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Unfolding the Paradoxes of a Modern Liberal ‘Secular’ State: Studying Egypt

Review by Sania Ismailee

Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report

By Saba Mahmood

Princeton University Press, 2015

Saba Mahmood presents an interesting analysis of how secularism and modern liberal state, contrary to their claims of maintaining religious harmony, have exacerbated “interfaith inequalities” (2). Moreover, she argues that their claim of “religious neutrality” (2) is false and that the modern state interferes in religious life. Mahmood bases her study in Egypt where Coptic Orthodox Christians, the minorities, are treated as second-class citizens despite their contribution to Egypt’s past. She points out that while some may think the reason for this is the “inherent intolerance” (1) of Islam, she suggests it is in fact an effect of modern secular governance. This might seem paradoxical but the truth is that in Egypt, the modern-state has polarized religious differences, rather than become the solution to religious intolerance and conflict. The book explores the modern state’s relationship to religion and how the state’s regulation of religion affects religious identities.

Mahmood suggests there are certain features of secularism that are common to both the West and the Middle East. The bifurcation of Western and non-western secularism which considers only the former as accomplished ignores “the shared history of the institutionalization of the modern state” (9) which is premised on the public-private divide. Mahmood conceptualizes “political secularism” as “the modern state’s 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). The constitution of Egypt acknowledges religious equality and religious freedom as virtues and the courts entertain challenges to discriminatory policies. Egypt shares features with its Euro-Atlantic liberal counterparts and Mahmood is not wrong in studying Egypt through a Western conceptualization of secularism. One problem exemplified by the Egyptian case is that the state is not really neutral because Islam does play an important role in recognizing social identities (Muslim, People of the Book, or others). Sharia legal concepts and principles are also invoked in juridical decisions, just as Euro-Atlantic states have Christianity at their center. Mahmood quotes Jurgen Habermas who says that “Universalistic egalitarianism is a direct legacy” (8) of Judeo-Christian Ethics.

Religious Difference in a Secular Age traces the evolution of political secularism in Egypt through the institutionalization of five ideas- political and civil liberty, minority rights, religious liberty, public order, and the public-private divide as spelled out in Egyptian legal framework. In each of the chapters,

Mahmood highlights the inequalities faced by Coptic Christians and Bahais. Her analysis tries to show that inequalities arise out of the way the modern nation-state deals with religious differences. Mahmood is clear that political secularism is not an expression of state neutrality. Egypt is a secular state but the manner in which the image of a nation is constructed presupposes Islamic ideals.

In the first part of her book, Mahmood sets up the historical framework to understand the current interreligious conflicts in Egypt. In chapter 1 of part 1 “Minority Rights and Religious Liberty: Itineraries of Conversion”, Mahmood traces the evolution of the concepts that are at the heart of political secularism- religious liberty and minority rights. She is interested in knowing how religious differences are regulated in modern secular governments. Europe and the Middle East had overlapping histories which have shaped their modern trajectories, be it their political concepts or institutions. This chapter’s discussion is centered on three major historical shifts. First, in the nineteenth century when Europe asserted its autonomy over Ottoman Empire and undermined the sovereignty of the latter to protect minority rights of Christians. In turn, a weak Ottoman empire’s response to re-assert its sovereignty over its territory. Second, the inclusion of religious liberty and minority rights in the vocabulary of civil and political rights by the end of the nineteenth century when nation-states were institutionalized. Third, the conceptualization of minority rights with the setting up of the League of Nations and the dominance of rights discourse in international law. By the end of this chapter it is clear that Mahmood calls for viewing religious liberty and minority rights outside the framework of rights by placing it within a “broader field of secular political praxis” (32) so that the role of modern state as an arbiter of religious differences and religious identity is visible.

Chapter 2 “To be or not to be a Minority” centers on the problem of categorizing Coptic Orthodox Christians as a “minority” in Egypt. Mahmood explores the designation “minority” in the current Egyptian scenario to delve deeper into the problem. Generally, “minority” is conceptualized with reference to linguistic, ethnic or religious identity. However, the Egyptian government doesn’t follow this logic. Both the Egyptian government and the Coptic Orthodox Church do not consider Copts as minorities even when evidence shows that Copts are at the receiving end of “systemic discrimination” due to their religious identity (66). This chapter highlights the problem of liberal secularism in addressing equality to minority as a religious group on one hand, and being neutral to religion on the other hand. Further, it analyzes the problem of assigning minority status to Copts in late colonial (1911-23) and postcolonial (1952- present) Egypt with taking into account the question of ethnicity and minority representation.

In the three chapters of part 2, she discusses the peculiar cases of discrimination faced by two religious minorities in Egypt – the Bahais and Coptic Orthodox Christians. In Chapter 3, entitled “Secularism, Family Law, and Gender Inequality” Mahmood states, “permitting Muslims, Christians and Jews to have their own separate family laws is one of the primary ways the Egyptian state has enshrined religious difference in its legal and political structure” (115). Drawing from Islamic principles, the Egyptian state extends recognition, and by that virtue special privileges, to “People of the Book” which include Christians and Jews while it denies special privileges to Bahais and Shi’as. Since religion and family belong to the private sphere, any attempt by the state to reform family laws is perceived as an “illegitimate intervention in communal affairs” (115). However, allowing space for practice of religion-based family-law is not a symbol of “incomplete secularism” (148) of the Egyptian society. The chapter explores the histories of Muslim and Coptic family laws and their manifestation in Egypt. It also deliberates on the consequences of interfaith marriage and conversion over Muslim- Christian relations in Egypt.

The controversy behind official recognition of Bahai faith is the central theme in chapter 4, “Religious and Civil Inequality”. Exclusion of Bahai faith from “People of the Book” presented a peculiar case of religious discrimination in Egypt. Egyptian courts invoke religious and secular concepts to regulate the religious difference of Bahais. Mahmood undertakes an analysis of the rulings and judgements issued by Egyptian courts (in the first part of the chapter) and European Court of Human Rights (in the second part of the chapter) to show that regulation of religious minorities in both the Western and non-Western societies amount to promotion of the majority’s religious “values and sensibilities” (150) at the expense of the minorities. She analyzes the legal grammar employed by secular liberal states and the public-private divide of religious practice and religious belief at the background. The puzzlement with the paradox of the modern secular liberal state’s role in ensuring civil and political equality (which is indifferent to religion) to everyone and regulating religious difference in social life such that the majority’s values are preserved without discriminating the religious minorities is a broader theme addressed in this chapter.

The concluding chapter “Secularity, History, Literature” marks a break from the previous chapters. Instead of discussing secularism as a legal political concept it focuses on *secularity* which is “the shared set of background assumptions, attitudes, and dispositions that imbue secular society and subjectivity” (181). According to Mahmood one’s sensibility regarding what religion should be in the modern world follows from secularity. The assumptions of secularity, though difficult to explore, unravel at the helm of controversies. This chapter focuses on exploring various aspects of secularity as has emerged in Egypt with the publication of the Arabic novel *Azazeel* which comments on the birth of Coptic Orthodox Christians. The novel, written by a Muslim author, is critical of the Church as authoritarian and thus, offended the Church. Mahmood tries to understand this controversy beyond the boundaries of Muslim-Christian strife.

I think Saba Mahmood’s *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* beautifully addresses the problem of secularism as a concept across Western and Non-Western societies. She creatively manages to comment on the political tussles that arise in the modern liberal state of Egypt as it tried to manage religious differences. She successfully highlights the paradoxes in a modern nation-state to bracket “religion” on one hand and “privilege of the majoritarian religion” on the other hand. It is a well-researched treatise for anyone who wishes to understand secularism as a universal concept.

Bibliography

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