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Theologies of the West: A Commentary on Saba Mahmood's *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*

Saba Mahmood's *Religious Difference in a Secular Age* presents a historical anthropology of secularism, one that works with erudition across a diverse array of materials that include political and religious history, texts of international and Egyptian law, modern Arabic literature, and ethnographic interviews. The book does not polemicize against secularism but grapples with the promise of civil and political equality it holds open. Mahmood analyzes the many ways in which this ideal persistently, perhaps even necessarily, runs into contradiction with its social and institutional reality.

As Mahmood details, the crux of the problem is that secularism is at once a language of emancipation – from inherited religious doctrines, sectarian subordination, ascribed social roles, clerical hierarchy, etc. – and a discourse of the modern state, in which the latter arbitrates over what counts as a legitimate expression of religion. What makes this duality pernicious is not only that emancipation is thereby contained, managed, and administered by the interests of those who control the state apparatus, although that is in fact a source of considerable political tension. The issue is also that the enshrining of the centralized state as the arbitrating authority smuggles in a host of additional hierarchical divisions that are internal to its political imaginary: national divides between majority-minority; colonial divides between western imperial powers and those subjugated to their rule; the public-private division and the forms of gender inequality it prescribes. Against those who would insist on isolating, for the sake of salvaging, the ideal from its working existence, Mahmood demands that we put secularism's moral valence to the test of its historical unfolding. The book forces us to confront the manifold inequalities that this seemingly inescapable language of emancipation has predicated.

Central to the arc of the argument is a focus on the history of geopolitics. The book's interrogation of this history is more complex than it appears at first sight: on the one hand, Mahmood historicizes secularism in terms of global geopolitical relations; on the other hand, the book also unsettles the historical grounds of the concept of geopolitics itself. Mahmood does not frame the labor of the book as an examination of the conceptual history of 'geopolitics', and as a result it does not offer a genealogy of the concept itself. However, I want to suggest in this commentary that one of the most challenging and important consequences of the book's analytical frame is that it asks us to move between two tasks: historicizing the geopolitics of secularism and historicizing the taken-for-granted coordinates of the concept of geopolitics. It is only by understanding the productive tension between these two modes of historicization that we can begin to grapple with Mahmood's open-ended call, at the conclusion of the book, to move beyond 'our collective incapacity to imagine a politics that does not treat the state as the arbiter of majority-minority relations' (213).

For readers attentive to the historical legacies of colonial imperialism, a certain aspect of the book's historical geopolitics will be familiar. The text foregrounds the way that relations between formally sovereign states are hierarchically orchestrated through international law and transnational connections. The book centers on issues of religious difference within

Egypt, but from start to finish, it situates these nation-internal relationships within a global context. The very question of whether Copts can be considered a ‘minority’ was only raised in the twentieth century, in the context of minority treaties struck at the end of World War One, and its resolution has never been a matter of internal relations alone. Mahmood informs us that Copts themselves debated the question in the early twentieth century in the terms of anti-colonial politics: would recognition as a minority further or hinder the cause of national independence? What were the interests of imperial powers in the recognition of ‘minorities’, especially Christian ones? A similar set of questions is being posed anew in Egypt today, although among the key interlocutors now are American evangelicals who, in the global political aftermath of 9/11, have taken up the cause of defending Christians against Muslim oppressors. ‘Secularization in the post colony’, Mahmood writes, ‘is entwined with the history of power inequalities between the West and the non-West’ (10).

Having convincingly demonstrated how inter-state geopolitics have historically impacted the adjudication of intra-state religious difference, how then does Mahmood go on to trouble the very notion of geopolitics and to what analytical effect? The questioning of the category of geopolitics is perhaps most apparent in the way that Mahmood both raises comparative questions about secularism in multiple contexts *and* challenges the more commonplace ways in which such comparisons are often drawn. In a chapter discussing the legal debate about the recognition of the Bahai in Egypt, Mahmood compares Egyptian case law with that of the European Court of Human Rights. The comparison draws out important differences – for instance, between the way that secularism is taken to be integral to the national culture of France, and how Islam is given that role in Egypt. More importantly, Mahmood indicates the shared preoccupation that underlies legal disputes in these sites, namely, that the modern state at once insists on formal equality among citizens and also reserves the right to define and then to protect the traditions of the majority.

What is striking about this comparative analysis is that it allows Mahmood to question the usual terms of comparison itself. Conventional wisdom suggests that the difference between these locations, understood as the West and the non-West, lies in the fact that the latter remains incompletely secularized. This failed secularization, in turn, is said to contribute to the rise of authoritarian states and the travails of minority groups. In fact, Mahmood argues, the issue is misunderstood in those terms, because parallel problems of systemic minority discrimination arise in settings that are often presumed to be exemplary of secularism. What Mahmood is interrogating here is not only the proclaimed superiority of the West, but the conceptual alignments that give meaning to the very division between the West and the non-West – an aligning of that division with the binary of the secular and the religious, itself bound to a historicist rubric of the modern and the not-yet modern. The notion of geopolitics divided across a single line (Western and non-Western) tows in its wake an elaborate web of inter-connected binaries that orient geo-spatial divisions in terms of putative historical differences. While Mahmood’s attention to geopolitics enables a comparative project, her analysis persistently questions the complicity that the categories of geopolitical comparison maintain with the political hierarchies under scrutiny.

In the absence of an explicit genealogy of the concept of geopolitics, Mahmood’s analysis nonetheless moves in that direction, especially in her discussions of religious history (specifically Christian history). In discussing the history of Protestant missions in the Middle East, Mahmood argues that the call of such missionaries in the nineteenth century for religious liberty worked through a different concept of religion and also of global politics than the discourse of Christian European rulers of the seventeenth century. In the latter case, European sovereigns addressed ‘Eastern Christians’, seeking to bring them under European patronage (44). Over the course of the succeeding centuries, however, ‘Western Christianity began to

construct itself in civilizational terms', distancing itself from 'the history of what came to be called non-Latinate Christianity' (192). In the process, Oriental and Eastern Orthodox Christian churches were cast as alien. The very concept of 'the West' – as something whose distinction from the churches of the East could be rendered up in terms of civilizational differences between the modern and the modernizing, between the secular and the not-yet secular – is the product of recent history.

As Mahmood shows, recent philosophical studies of secularism, such as Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* and Marcel Gauchet's *The Disenchantment of the World*,¹ in fact appeal to the distinction of Western and Eastern, or Latinate and non-Latinate, Christianity. They do so in order to claim an intrinsic kinship between modern secularism and the theology developed in the West, but such an argument only makes sense if the notion of the West is held to be a relatively stable and unified civilizational entity, and thus capable of linear development. Mahmood's counter-history pushes us to think against this political theology. It demonstrates that the portrayal of secular modernity as an outgrowth of Western Christianity has become a crucial underpinning of the geopolitical commonsense of our times.

In the final sentence of *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*, Mahmood writes that 'the ideal of interfaith equality might require not the bracketing of religious differences but their *ethical* thematization as a necessary risk when the conceptual and political resources of the state have proved inadequate to the challenge this ideal sets before us' (213, emphasis in original). The book does not describe what an 'ethical thematization' might entail or where it is already unfolding. The text does, however, reveal the formidable challenges that would confront any effort to expand the limits of our political imagination beyond the secular-modern – and therefore beyond 'the state as the arbiter of majority-minority relations'. Because secularism is bundled with geopolitics, this emergent ethics would not only face an entrenched state apparatus but the global system that enables that apparatus. Because geopolitics is itself premised on a political theology of 'the West', it would face not only the renewed powers of imperialism but their hegemony over the language of emancipation. An 'ethical thematization', whatever else the phrase might imply, recuperates the ideal of equality, but does so as a demand against the promise that secular emancipation has made imaginable.

Note

1. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World*, trans. Oscar Burge (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

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Response to Saba Mahmood's *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*

Saba Mahmood has once again written a work that provides deep insight into the most basic structures that define our political lives. *Religious Difference in a Secular Age* focuses on the status of Christian Coptic and Bahia religious communities in modern day Egypt. Its argument, however, will be of interest to scholars across the humanities and social sciences.