

Saba Mahmood

Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report

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In her refreshingly original polemic, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report*, Saba Mahmood, professor of anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, holds the modern, "secular" nation-state accountable for fomenting religious inequality in pluralistic societies. At first glance, the claim might appear counter-intuitive. After all, "secular" is understood in both lay imagination as well as in disciplinary discourse to be the desirable Other of "religion." Secularism privileges the human, the material here and now, and does not dwell on noncorporeal, metaphysical abstractions. Secularism is the political imaginary uniquely proffered as the cure for religious inequality, racial and ethnic strife, and day-to-day divisive bigotry in pluralistic societies. Secularism's promise feeds our deep-seated yearning to believe and trust in objective, equal, and just law that does not discriminate among its citizenry.

Can a seemingly universal panacea such as secularism actively *create* religious inequality and concomitant social bigotry and unrest? Mahmood says that it can and it does. Mahmood's test case for evaluating secularism's spectacular failings to ensure religious equality is the modern, pluralistic nation-state of Egypt. Mahmood's book evolved out of fifteen months of fieldwork in Cairo, Egypt from 2008-2013, and her collaboration with the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), where she investigated the marginalized experiences of two of Egypt's religious minorities, Coptic Christians and Bahais. Egypt might appear to be a nonintuitive choice for discussing the failings of secularism; after all, Egypt is in the "Middle East," already a geopolitical region associated in Western imagination and disciplinary literature as belonging to the "nonsecular" and "religious"--read "Islamic"--"authoritarian," or "inadequately secular" (4) part of the world. Isn't secularism's critique more assured when directed at Euro-American democracies with their secular liberal governance?

Mahmood is cognizant of such an objection, and her elegant rebuttal exemplifies the arc of the argument of the book: "liberal and authoritarian states are not mutually exclusive

entities. Authoritarian practices exist in paradigmatically liberal states, just as authoritarian regimes are held accountable in national and international courts for their violation of principles of liberal governance . . . What distinguishes the secular dimension of the liberal project is an elaboration of the concept of equality in relation to religious difference . . . Even in the most repressive states, the variety of social movements fighting for religious equality attests to the global reach of this ideal and its promise" (5). Do the much publicized attacks and mistreatment of Coptic Christians and Bahais in modern Egypt share any similarities with those on marginalized religious minorities in secular polities elsewhere in the world? *Religious Difference in a Secular Age* discusses this question with imaginative breadth and depth, rigorous scholarship, and admirable tenacity.

Mahmood shows that secularism, in Egypt, or in France, the Middle East, or Europe, is predicated on the majority-minority division of its polity and how its religious differences are valorized by the governing structures at particular and specific historical junctures. The exact configurations of secularism, religious inequality, and minority rights might differ between Egypt and France, but the fundamental requirements of the secularism project remain isomorphic in both contexts: majority/minority, and public/private divide. Here, the title of Mahmood's book, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report*, takes on a tendentious significance. The "secular" points to the necessary legal category of a "minority." Any ongoing project of *secularism* depends on the reliable duplication of legally sanctioned *minority* polities inside majority national contexts. The simultaneous erasure and validation of minority religions as *minority against the majority* is an essential hallmark of modern, liberal secular societies. Secularism appears to be predicated on the continuous reproduction of minorities *qua* minorities within a nation, and is by definition an admission of the unequal status of some of its citizens in the eyes of law. Secularism appears to be coextensive with religious inequality. This galling paradox is at the heart of this brave book.

Religious Difference in a Secular Age is divided into a lengthy and polemical introduction followed by two parts. Part 1 focuses on religious liberty and minority rights in two chapters, and the three chapters that constitute part 2 examine three exemplary "cases" that illustrate the struggle over minority rights, gender inequality, religious inequality, and secularism/secularity. Mahmood's expositions and arguments rest on a solid and substantial bedrock of primary and secondary research that spans multiple texts in multiple languages, including Egyptian and European texts on minority rights, human rights, Middle East history, and colonial history; Quranic exegesis and hadith scholarship; Islamic jurisprudence; literature; newspaper reports; personal interviews; and other discursive modalities. Mahmood defines political secularism as "the modern state's sovereign power to reorganize substantive features of religious life, stipulating what religion is or ought to be, assigning its proper content, and disseminating concomitant subjectivities, ethical frameworks, and quotidian practices" (3). Any discussion of secularism, minority rights, and religious inequality in Egypt is necessarily in a dialectical bind with the Euro-Atlantic presence in Egypt since the nineteenth century, Mahmood argues, as the discourse of minority rights and religious liberty emerged at the close of the Ottoman Empire in response to the increasing European presence and power

in the region, in particular, the European mission to protect the "Eastern Christians" of the Ottoman Empire.

The key argument in this chapter centers on Mahmood's patient debunking of the reputation of religious neutrality that Euro-Atlantic secularism proclaims. Secularism in Europe is Judeo-Christian in its structuration, Mahmood points out, citing philosophers and public intellectuals from Jürgen Habermas to Slavoj Žižek to the European Court of Human Rights, which upheld the rights of Italian public schools to display the crucifix in classrooms (7). Commenting on Habermas's effusive tribute to "the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love" that gave rise to "egalitarian universalism" and "human rights and democracy" (8), Mahmood notes that setting Europe's long history of anti-Semitism aside for a moment, these claims "are symptomatic of the fundamental centrality of Christian norms, values, and sensibilities (however Judaic they are made out to be) to European conceptions of what it means to be secular" (8).

In chapter 1, "Minority Rights and Religious Liberty: Itineraries of Conversion," and chapter 2, "To Be or Not to Be a Minority," which make up part 1 of the book, Mahmood unpacks the semantic drift undergone by the term *religious liberty*, which at various times in its twining with the rise of the nation-state in Egypt referred to the right of individuals to convert to a faith of their choice, and conversely, the right of believers to proselytize converts to a new religion. Religious liberty, in these senses, was emphasized by the Protestant missionaries who came to Egypt at the end of the nineteenth century, and although they failed to gain many converts in the region, their reformulation of religion as a "matter of private belief and individual conscience" (51) gained traction in the region especially in majoritarian dispensations about minority religions.

The term *national minority*, Mahmood notes, has proven to be elusive to define: on the one hand, minorities can lay claim to membership in a polity the way migrants and refugees cannot; on the other hand, the minority group also represents an incipient threat to national unity by virtue of its difference from the majority (53). Through a detailed exploration of the many debates surrounding the Coptic ambivalence about claiming "minority" status in Egypt's political history, Mahmood deftly singles out the fundamental "conundrum" at the heart of secularism: a minority group must necessarily highlight its differences from majoritarian norms in order to redress its unequal treatment within the majoritarian polity. However, highlighting these differences widens the gaps that created the group's exclusion from majoritarian participation in the first place. Thus any accommodations done by the majoritarian secular state toward the minority group, such as affirmative action, proportional representation, quotas, or special protections, will be seen as the secular state's bias toward the minorities, "thereby contravening its commitment to treat all citizens equally" (67). As a minority religion, Coptic Christianity necessarily draws attention to its difference. Mahmood notes the similarities between the current international focus on the plight of the religious inequality of Coptic Christians in Egypt, and the involvement of the American evangelical movement and the US government in Egypt's minority rights, to the Ottoman years and European interventions to protect "Eastern Christians," but with a renewed emphasis on the civilizational standoff between Christianity and Islam in the new post-9-11 world order (68).

In chapter 3, "Secularism, Family Law, and Gender Inequality" (in part 2), Mahmood unpacks key high-profile cases of the last two decades of Coptic women allegedly "kidnapped" and forced to convert to Islam and marry Muslim men, such as the cases involving Camille Shehata and Wafa Qustuntin, wives of two Coptic priests who left their husbands or were "abducted," to highlight how the charges against Egypt's inadequate secularism as well as the civilizational standoff between Islam and Christianity are tendentiously played out in national and international stages under the banner of women's rights. Mahmood's trenchant critique of secularism's inherent bad faith is nowhere more urgently argued than in this chapter. Coptic minority identity is most actively defended in the realm of "family law," since it is through "permitting Muslims, Christians, and Jews to have their own separate family laws that the Egyptian state has enshrined religious difference in its legal and political structure" (115).

A critique of patriarchy is not enough, Mahmood argues. Feminists would benefit from reading these abduction stories of agency-less, object-status Coptic women rescued or punished by their Christian male counterparts for crossing their religious and communal borders, less as emblematic of both Islam's and Christianity's inherent patriarchy, and more as "symptomatic of the pernicious symbiosis created between religion and sexuality under modern secularism" (114). Minority religious communities with autonomy over family law, such as Coptic Christians in Egypt, or Muslims in secular India who practice Sharia, tend to view any state attempt to reform family law as an illegitimate intervention into communal affairs: "Rather than interpret this resistance as an example of religious intransigence and patriarchy, we need to think critically about how modern secularism has perniciously linked religious, sexual, and domestic matters to the extent that the family has become the primal site for the reproduction of religious morality and identity, exacerbating earlier patterns of gender and religious hierarchy" (115), a caution with a particular salience in all societies where looking to the state to redress grievances directed at patriarchy has proved ineffectual.

For instance, Coptic women who pursue divorce or convert to Islam are seen as victims of Muslim coercion, but Coptic men who convert to Islam are seen as exercising their will and choice, with the church welcoming them back to the fold with no public consequence, as in the case of the *a'idin*, or "returnees," a large group of Coptic men who converted to Islam to divorce their Coptic wives, since divorce is forbidden in the Coptic church. "The Coptic woman's submission to the Coptic church," Mahmood argues, "secures the community's collective exercise of religious liberty" (145). This submission is not merely an expression of a religio-cultural patriarchy; rather, Mahmood characterizes it as a "product of the secular dispensation in which minority identity has come to be vested in the regulation of the family, whose exemplary bearer, is after all, the woman" (146). Secularism is an enabler of patriarchy.

In chapter 4, "Religious and Civil Inequality," Mahmood discusses how the sequestration of religious identity within the family and the public/private divide sanction "civil death" of the minority Bahai religion. A 2008 court ruling allowed Bahais to leave their religious affiliation blank in state-issued identity cards; the majoritarian Islamic Sharia norm

permits only the "three divine religions" of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity to publicly affirm their faith. Egyptian courts permit Bahais freedom of religious belief, while prohibiting the same exercise of religion in public for the good of the public order, an article of nineteenth-century French Civil Code that sanctions "a state's right to reject foreign (or international) laws that it deems unacceptable or contradictory to its own legal system" (163). The public prohibition of Bahai religious practice in Egypt shares with the European Court of Human Rights ban on Muslim headscarves the "for the good of the 'public order'" clause. Secularism, Mahmood argues, employs the public order clause to reify its majoritarian norms foundational to national identity, against which the legitimacy of minority religious traditions is judged (166). Secularism exacerbates religious inequality.

In chapter 5, "Secularity, History, and Literature," Mahmood contrasts secularism with "secularity": "the shared set of assumptions, attitudes, and dispositions that imbue secular society and subjectivity" (181), what one might term the unmarked cultural and aesthetic modalities that transmit ideology--here, secularism. Mahmood analyzes the controversy unleashed in Egypt among Coptic Christians by the publication of the historical novel *Azazel*, which proffers a symbolic space for secularism. *Azazel* (a synonym for Satan) tells the story of a young Christian monk, Hypa, an eyewitness to the Christological controversy about the nature of Christ--human or divine?--that divided Christendom in 5 CE. Historical characters appear in the novel, including Patriarch Cyril of Alexandria, Nestorius, the Archbishop of Constantinople, and Hypatia, the Greek philosopher and mathematician murdered with Cyril's knowledge by a Christian mob. Mahmood's sophisticated reading of the *Azazel* controversy elucidates why favoring the heterodox, Nestorian view of the diaphysite human/divine nature of Christ would outrage the Coptic Church, for whom Christ was human and divine in one. When the Coptic Christians partake in the Eucharist, it is salvation that is ingested in the flesh and blood of Christ. In *Azazel*, Mahmood argues, favoring the humanity of Christ easily slides into "claiming that God and religion are human creations . . . a secular conception of religion as a human feat" (203). In the Christological debate that split Christendom into distinct blocks of Eastern and Western Christianity, it was Western Christianity with its deconstructed "non-hierarchical unity of man-god that paved the way for a crucial break between transcendence and immanence, temporal and metaphysical worlds--thereby birthing the secular political order" (205). Eastern Christianity and Islam are both alien to this Western conception of Christianity that "can facilitate Christian salvation just as it can single-handedly invent secular politics" (206).

Religious Difference in a Secular Age offers an intellectually rigorous and imaginatively rich and provocative reading of secularism as a statist project to maintain religious minorities as *minorities with unequal rights*. Its suggested takeaways are many and varied, not the least of which might be, as Mahmood reminds us, that after recognizing the state to be inadequately equipped to arbitrate religious equality, with majoritarian norms contaminating any equality project, perhaps it might be fruitful to look toward an "ethical thematization" (212) of religious differences as a necessary risk on the road to "interfaith equality."