Western appropriations.

Perhaps the most important point in Danilyn Rutherford’s discussion is that the question of belief might be more interesting than the category of religion itself, or, one could argue, even more interesting than the dichotomy of the secular/non secular that constantly accompanies it, because religion is only one example of mobilization of belief. What seems to matter is how reactions to uncertainty, the search for reassurances,

anticipations, the desire to be convinced of something, all proceed in our lives, and are all acts of mind that have transformative effects in politics, daily routines, the anthropologist' work, or religion. While Asad showed how Western modern understandings of religion translated the latter into "belief," circumscribing these categories to Western centered scholarship, Danilyn Rutherford's essay opens the analysis of "belief" up to many and various possibilities, as an active element in our and others' lives, and this is a conversation worth being pursued.

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