

Review: Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report*

In an unpublished memorandum written six years before his famous *Epistola de Tolerantia* (1685), John Locke recorded an anecdote about the English ambassador to Constantinople. Having opened a room in his residence for Christian worship, he discovered, much to his chagrin, that most of the city’s Protestants were Huguenots, who worshiped “in the French style.” Even so, the chaplain offered communion to all, “according to the several fashions of their churches or persuasions of their own minds”: “Which...had so powerful an effect...[that] they of their own accords received [the cup] every one kneeling”—that is, in the Anglican fashion. Locke concluded: “This way, if it were a little more practiced, would perhaps be found not only the most Christian but the most effectual way to bring men to conformity.”ⁱ

Locke’s anecdote captures a drama at the heart of Saba Mahmood’s excellent new book—the emergence of secularism and religious liberty as core commitments in Western political thought alongside increasing European interest and engagement with the Islamic world. In tracing the careers of these concepts since the early modern period, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age* asks readers to look beyond these grand abstractions and hallmarks of enlightened liberalism to the global contexts and political-legal arrangements through which they have been realized. The experiences of a seventeenth-century ambassador and his Anglican chaplain not only illustrate how the *imperial* and *evangelical* involvement of European Christianities in the Ottoman Empire informed the ideas and institutions we associate with religious liberty today (liberty of conscience, free exercise and association), but also how these went hand in hand with a growing, eirenic sense of (Protestant) Christian unity facilitated and funded by European states.

Mahmood’s deft historical treatment of the mutual imbrication of “secular” ideas and institutions of religious liberty with early modern empire and Christian mission is in the service

of a pressing, present end—namely, understanding how and *why* religious coexistence remains a problem for secular states even as they premise their legitimacy on having solved it. In her analysis of the plight of religious minorities in modern Egypt, Mahmood charts the course of political secularism and its effect on the country’s foremost “recognized minority,” Coptic Christians, as well as its most marginalized and marginal group, the Bahais, in their ongoing legal struggles for religious and civil equality. The oppression facing these groups, Mahmood argues, is *not* a failure of secularization in the face of “Muslim intolerance,” but rather a symptom of structural paradoxes implicit in secularism, in which a “regulatory impulse” and “promise of freedom” are “thoroughly intertwined.”

Mahmood’s point is subtle. In deploying the language of rights and recognition, she suggests, vulnerable groups only exacerbate their subjection, because the political-legal language in which they phrase their call for liberation reaffirms religion as the ground of identity while empowering the secular state as the ultimate arbiter and definer of religious difference. In this, the state will not and *cannot* be neutral; it defines, regulates, and remakes religion in the image of the majority. Thus, against the commonplace assumption that secularism entails the *separation* of church and state, Mahmood argues that its implicit majoritarianism entails a *de facto* religious establishment in which the religion of the majority supplies the “neutral” standard by which minority creeds or cultures are judged. Her comparison between recent decisions in the Egyptian Supreme Court against Bahais and those against unpopular minorities (Muslims and evangelical Christians) in the European Court of Human Rights effectively illustrates the point and underscores the identical logics of “private” belief and “public order” at work.

This comparative argument is powerful, but Mahmood’s appeal to history to trouble the principles of religious liberty and equality that supply modern secularism with its normative

force is more powerful and original still. From the beginning, she shows that claims to religious liberty went hand in hand with the extraterritorial privileges enjoyed by European Christians in the Islamic world. The institutional vehicle was the Ottoman system of “capitulations” (*ahdiname*), treaties which granted privileges of communal autonomy and religious worship to European merchants and embassies (like Locke’s ambassador) within the Empire. What began as a two-way street became, with the weakening of the Ottoman state, a vehicle of European hegemony. Western countries, with the help of a swelling missionary movement in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, called for religious liberty on behalf of Ottoman Christians and so justified further incursions upon Eastern sovereignty, a dynamic Mahmood suggests is reproduced today under the international human rights regime.

Mahmood is right to emphasize the missionary roots of religious liberty, but her historical account moves quickly, which sometimes leads her to read the later asymmetry between West and East back into an earlier period when ideas, institutions, and personnel flowed both ways. The first capitulation between the Ottomans and the Venetians signed in 1419 was a reciprocal agreement that granted religious privileges to “stranger” communities of Muslim merchants and diplomats, an arrangement replicated throughout Western Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as far as London.ⁱⁱ The radical evangelical tolerationist and founder of Rhode Island, Roger Williams, grew up in London as the son of a tailor and claimed to have conversed with “*Jews and Turkes, Papists and Protestants, and Pagans*” alike during his lifetime, and he and others framed their demand religious liberty as an extension of the privileges enjoyed by Muslims to Protestant dissenters as well.ⁱⁱⁱ

As we saw earlier, this two-way traffic caught the attention of the most famous English defender of toleration in the seventeenth century, John Locke.^{iv} The result was far from being a

caricature of “Eastern intolerance” as opposed to Christian liberty. *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1685/9) cited Ottoman tolerance towards non-Muslims in Constantinople as an embarrassment to Protestants, who “deprive [others] of their Estates and Liberty...whilst the *Turks*...laugh to see what inhumane Cruelty Christians thus rage against Christians.”^v Locke offers a prime example of the paradoxical combination of statism and evangelicalism Mahmood identifies as the key to secularism as a “global grammar of legal and political governance.” The *Letter*’s demand that “neither *Pagan*, nor *Mahumetan*, nor *Jew*, ought to be excluded from the Civil Rights of the Commonwealth, because of his Religion” was defended on explicitly evangelical grounds—“it will hardly be believed, that we pray in earnest for their conversion, if we exclude them from the ordinary profitable Means.”^{vi} Moreover, Locke’s irenic distinction between the public and private aspects of religion, culminating in his infamous exclusion of Turkish Muslims who are “blind[ly] obedient to the *Mufti of Constantinople*” from toleration—as a “private” belief with “public” implications—exemplifies the simultaneous limitation and aggrandizement of the state viz. religion characteristic of secularism highlighted by Mahmood.^{vii}

Nevertheless, in appealing to Locke throughout the book, Mahmood is less interested in the peculiarities of his theory than in his status as a synecdoche for secular liberalism and its “Protestantizing” approach to religious difference. On this view, his evangelical/sectarian and irenic/statist strands flow seamlessly together, two sides of the same Western imperialist coin. Upon closer inspection however, these aspects of Locke’s theory stand in considerable tension. While evangelical tolerationists like Williams rejected the public/private distinction and demanded disestablishment, Locke’s distinction between church and state was conceptual not institutional; he remained a communicating member of the established Church of England until his death and oversaw state-funded missionary efforts during his tenure on the Board of Trade.^{viii}

Indeed, the statist distinction between the public (external) and private (internal) aspects of religion in the *Letter* was a holdover from his earliest writings as a young man at Oxford in which, inspired by Hobbes, he argued *against* religious toleration and liberty of conscience on those grounds.

Given her sensitivity to the significance of competing Christianities—Catholic and Protestant, Eastern and Western—elsewhere, Mahmood’s indifference to the differences within Anglo-American Protestantism are frustrating. If, as she suggests, Locke bears some responsibility for the paradoxes of religious liberty and the predicament of modern religious minorities, then understanding how and why he brought these evangelical and statist Protestant strands together might enable us, in turn, to pick them apart. Perhaps some untapped emancipatory potential, a way out of the impasse so ably diagnosed by Mahmood, lingers on in the gaps. For if the problem with the modern discourse of religious liberty is increased alienation and subjection to a hostile state, it is unclear how Mahmood’s critique empowers minorities to avoid this outcome. Her solution—an “urgent” call to “rethink” the problem of religious difference “outside the framework of rights”—does not seem urgent enough. In Mahmood’s account, it seems that discourses “come to be” then proceed to “reorder” and “remake” reality, while the people that participate in them remain enmeshed and cannot escape.

This is not, of course, Mahmood’s intention. In the conclusion, she suggests that religious equality might be realized in the realm of cultural secularity and in the horizontal relationships between individuals, without the vertical mediation of the state. Here, the early theorists of toleration like Locke or Williams, or even Hobbes, who worked and re-worked, both within and against, the reigning religious and political discourses of their day offer a fruitful model. In addition to troubling secular liberal pieties, recovering “the fragments of the past

congealed in the present,” in Mahmood’s phrase, can awaken us to past possibilities, paths forgotten or untaken. Her book will be required reading for anyone interested in taking up that task.

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ⁱ John Locke, “Latitude (c. 1679)” in *A Letter Concerning Toleration and Other Writings*, edited by Mark Goldie (Libertyfund, 2010), 173-4.

ⁱⁱ See Nabil Matar, *Islam in Britain, 1558-1685* (Cambridge 2008).

ⁱⁱⁱ Roger Williams, “To the People Called Quakers,” in *George Fox Digg’d out his Burrowes* (1646), in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, volume 5 (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963).

^{iv} Locke had the anecdote from John Covel, who had served as an Anglican chaplain in Constantinople himself before becoming the master of Christ’s College, Cambridge.

^v John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 21.

^{vi} John Locke, “A Third Letter for Toleration” in *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 77. See also Teresa M. Bejan, “Evangelical Toleration,” *Journal of Politics* 77 (4), 1103-1114.

^{vii} Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 52. This is usually read as an allusion to the Pope, but the structure of Locke's argument implies a distinction between Turks and Catholics loyal to the Pope—namely, that the latter are even worse.

^{viii} See Jack L. Turner, "John Locke, Christian Mission, and Colonial America." *Modern Intellectual History* 8 (02): 267–97.