

---

## Review Essay

# On the Coptic question

### **Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report**

Saba Mahmood

Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2015, xiii+237 pp.,

ISBN: 978-0691153285

### **The Symbolic Scenarios of Islamism: A Study in Islamic Political Thought**

Andrea Mura

Ashgate, Burlington, VT, 2015, xiv+244 pp., ISBN: 978-1472443892

### **Islam and Human Rights**

Abdullahi An-Na'im

edited by Mashood A. Baderin, Ashgate, Burlington, VT, 2010, xxxix+372 pp.,

ISBN: 9780754628231

*Contemporary Political Theory* (2017) **16**, 123–130. doi:10.1057/cpt.2015.70;  
advance online publication 12 January 2016

On 7 May 2011, Muslims and Coptic Christians clashed in the Imbaba district of Cairo, Egypt. A Muslim named Yassim Thaabet Anwar reported that his wife Abeer, a Christian convert to Islam, had been abducted by her former co-religionists and hidden in the Church of St. Mina. Hardline Islamists, or Salafis, approached the church to look for her, and Christians in the neighborhood shot at them. The Muslim men retaliated with Molotov cocktails, guns and knives and set fire to the church as well as the nearby Church of the Virgin Mary. Police officers, military soldiers and firemen in the vicinity made little effort to stop the violence or prevent the destruction of the churches. By the time the battle ended, a dozen people, Christian and Muslim, were dead, and dozens more were wounded (El Rashidi, 2011; Londono, 2011).

How should foreigners respond to this kind of atrocity? More precisely, should the most powerful country in the world, the United States, use its diplomatic, financial, or military muscle to protect an embattled minority in another part of the world? The Coptic question, as I call it here, is whether the Copts' problem is *our* problem to be addressed with tools such as public shaming campaigns, legal pressure, economic sanctions, or, as a last resort, armed intervention. This essay explains why Saba Mahmood and Andrea Mura seem to counsel against foreign encroachment in Egyptian or Islamist politics, and



Abdullahi An-Na'im and I think that people around the world should care about and do what they can to help persecuted minorities in faraway countries.

## The Secular Cure

Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* (2004) issued a profound challenge to contemporary Euro-American political theorists who believe, or assume, that Enlightenment ideals of liberty, equality, autonomy and so forth, are universally shared. Her ethnographic study of the women's piety movement detailed how thoughtful, informed and ethical Egyptian women embrace traditional notions such as piety and humility rather than liberal, feminist ones. Employing a similar strategy of reversing roles and illuminating paradoxes, Mahmood's new book argues that secular norms and institutions, more so than religious fundamentalist ones, have intensified conflict in Egypt.

*Religious Difference in a Secular Age* contends that 'modern secular governance has contributed to the exacerbation of religious tensions in postcolonial Egypt, hardening interfaith boundaries and polarizing religious differences' (p. 1). Mahmood draws a key insight of her book from Karl Marx's 1844 essay, 'On the Jewish Question' (pp. 13–15). Marx argued that secularism did not so much vanquish religion as transform and control it for different ends, in his view, the capitalist end of protecting private property. Mahmood's thesis is that the West has imposed the public–private distinction, the heart of the secular imaginary, upon other countries in order to empower Christians, acquire resources and protect regional allies, while the secular 'cure' for religious politics has intensified certain forms of religiosity and increased interreligious strife.

The first half of the book is a genealogy of secular concepts such as political and civil rights, religious liberty, minority rights, public order and the distinction between public and private. According to Mahmood, these concepts were born in the West and exported to Muslim-majority countries in ways that continue to harm the indigenous religious communities. Starting in the sixteenth century, Western European traders demanded 'capitulations' from Ottoman rulers – that is, a degree of self-government in matters of religion worship and practice – without offering to reciprocate this privilege in Europe (p. 34). Likewise, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) demands that all countries adopt the Protestant idea that religion is a matter of individual conscience rather than a collective form of life (pp. 48–49). Mahmood notes that Eleanor Roosevelt, the main architect of the UDHR, refused to countenance the application of its principles of racial equality to the United States. This act of hypocrisy 'was consistent with the history of Western powers claiming immunity from international law, even as they determined its scope, substance, and implementation elsewhere' (p. 58).

In the second half of the book, Mahmood analyzes recent controversies about religious minorities in Egypt. One chapter is on the dilemma faced by the Bahais struggling for political recognition in an Egyptian secular legal order that, ironically,



demands private identification as a Christian or Muslim; another is on how the Egyptian debate regarding *Azazeel*, a novel about the early history of the Coptic Church, reveals that secular presuppositions about history have penetrated cultural debates even about theological topics such as the nature of Jesus. The most provocative chapter, however, is on ‘Secularism, Family Law, and Gender Inequality’.

Mahmood begins the chapter by talking about the Imbaba riot and, throughout the essay, expresses appropriate regret at the plight of the Copts and their felt need to emigrate from Egypt. What led to the riot and the intolerable condition for the Copts? First and foremost, the secular compromise in Egypt that gave each religious community discretion over personal status or family law. As a result of the Egyptian secular order, the Coptic Orthodox Church acquired the power to regulate marriage and divorce, and in a 1971 ruling, the Coptic Pope determined that Copts could only divorce in cases of adultery or when a spouse has changed his or her religion. ‘This has served as an impetus for Coptic men and women to convert to Islam in order to escape difficult marital situations or to remarry’ (p. 113). Furthermore, the Coptic Church approves of this arrangement more than if there was an ostensibly secular family law that reflects the Islamic values of the majority. That is why the Coptic leadership support autocrats that preserve their privilege: ‘Under the current Pope Tawadros, once again the Church has pledged its support for the ruling junta of General Abdel Fattah al-Sissi on the assumption that this will help preserve its diktat more than if it were to make its case in the courts or before the public’ (p. 129). In short, the Coptic Church imposes a repressive marriage law on its members that induces many of them to convert to Islam in order to divorce. Furthermore, the Copts have supported corrupt secular authorities that do not even give them much protection, as at Imbaba, and their strongest allies abroad are evangelicals in groups such as Christian Solidarity International (p. 143). If the Coptic Church endorses secular, corrupt autocrats and secularism leads to more violence against the Copts, then the implicit conclusion is that the Copts are at least partly culpable for their persecution. ‘The Coptic Church’s collusion with the security states bodes ill for the future ...’ (pp. 86–87).

*Religious Difference in a Secular Age* complicates the story, common in the West, that the worldwide struggle is between enlightened secularists and religious fundamentalists (see also Hurd, 2015; Sullivan *et al.*, 2015). Regrettably, Mahmood’s book avoids identifying who has actually burned Coptic churches or beaten Coptic demonstrators. ‘Religious minorities continue to suffer various forms of discrimination in contemporary Egypt and other parts of the Middle East’ (p. 2). Who is making religious minorities suffer? A reader of Mahmood’s book has little sense that militant Islamism has transformed the Middle East and the world in the past eight decades. To be sure, the book is more interesting than a jeremiad against al-Qaeda or the Muslim Brotherhood. Yet Mahmood’s relentless critique of Western intervention in Muslim-majority countries provides little guidance for how Coptic Christians, and their allies around the world, may work for a ‘multicultural Egypt’ that accords Copts dignity, respect, and the right to express their own identity in public (Ibrahim, 2015). Even if the Coptic Church has made



ill-conceived political alliances in Egypt, and diasporic Copts have sometimes worked with neoconservatives and Islamophobes in the United States (Haddad and Donovan, 2013), concerned people around the globe may still believe that certain Islamists act unjustly to Coptic Christians in Egypt. So what can we do about it?

## Rehabilitating Islamism

Andre Mura's *The Symbolic Scenarios of Islamism* explicates the ideology that Muslims should 'strive to restore the primacy of Islam in the social and political order' (p. 13). The book performs a discourse analysis of three of the most important Egyptian Islamists of the past century: Hasan al-Banna (1906–1949), the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood; Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966), the main propagandist for the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s and early 1960s; and Osama bin Laden (1957–2011), the founder and head of al-Qaeda. The book explains how Islamists have negotiated the binaries of tradition and modernity and universalism and nationalism. The purpose of the book is to confront the specter of Islamism haunting Europe by showing that the tradition is more complex than the public or scholars sometimes acknowledge (pp. 1–5).

Initially, Mura describes the methodology of discourse analysis and the historical and theoretical backdrop to the case studies. Discourse analysis examines the historically inflected transcendental field that shapes how, in this case, Islamists look at and act in the world (pp. 17–23). From the beginning of Islam, Muslims have viewed the whole world as the abode of Islam (*dar al-Islam*); in the past two centuries, historical developments have forced Muslims to make compromises with nationalism, including the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, the rise of pan-Arabism and Kemalism, and the abolition of the caliphate (p. 71). Muslim political thinkers have also addressed the fact that we live in a time of globalization and transmodernity, or a period of 'time-space compression' where all of our fates are intertwined (p. 77).

The second half of the book is on al-Banna, Qutb and bin Laden, each of whom has contributed, in deeds and words, to the rise of Islamism as a global force. In the early 1930s, al-Banna defined the mission of the Muslim Brotherhood as establishing God's sovereignty over the world; later in the decade, al-Banna recognized the instrumental value of nationalism: 'Muslims strive hard for a motherland such as Egypt, exert their utmost effort for its cause and exhaust themselves in the Jihad because Egypt is a part of the Islamic land and the leader of its nations' (p. 118). Through his selective appropriation of modernity and nationalism, al-Banna made the Muslim Brotherhood a powerful actor in Egyptian and regional politics.

Qutb, the editor-in-chief of the Muslim Brotherhood weekly *Al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin* and author of books such as *Social Justice in Islam* and *Milestones*, refused to use modern or nationalist rhetoric and insisted that Muslims recover their own sources to think about political theory, culture, or economics. According to Qutb, a Muslim has no nationality except membership in the Muslim community of

*dar al-Islam*, but currently the world is steeped in pagan ignorance, or *jahiliyyah*. Qutb's sharp dichotomy between *dar al-Islam* and *jahiliyyah*, as well as his call for a vanguard to resist the West and spearhead the Islamic revival, laid the groundwork for radical Islamist groups.

As the founder of al-Qaeda, bin Laden turned Qutb's invitation to jihadist militancy into action. Although bin Laden has an evil reputation in the West, 'his re-elaboration of a pan-Islamic vision ... shows an innovative recasting of traditional perspectives, aligning his discourse with the distinctive features of the global context, and thereby creating the possibility for strategic dialogue with transmodernity' (p. 168). In diverse ways, Islamists have a complex and evolving view of community, subjectivity and temporality. In the conclusion, Mura explores the reverberations of the Islamist legacy in contemporary Egyptian, Iranian, Syrian, Palestinian and European politics.

Mura's book is a helpful introduction to Islamist political thought, particularly because of its block quotes that enable al-Banna, Qutb, and bin Laden to speak in their own voices. One thing that *The Symbolic Scenarios of Islamism* lacks is a critical edge. According to March (2009b), comparative political theory may rehabilitate foreign views and make them seem more comprehensible and attractive, which Mura has done. Comparative political theory may also conjecture in another discourse, for example, to nudge Islamism to facilitate peaceful, egalitarian relations between existential faiths (March, 2009a). Mura could have complicated his narrative by examining internal critics of hardline Islamism such as Nadia Yassine (b. 1958), the Moroccan Islamist who leads the Justice and Spirituality Association, or Tariq Ramadan (b. 1962), Hasan al-Banna's grandson who has called for a radical reform (*ijtihad*) of Islamic political thought. Mura also could have explored, and maybe even contested, troublesome themes of Islamist political thought such as interpreting jihad as aggressive war, encouraging violence against Jews and 'polytheists', and oppressing women (Euben and Zaman, 2009).

Instead, the final thought of the book is that there are analogies between Islamism and the 'critical humanities' (p. 216), a dubious claim given that Ayatollah Khomeini executed Communists after the Iranian revolution and violent jihadis targeted 'hipster socialists' in the 2015 raid on Paris. *The Symbolic Scenarios of Islamism* seems to confirm the thesis that the left sometimes has a failure of nerve when confronting Islamist zealotry (Walzer, 2015).

## Lessons from Sudan

Few people in the world have thought more profoundly about how to protect faraway embattled minorities than Abdullahi An-Na'im (b. 1946). A native of Sudan, An-Na'im watched Islamists execute his mentor and political reformer Mahmoud Mohammed Taha on the charge of apostasy in 1985. An-Na'im is presently a



Professor at Emory Law School, where he has become an advocate for secular states in Muslim-majority countries. *Islam and Human Rights* collects many of An-Na'im's most important law review articles, including ones that grapple with how the United States may best protect human rights in countries such as Egypt, Sudan, or Iran.

On principle, An-Na'im thinks that Americans should take a vested interest in what happens to Coptic Christians in Egypt or accused apostates in Sudan. Just as people around the world yearned for the end of apartheid in South Africa, so too 'the status of religious minorities is not the exclusive concern of any national or cultural tradition' (p. 248). An-Na'im countenances the idea of humanitarian intervention to end human rights abuses, and he also supports efforts to shame Arab governments to comply with human rights standards (pp. 139, 137).

Still, one of the main themes of this volume is that 'human rights cannot be protected in an effective and sustainable manner without developing an *internal* popular human rights culture and *local* human and material infrastructures necessary for consolidating achievements' (p. 154). In the near term, the best available option is for local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to expose human rights violations, challenge governments before United Nations human rights treaty bodies, defend the rights of all persons and groups, pressure governments to ratify international human rights treaties, and set clear human rights standards (pp. 154–155). An-Na'im acknowledges that NGOs depend on Western funders, which compromises their legitimacy in their communities and leads to bad habits of ignoring local concerns. Until a human rights culture germinates, this dilemma must be negotiated rather than avoided, and NGOs should work on building local support and capacity. *Contra* Mahmood, who criticizes NGOs such as the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights for advancing Western and evangelical interests, An-Na'im thinks that the bulk of the problem resides with the countries that forbid and harass human rights NGOs.

How is it possible to change minds in countries such as Egypt where approximately 90 per cent of the population is Muslim? Like many of the great political philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth century European Enlightenment, An-Na'im recognizes that political theory and scriptural hermeneutics intertwine when making a case for tolerance. An-Na'im takes up several of the themes of his mentor, Mahmoud Mohammed Taha. The central religious teachings of Islam, such as the five daily prayers, were primarily revealed in Mecca and remain the same today. 'What is open to restatement and reinterpretation...are the social and political aspects of sharia' (p. 263). Islam is not sharia. Historical sharia reflected the conditions of seventh century Arabia when the early Muslim community of Medina was under attacks from outsiders. Early Muslim jurists codified a *dhimmi* system where People of the Book, primarily Jews and Christians, had to pay a humiliating social tax and could not serve at the highest levels of the state or the military. For An-Na'im, these political traditions have nothing to do with Islam as such, and today, Islamic commitments are better realized by endorsing the international human rights consensus: 'International peace, justice, and human rights have already been partially

achieved through the Grace of God, and are to be enhanced and promoted through His Grace too. It is the paramount religious duty of all Muslims to participate in this ultimate act of worship' (p. 31).

Here is the crux of the disagreement between An-Na'im and Mahmood. Mahmood (2006) thinks that historicizing sharia, making Islam a religion that changes with the times, reflects Protestant and American aspirations. Once Muslims historicize and contextualize notions such as jihad, then they are more likely to make peace with Americans, Israelis and multinational corporations that look to exploit Muslim-majority countries. For An-Na'im, just because modern human rights discourse originated in the North Atlantic, 'efforts to protect human rights are simply the present manifestation or expression of the constant struggle of persons and communities everywhere for realizing and maintaining human dignity and social justice in their respective contexts' (p. 137). The question is not capitulating to the Western hegemonic human rights discourse, for 'different cultural traditions may contribute positively by raising new areas of concern, adding more rights, and generally informing the interpretation and application of the accepted norms' (p. 250). For ethical and pragmatic reasons, An-Na'im reasons, Muslims should join the international human rights community.

In *Islam and Human Rights*, An-Na'im elaborates why Muslims should treat religious minorities as political equals. Most Muslim-majority countries have signed the United Nations Charter that proclaims 'universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion' (p. 252). These countries have also signed subsequent treaties – such as the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights – that express at least nominal commitment to human rights principles. Furthermore, and most importantly, certain Qur'anic verses (for example, Chapter 16, verse 125; Chapter 18, verse 29) support 'complete freedom of choice and prohibit any degree of coercion of non-Muslims', which means, today, 'all citizens of a modern Islamic state must enjoy full rights of citizenship, regardless of religion or belief' (p. 264). I do not venture here whether An-Na'im's arguments are theologically sound or likely to convince other Muslims. Nonetheless, An-Na'im's efforts reveal something conspicuously absent from Mahmood's and Mura's books: a Muslim intellectual who combats Islamists on the terrain of ideas and contends that it is incumbent that Muslim-majority countries make non-Muslims feel at home.

Muslims around the world are debating whether to tolerate minorities in their midst such as the Coptic Christians in Egypt. While acknowledging that the language of human rights has been used to justify imperialism and that lasting political reform must transpire within autonomous polities (Cohen, 2008), Euro-Americans can still publicize human rights violations, tie strings to its foreign aid to Egypt, facilitate the emigration of Coptic Christians, and so forth. Mahmood's book explains how Coptic Christians and secularists have exacerbated religious tensions in Egypt; Mura's sheds light on how Islamists view *dar al-Islam* as an ever-present reality that just needs to



become manifest. But only An-Na'im's book presents a plan for how global citizens may collaborate to protect minorities and heretics in Muslim-majority countries such as Egypt.

## References

- Cohen, J.L. (2008) Rethinking human rights, democracy, and sovereignty in the age of globalization. *Political Theory* 36(4): 578–606.
- El Rashidi, Y. (2011) 'Egypt: Why are the Churches Burning?' *NYR Daily*, 17 May, 2011.
- Euben, R.L. and Zaman, M.Q. (2009) *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from Al-Banna to Bin Laden*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Haddad, Y. and Donovan, J. (2013) Good copt, bad copt: Competing narratives on coptic identity in Egypt and the United States. *Studies in World Christianity* 19(3): 208–232.
- Hurd, E.S. (2015) *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Ibrahim, V. (2015) Beyond the cross and the crescent: Plural identities and the copts in contemporary egypt. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38(14): 2584–2597.
- Londono, E. (2011) Religious Strife Kills 12 in Egypt. *Washington Post*, 9 May.
- Mahmood, S. (2004) *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Mahmood, S. (2006) Secularism, hermeneutics, and empire: The politics of Islamic reformation. *Public Culture* 18(2): 323–347.
- March, A.F. (2009a) *Islam and Liberal Citizenship: The Search for an Overlapping Consensus*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- March, A.F. (2009b) What is comparative political theory? *Review of Politics* 71(4): 531–565.
- Sullivan, W.F., Hurd, E.S., Mahmood, S. and Danchin, P.G. (eds.) (2015) *Politics of Religious Freedom*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Walzer, M. (2015) Islamism and the Left. *Dissent*, Winter.

Nicholas Tampio  
Fordham University, Bronx, NY 10458, USA  
tampio@fordham.edu