

Conversations with Saba Mahmood

JOAN WALLACH SCOTT

When Saba was writing *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*, she often contacted me to talk about history. She knew that to make the case she wanted to make about the imbrication of secularism in the regulation and practice of religion, she needed to put the ethnographic material she had gathered in a larger framework. It was particularly important to be able to do this because Egypt—where she had done her fieldwork—had begun to be secularized (if that is the right description of it) under the influence of European colonial powers well before the decline of the Ottoman Empire. More was at stake for her than getting the facts right, though of course she was committed to doing that. The challenge was to write a critical history that would illuminate the analysis she wanted to offer. She needed to give concrete form to the argument—fundamentally historical—that “the modern state and its political rationality have played a far more decisive role in transforming preexisting religious differences, producing new forms of communal polarization, and making religion more rather than less salient to minority and majority identities alike.”¹

I don’t now remember what advice I gave her, but I do remember long, engaged conversations about relating the concrete details she had assembled (dates, texts of laws and diplomatic conventions, appeals by representatives of religious groups, and the like) to the more abstract scheme she had so clearly articulated. Which facts mattered and which didn’t? How not to let the narration of, say, the debates at the meetings that produced the Versailles Treaty take over the analytic story she wanted to tell? What did it mean to use history to make sense of ethnography? “This process. . . required an engagement with historical materials from the eighteenth century to the present about which I knew little when I embarked upon this project. The book thus could not have been born without the ethnographic encounter, but also had to transcend it in order to make sense of *what* I encountered.”²

She tackled colonial laws and edicts to show exactly how the dominating powers “subjected preexisting religious differences to a new grid of intelligibility,” assigning religion, family, and sex to the private sphere, and confirming the salience of religious identities in the process.³ The interreligious conflicts so evident in twenty-first century Cairo were, she concluded, “a product of the simultaneous privatization of religion and the family under modern secular governance, further exacerbating pre-modern patterns of confessional hierarchy and gender inequality.”⁴ Religion and religious conflict were not the antitheses of secularization, but among its historical effects.

Readers of the book will note how deftly Saba wove her history tightly into her analysis. The book is an example of how well she mastered the writing of critical history. It is her final chapter, though, that stands out for me as a major contribution to the philosophy of history itself. There she analyzes a historical novel about the early Coptic Church that gave rise to an intense debate when it was published in 2008. She recounts the story of the novel, as any good literary critic would, and she tells us about the sides in the debate, as would a good literary historian. But she uses the novel and the debates around it to take her examination of the operations of secularization further, linking them to our conception of history itself. “In this chapter, I have shown how the modern conception of history—as an autonomous mode of inquiry into the positivity of events as they occur in linear time—is a key feature of secularity that has had an enormous influence on how religious truth is interpreted and justified in the modern world.” History, she adds, is “an authoritative discourse for grounding religious claims.”⁵ In the debates over the novel, “complex Christological issues about the nature of Christ had to be reduced to questions such as who did what, when, and for what kinds of worldly reasons.”⁶ For me, this clinches the argument about secularism’s reach, its powerful impact on all aspects of social, political, economic, and religious life and on the stories—the history—we are able to tell about them.

I think the chapter is particularly stunning to me because when I read a first draft of the manuscript, I didn’t think it belonged in the book. Introducing a novel seemed somehow superfluous, and it distracted attention from the material in the other chapters. In my defense, I think I was right about that early version; it was too focused on the narrative, too full of the details of the debate. Saba insisted that the chapter belonged in the book, that indeed it was crucial for what she was doing, and she set to work to rewrite it to prove her point. (As those of us who knew her remember, she was not easily deterred or defeated when she thought she was right.) I’m sure that I’m deluded in thinking that the new version was a response to me in particular. But all those brilliant insights about history seemed to me a continuation of so many conversations we had had—conversations in which I was the one who knew about writing history, and she was the person finding her way to its uses. There, Joan,

I seemed to hear her saying, this last chapter is not just an indulgence of mine, it's a way of showing *you* how important history has been in our conversations.

Saba loved to give her friends gifts, small tokens of her friendship and esteem. She always seemed to know exactly what the right ones were; she'd taken the measure of us carefully. I think of that last chapter as a gift to me: she took the conversation further than I had ever done and left me with better understandings and articulations of "my" notions of history (and of secularism, too). I will continue to work with these ideas alongside her, even though we can no longer have the live conversations that so engaged and enriched us both.

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Notes

1. Mahmood, *Religious Difference*, 2.
2. Mahmood, *Religious Difference*, 23.
3. Mahmood, *Religious Difference*, 25.
4. Mahmood, *Religious Difference*, 27.
5. Mahmood, *Religious Difference*, 206.
6. Mahmood, *Religious Difference*, 207.

Work Cited

Mahmood, Saba. *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.