Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report. Saba Mahmood.
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Saba Mahmood, in her book *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*, explores the historical relationships that have evolved for over two hundred years between religious majorities, minorities, and modern secular state structures in the regions of Europe and the Middle East. In her observation, these relationships have been shaped and influenced by European interests and active involvement in Middle Eastern affairs. But the book is, more specifically, an excellent historical tour of modern Egyptian social, religious, and political life.

As the title shows, this book offers "a report" about the relationship between the religious majority and minorities in modern Egypt and beyond. Mahmood has raised many important points about this issue, but the most significant one, in my view, is the claim that "Western religious and secular discourses were crucial to the construction of the minority problem in Egypt" (72). This premise is important in three ways in the debate about religious liberty and minority rights in Egypt. First, it tries to subordinate the role of local actors in the construction of the problem associated with religious liberties and minority rights. Second, it is true that modern secular state structures have played a prominent role in trying to regulate the relationships between the communities in the region, but the problems related to religious minority groups predate Western secular influences in the Middle East. Third, Mahmood's argument exposes the magnitude of the challenges facing religious minorities in Egypt, which is the overall achievement of this book.

Let me begin with the impact of Western religious discourse. The assertion that it bears a primary responsibility for the problems of religious minorities in Egypt contradicts the historical realities of Egyptian society. In particular, it ignores different local factors that created the problems associated with minority rights and religious freedom in the region. Western religious or political discourses were not necessarily central to these issues, but were generally secondary. First, the existence of religious minorities and the problems they have been facing throughout the history of Egypt or the whole of the Middle East were a product of the historical religio-political frameworks in the region, which continue to value supremacy of one religion over the others.[1] They were not constructs of European religious or political discourses; after all, the so-called religious minority groups were present well before the arrival of European colonialism.

1. Maurits H. van den Boogert, "Millets: Past and Present" in *Religious Minorities in the Middle East: Domination, Self-Empowerment, Accommodation*, eds. A.N. Longva and A.S. Roald (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 31.

Furthermore, this claim contradicts even the arrangement of "*dhimma* (literally, pledge of security)" that the Ottoman colonial authorities made for religious minorities under their rule (36). The pledge of protection for religious minorities – which carried huge financial burdens – was put in place to address the problems they were facing under the Ottoman system of governance (36). The European religious and political discourses had no influence on such arrangements. Their contributions to the debate on the question of religious minorities in Egypt or the Middle Eastern region, rather, was a relatively recent phenomenon when Egypt became a British "protectorate in 1914."[2] Moreover, the issues of religious minorities under Ottoman rule were not the main reasons for the European powers to interfere in the internal affairs of the Ottoman state. Indeed, the European powers were advancing their colonial ambitions to control the world. They would have continued "to undermine" the Ottoman Empire even without the issues of Christian minorities in the region (34-5). They were dealing with a competitor, another colonial empire, which had also subjugated other nations to serve its imperial ambitions. Mahmood highlights the global impact of Western power. Arguably, there were a variety of imperial strategies, both Western and non-Western, at play during the pre-modern and modern eras that shaped the problem of majority/minority relations.

Another point that Mahmood has discussed in relation to minorities is the co-existence of different religions under the Ottoman Empire. Mahmood notes that "the diversity" of religious beliefs under the Ottoman rule "led" Karen Barkey "to describe it as 'the empire of difference,'" which is true (36). Barkey has, however, emphasized that this acceptance of differences was also a policy of Roman and Byzantine Empires before the emergence of the Ottomans on the scene. It was not the desired 'goal' of any of these empires to accommodate differences or diversity in their social and political structures but a political tactic that enabled all of them "to maintain power" and exercise "control" over the conquered peoples.[3] It should also be noted that under Ottoman rule, Islam celebrated superiority over other religions and thus constructed the religious minority problem that has continued to this day in Egypt and the whole of the Middle East.[4] Therefore, Western religious discourse entered the social and religious equation as part of the Western colonial expansion in the region, but it did not create major social structures or minority traditions that did not pre-exist.

What Mahmood could have highlighted – instead of blaming the West – as a crucial factor in the construction of the problem of religious minorities in Egypt is the

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2. Van den Boogert, "Millets: Past and Present," 39.

3. Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottoman in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008), 18-20.

4. Van den Boogert, "Millets: Past and Present," 27-31.

failure of the Egyptian national agenda that gained momentum when both Copts and Muslims united against colonialism in the 1920s (80) to establish a united Egyptian society irrespective of religious affiliation. The Coptic Christian community at that time believed that Egyptian nationalism was far more important than religious identity. It was to them a powerful symbol of social co-existence. Nonetheless, the building of Egyptian national identity based on citizenship received little enthusiasm from the majority and so the question of religious freedom and minority rights came up (78-80). In this context, the construction of the minority problem in Egypt was ultimately a product of local political, social, and religious contexts. Mahmood's heavy emphasis on the influence of Western secularity provides a skewed account of these developments.

The failure of the Egyptian national agenda has added new dimensions to the persecution of religious minorities in Egypt today. Because of this open discrimination, the Coptic Christian community and other minority groups in modern Egypt are facing existential problems. The minimal option they have to mitigate the evolving threats they face daily is to raise their concerns at the international level. But Mahmood believes this process has complicated the situation and "makes the project of finding ways of Copts living together with Arab Muslims in Egypt more difficult" (102). Blaming the Coptic minority for seeking different peaceful means to secure their survival in Egypt seems hard to accept, particularly in light of the Coptic call for Egyptian nationalism free of religious influence in the 1920s. They have been struggling to fit into the new realities of Egyptian society for hundreds of years but with tenuous success. The so-called majority has relentlessly imposed its values and laws on the nation with little or no regard for the concerns of minorities.

The concerns of religious minorities in Egypt are central to family laws, which regulate the social life of different religious communities; a topic that Mahmood discusses in detail (Part II, Chapter 3). These laws capture the essence of the problem facing Egyptian society today. They take religion into the innermost core of society where traditions and national identity begin to develop. At the same time, the demise of the Egyptian national project after the end of British colonialism has since strengthened religious minorities' support for separate religion-specific family laws to offer them some space to preserve their identities. Although these laws do not help that much under the current discriminatory national legislation that allows "conversion" to Islam but "prohibit[s]" (through apostasy laws) the opposite (86), this form of legal pluralism remains the only positive contribution the Western secular legal discourse has made toward the survival of religious minorities in Egypt.

Furthermore, the Western secularization process in the Middle East helped not only non-Muslim religious minorities but also recognized the existence of small Islamic sects, such as Druze, Ismailis, Alawis, and others (62). These communities were not a creation of Western secularization, but were previously existing and

largely suppressed minority communities. Therefore, Mahmood's claim that Western religious and secular discourses were central to the construction of the religious minority problem is questionable. We know that the purported secular regimes that have emerged in the Middle East before and during the postcolonial period have not built themselves around national identities free of religious influences. They have always appealed to a dominant religious tradition to maintain power in the society. In this context, the issues of religious liberties and national minorities need to be understood primarily within the framework of the Middle Eastern political and religious structures that maintain religious superiority as a defining feature of national identity.

Despite these concerns, Saba Mahmood has opened a new chapter in the debate about religious freedom and minority rights in Egypt and beyond by exposing the challenges these groups face in the Middle East.