

# Book Reviews

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**Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report.** By Saba Mahmood. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. 248pp. \$80.00 cloth; \$24.95 paper.

Saba Mahmood's *Religious Difference in a Secular Age* masterfully combines the study of two topics in identity politics with advanced literatures—secularism and minority rights—to create an original and engaging volume about the promises and limits of political secularism. The volume moves beyond recent intellectual efforts to pluralize secularism into its different “varieties,” instead exposing how common features of the secular project have shaped the religious identities of majority and minority populations. Through a seamless blend of historical analysis and ethnographic research, the book traces the evolution of political secularism in Egypt with a focus on five of its signature ideas: political and civil rights, religious liberty, minority rights, public order, and the legal distinction between public and private. What emerges is an intelligent and graceful assessment of how “religious difference has proliferated and metastasized in modern Egypt even as its *raison d’etat* secularized” (p. 11).

The bulk of the volume is dedicated to the study of political secularism, described as the “modern state’s relationship to and regulation of religion” (p. 3). The first two chapters are historical. Chapter one deftly narrates the genealogy of two key secular concepts in the Middle East: religious liberty and minority rights. Here Mahmood convincingly argues that these concepts are not simply neutral and universally applicable legal instruments to protect individuals from state predation and/or social inequality. The meaning and praxis of these concepts in the Middle East reflect strategies of secular liberal governance designed to regulate and manage difference, subjecting religion “to a new grid of intelligibility” (p. 62). This grid is characterized by the modern state’s renunciation of religion’s political calculus (hence religious liberty) and its simultaneous reliance on religious categories to regulate social life (hence minority rights). As such, the two concepts are riddled with paradoxes and inconsistencies, linking the private and public domains that the secular state purports to keep separate. Chapter two brings this theoretical discussion into sharper focus through a fascinating history of

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Egyptian Copts' use of the term *minority*. Many lay Copts and even the church hierarchy originally rejected the term *minority* in support of a broader notion of secular national citizenship. According to Mahmood, the reemergence of the language of religious liberty and minority rights in more recent years betrays not the failure of secularism but the tensions inherent in the agenda of any secular state that seeks to manage religious difference while also remaining religiously neutral.

Chapters three and four use an ethnographic and interpretivist approach to explore political secularism through an analysis of gender and family law (chapter three) and the comparative plight of unrecognized religious minorities (chapter four). On family and gender, Mahmood highlights how processes of political secularism—specifically “the telescoping” of the sharia into personal status law—amplify religion’s jurisprudential dimension and grant it a privileged place in the regulation of family and sexual relations. The existence of religiously based family law is thus “neither an expression of the essential religiosity of these societies nor a sign of incomplete secularization” (p. 147). Chapter four places the ambiguous and long-debated status of Egypt’s Baha’i population in the context of wider, comparative debates about the maintenance of public order. Defenders of public order, argues Mahmood, draw on majoritarian religious and social norms. Such defenses are as frequently levied in Europe as they are in the Middle East, as illustrated through a comparison of court cases from both geographies.

Chapter five, which sits somewhat uneasily with the rest of the volume’s focus on political secularism, shifts to explore *secularity*—that is to say, “the shared set of background assumptions, attitudes and dispositions that imbue secular society and subjectivity” (p. 181). Here, Mahmood unpacks the controversy that erupted over the publication of the historical novel *Azazeel* to show that secularity does not provide an objective vantage point for resolving such controversies. Rather, secularity enflames such conflicts so that they become “erroneously described as a standoff between ‘religious taboos’ and ‘secular freedoms’” (p. 208).

It is very difficult to find fault in a book that manages such impressive scope and depth while also providing a remarkably enjoyable read. That said, given how much the book accomplishes, some stones might best have been left unturned. For example, the discussion of how the advent of neo-liberalism and the privatization of the state and public sector contributed to the conditions of religious inequality seems underdeveloped. Instead, a more intensive discussion of the evolution of majoritarian (i.e., Sunni Muslim) norms and institutional structures under the project of political secularism in Egypt would have helped contextualize minority

issues. Such a discussion would also further shed light on the role of state sovereignty—which seems to be considered hegemonic in some parts of the analysis and deeply contested in others.

These questions aside, my only real regret after reading *Religious Difference in a Secular Age* was that the volume was not yet in print when I was teaching a repertoire of three classes on religion and politics, state-building, and gender in the Middle East. The book is a must read for anyone interested in these topics. I came away with a better understanding of how colonial encounters shaped state formation trajectories, how projects of political secularism restructured religious life and interconfessional relations, how struggles against religious inequality get organized and articulated, and how the complex relationship between secularism, family, and morality reproduces hierarchies of gender and religion. Perhaps most importantly, the book casts serious doubt on the “... secularist hope that a truly secularized state will deliver us from religious conflict” (p. 21). Unflinching champions of state secularism all too often fail to grasp the mirage-like quality of concepts like separation and neutrality. So too do they underestimate how state regulation under secularism can transform the nature of religious identification in ways that fuel interreligious inequality and conflict. In this vibrant and brilliant study, Mahmood sets the record straight.

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**Secularism on the Edge: Rethinking Church–State Relations in the United States, France, and Israel.** *Edited by Jacques Berlinerblau, Sarah Fainberg, and Aurora Nou.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 316pp. \$100.00; \$79.99 e-book.

This is an edited volume of papers and interviews drawn mostly from an academic conference of the same name at Georgetown University’s Program for Jewish Civilization in February 2013. Volumes of this kind feature certain well-known limitations: rather than elaborating a scholarly approach at length or investigating a case in-depth, they often gather a series of reflections that may or may not hang together coherently. What such volumes can do well, however, is bring together scholars who are not normally in