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Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report. By Saba Mahmood. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. Pp. 248. $24.95 (paper). ISBN: 978-0691153285.

Anthropologist Saba Mahmood's latest book, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report*, offers an erudite history of what she calls "political secularism" in Egyptian modernity, from nationalist discourse in the British colonial period through the career of the Egyptian state. Scholars of Egypt, Coptic Christian social history, and secularism will appreciate Mahmood's painstaking history of how Egyptian nationalist movements, key Coptic and Muslim figures, and the post-1952 Egyptian republic have understood and conditioned Copts and Muslims alike not only in their religious and secular practices but also in their fundamental self-understanding. While this study offers an airtight history of these processes, some theoretical claims about secularism and the Egyptian state end up on shakier ground.

Mahmood argues that political secularism is made up of two dimensions: "Its regulatory impulse" and its "promise of freedom" which are "thoroughly intertwined" (21). In chapters 1 and 2 she accounts for political secularism in the Middle East through a genealogy of the concepts of religious liberty and minority rights. Asserting that one cannot understand Middle Eastern formations of the secular without understanding the European history of secularization, particularly through adopting "universal" human rights standards, Mahmood provides an informed reading of European and Middle Eastern negotiations with secularity on the stage of the nation state. In chapter 2 she offers an outstanding account of how European and later American missionary activity shaped debates around Coptic identity and the desirability of minority status, and her use of internal Egyptian scholarly and polemical discussions through voices such as those of Saad Zaghloul, Abdul Hamid Badawi, William Wessa, and Mahmoud Azmi to describe Coptic and Muslim nationalist debates is particularly cogent. In chapter 3, Mahmood presents a study of how family law in Egypt perpetuates secularism's undue influence over religion by borrowing Protestant bifurcations between the public and the private realm. In chapter 4 she examines the Bahá'í community's legal standing in Egypt to test the limits of the state's guarantee of secular neutrality. In chapter 5 Mahmood provides a well-conceived study of how secularism has affected notions of religion, time, history, and revelation in Youssef Ziedan's 2007 novel Azazeel, set in the fourth to fifth centuries CE during the foundational period of Coptic Christianity in Egypt.

Mahmood understands Egyptian political secularism as a set of processes and histories that marginalize minorities in the service of majoritarianism. Mahmood preempts a question that will no doubt occur to most of her readers: are Egyptian outcomes a result of secularism or authoritarian secularism? For Mahmood, the marginalization of minorities is a core function of secularism and much less so a result of Egyptian state authoritarianism. Mahmood resists centering Euro-American models of secularism as the standard against which Middle Eastern societies should be judged, and she asserts that while taking into account the importance of attending to specific trajectories of secularism, she is concerned that "this way of casting the difference blinds us to common features of the secular project shared by Middle Eastern and Euro-Atlantic societies" (4).

Though Mahmood makes a compelling case for how Euro-Americans imposed conceptions of the secular on Middle Eastern societies through missionary work and international human rights campaigns, in the material specific to Egypt she nonetheless stubbornly asserts the centrality of authoritarianism in understanding Egypt's outcomes. Whether it is Gamal Abdel Nasser's wresting of religious endowments from the hands of Coptic laity and giving them to the church, Sadat's

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instrumental courting of Islamists who went on to assassinate him, or Mubarak and Pope Shenouda III's détente in the interests of mutual agendas of control, these examples point to authoritarianism in action much more than they remind us of how contemporary France or the United States—or Tunisia, Lebanon, or Malaysia, for that matter—negotiate their own majoritarianisms.

Mahmood writes, "The political theology of the Egyptian state … navigates between liberal and Islamic traditions, even if one commands a much greater force in this negotiation than the other" (19). In her study she asserts a liberal tradition that dominates the Egyptian state, but there are other ways of assigning relative weight. In particular, she pays very little attention to the crucial history of Islamist political traditions so dominant in Egypt. While the Egyptian state gestures toward liberalism—particularly when it sets itself up as a foil against Islamists—and becomes a party to it by signing on to international human rights charters, the state's behavior is also heavily influenced by its almost ninety year competition with its primary nemesis—Islamist opposition. The Muslim Brotherhood, the flagship Islamist movement in Egypt and the wider Muslim-majority region, has from its inception defined itself against the burgeoning liberal tradition that was taking hold in Egypt in the 1920s and 1930s. As the Brotherhood came into increasing disfavor with Egyptian authorities—leading to a ruthless crackdown under Nasser; Sadat's ill-fated gamble in reviving the group; and Mubarak's continuous oppression, whereby the Muslim Brotherhood could stay just alive enough to contest rigged elections[1]—a picture emerges less of a liberal state producing majoritarianism than an authoritarian state engaged in an ongoing power struggle with an also authoritarian Islamist opposition. In this alternative schematization of the Egyptian state, liberalism is less a prime mover than a set of symbols and inchoate values cynically gestured toward by a state seeking to justify its illiberal authoritarianism.

While Religious Difference in a Secular Age stands on solid ground as a history, here is an area where it would have benefited from a deeper ethnographic engagement with Copts. Mahmood gives several examples of conflicts between Copts and Muslims, particularly regarding intermarriage, which she characterizes as prosaic local concerns. These conflagrations are given new and hyperbolic life once interpolated into international religious freedom discourses, dominated by right-wing American groups, along with certain segments of the Coptic diaspora, who read these incidents as a Muslim conspiracy to convert Christian women and harm Christianity. Mahmood does an outstanding job of drawing out and analyzing this transnational process. At the same time, one must look at the wider culture that has inspired these Copts' fears: a public space in Egypt that is dominated by Islam, not secularism. It is factors like the near-ubiquitous *hijab* among Muslim women, casting Christian women as outliers based on their different appearance; Qur'an resounding not only in private shops but in public service buildings; and the call to prayer broadcast five times a day on too-loud speakers that are frequently cited, in their aggregate, as creating a hostile environment for Coptic public life. It is difficult to see how political secularism is the culprit in this Islamicization of public space over the past few decades, except insofar as the instruments of the state have continued their agreement, traceable to Sadat, whereby Islamists are allowed to work to Islamicize the public realm and civil society in exchange for their promise not to contest state power.[2]

It is in chapter 3, in which she analyzes the state's instrumentalization of both Coptic and Muslim family law, that Mahmood raises some of the book's most fascinating questions. Here

1 See Tarek Masood, *Counting Islam: Religion, Class and Elections in Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

2 See Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion Activism and Political Change in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

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she argues that the state's restriction of Muslims, Christians, and Jews to separate family laws enshrines religious difference. Religion-based family law, "is also the most salient expression of the state's recognition of non-Muslims in the polity . . . . Even though religion-based family law is often regarded as a continuation from the premodern past . . . it is, in fact, a modern invention that belongs to a radically distinct political order—one that has little in common with the premodern arrangement from which it supposedly emanated" (115). Mahmood follows Talal Asad's argument that the transformation of religious law into family law was a product of a "secular formula for privatizing religion" that rendered the family (and sexuality) a matter of the private sphere. When religious family law was codified, the family itself was transformed from a decentralized entity (characterized by the *'ayla*) to privatized units of economic production (117). The creation of family law as a modern Western legal category ensconced this privatization process.

While it is true that the Muslim-majority world's colonial encounter and the rise of states spurned the codification of Islamic legal codes in many countries, the idea that the private sphere itself was invented or radically shaped by the process of modernization strikes me as greatly overstated. Islamic law is deeply concerned with bifurcations between the public and the private, particularly with respect to women's appearance in public space. Discussions about proper dress for both men and women, but especially women, are dominant features of legal compendiums. The boundary of *'awra* (body parts that should be kept private) is a long-standing legal debate, one that even questions whether a woman's voice should be restricted to the private sphere. Islamic architecture frequently features enclosed courtyards to protect or hide women from the public realm. The distinction between public and private is such a dominant theme that it can even be considered the leitmotif of Islamic law.[3] I therefore think it much more likely that the modern state—following, as Mahmood points out, colonial-era agreements with local Muslim authorities to preserve religious family law in exchange for colonial control over capital punishment and sovereignty—is engaged in the much more modest project of trying to maintain this agreement, namely allowing patriarchal authorities to continue their dominance over the private, family sphere while the authoritarian state maintains control overall.

Mahmood also argues that the state exercised great influence over the concepts of *nushuz* (spousal disobedience) and apostasy. On *nushuz*, Mahmood observes that Egyptian laws of 1837 and 1931 created an institution whereby a husband could secure a court order to eject his wife from the household upon her being found guilty of the crime of disobedience. Mahmood writes, "There was no scriptural support in the Quran or the hadith for this institution, nor were there any precedents in classical Islamic jurisprudence" (133). This is of course true, but the Quran and hadith offer almost no instruction on the institutionalization of any of their decrees, and Islamic jurists, as participants in a living tradition in constant dialogue with political authorities, primarily adjudicate principles of jurisprudence (*usūl*) rather than serve as architects of specific political manifestations. What this means is that in every era, Islamic legal norms and jurists work in symbiotic relationship with political authorities to actualize their principles. The modern state (particularly in Egypt) can be read as simply the latest example of a political authority to be negotiated.

Mahmood writes in her introduction that "Secularism is not something that can be done away with any more than modernity can be . . . by analyzing its regulatory and productive dimensions, one only deprives it of innocence and neutrality so as to craft, perhaps, a different future" (21). My sense that secularism was long ago deprived of uncritical innocence might be a symptom of my own intellectual conditioning, but I share a question that sociologist of religion Atalia Omer

3 Islamic legal scholar Baber Johansen made this observation in a lecture at Harvard University in the fall of 2008.

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has raised in her own review of Mahmood's book: "One wonders whether the students of religion still untutored in the ways of secular studies to whom (apparently) Mahmood directs her book are indeed still at large."[4] A generation of students and scholars have been inculcated in the art of deconstruction, and the specific issue of secularism has not escaped this analytic frame. While in the case of Islamic studies, in particular, one can imagine presumptions that secularism either does not exist in the Muslim-majority world or could be instrumentalized to solve its problems, as a category that is understood to have developed in the West, it is probably safe to assume that secularism is largely understood as historically contingent and an analytic construction.

In any case, the question of what the "different future" beyond secularism might be is an inevitable one. A hint of what a desired alternative might be comes as Mahmood summons Asad:

> Of particular importance is Asad's work, which shows that the concept of religion as belief is itself part of a normative secular framework in which religion is disinvested of its materiality. This normative framework not only secures an ideational and subjectivist concept of religion at the expense of its material entailments, but also fails to apprehend how modern religiosity (whether as belief in transcendence, political identity, or state ideology) is enabled and spawned by the secular institutions that have become more, rather than less, enmeshed in its formulation and praxis. (15)

If a normative secular framework divests religion of its materiality, what then, is the modern secular state regulating? What does Mahmood, following Asad, feel has been lost in these modern transformations? Mahmood's understanding of the Ottoman Empire as an open space for minority religious life relative to contemporaneous European spaces provides a hint, albeit an oblique one.[5] What is more dubious, though, is the implicit suggestion put forward by this anti-secularist school, most forcefully by Asad, that contemporary political Islam is a stand-in for what secularity has destroyed. For example, Mahmood's discussion of the 2013 coup, preceded by millions of Egyptians protesting Mohammed Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood government and the political Islam project, is sourced in only one footnote, a "critical account" by Esam al-Amin titled "The Grand Scam: Spinning Egypt's Military Coup," an article that rehearses the common claim that "liberal and secular forces" spurned the coup. Against this backdrop, Mahmood criticizes the Coptic Orthodox Church for "lin[ing] up to pledge its support for the new rulers" (85). Asad, in his 2015 article, "Thinking about Traditions, Religion and Politics in Egypt Today" repeats the claim that it was secularists, who "regarded themselves as modern" who view religion as "essentially a private matter of personal ethics" who spurned the coup. These secularists echo "a historical debate about religion since the early Enlightenment ... [that] is partly based on a new psychology that emerged in Europe in early modernity."[6]

4 Atalia Omer, review of *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report*, by Saba Mahmood, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 2 (2016): 584. Omer continues: "If not, isn't it time to move beyond relentless critique?"

5 Ussama Makdisi, in his review of Mahmood, describes Mahmood's notion that the Ottoman Empire featured less "majoritarian chauvinism" as "arbitrary." He continues, "The Ottomans could be and were mercilessly violent to any group that challenged, or was thought to challenge, their power. Ecclesiastical/communal autonomy was, moreover, often predicated on suppressing diversity, equality and legal pluralism within particular communities." Ussama Makdisi, "The Limits of Anti-Secularist Critique," *Politics, Religion and Ideology* 17, no. 1 (2016): 78.

6 Talal Asad, "Thinking about Religion, Secularism and Politics in Egypt Today," *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 1 (2015): 169–70.

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According to my own reading of events, which I witnessed live, along with those of other analysts,[7] popular protests against Morsi were attended by a wide swath of Egyptians, including millions of traditionalist Muslims alongside a wide swath of Copts. These traditionalist Muslims opposed the Muslim Brotherhood's political experiment in part because it violated their own conception of traditional Islam. Many of these same people voted for the Brotherhood because they were attracted by the promise of an Islamically inspired government, but they had eventually soured on the Brotherhood's political project. These concerns are distinct from the tragedies that were to follow. To label those who opposed political Islam in Egypt "secularists" conditioned by European sensibilities is to erase particular Egyptian agencies, contestations over Islam, and understandings of the state that are very much homegrown.

I raise these points about contemporary Egyptian affairs to suggest ways in which applying the theoretical dominance of the anti-secular critique to events on the ground in Egypt risks misreading them. Fortunately, this book's detailed engagements are greatly useful to scholars of Egyptian political and religious history irrespective of where one lands theoretically.

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7 See Hazem Kandil, "The End of Islamism?" *London Review of Books* (blog), July 4, 2013, http://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2013/07/04/hazem-kandil/the-end-of-islamism/.

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