ON THE COVER: Frederick Douglass, circa 1847. Accessed through Wikimedia Commons.

After Saba Mahmood: Examining Sexual Difference, Secularism, and the Study of Religion

Introduction

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THE CURRENT ROUNDTABLE is meant to prompt conversations on the contributions of Saba Mahmood, a former member of the editorial board of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, to the study of religion. Each article responds to the following prompt: What question in Mahmood's work deserves continuing consideration in the study of religion and why? Mahmood revolutionized debates about secularism, Islam, feminism, colonialism, and global politics, and we are just beginning to process the impact of her work. She instigated new ways of theorizing religion in its relationship to the secular, and her influential scholarship emerged at a critical point in history as scholars of religion confronted a dire social and political situation in which hostilities toward Muslims were on the rise.

Most notably, she revealed how secular and feminist epistemologies fail to account for the ways Muslims articulate religious values, misconstruing Muslims and their public practices. Her work posed broad questions of relevance beyond the Middle East and Muslim majority countries, about the problem with reducing religion to "false consciousness," thereby missing the agency of our subjects, as well as the politics of religious difference in the contemporary world. The goal of this roundtable is to assess her recent passing as a formative moment for the study of religion and a timely way to take the pulse of our discipline, after Mahmood.

In her anthropological studies of religion in modern Egypt, Mahmood argues against the view that religious differences and conflicts evidence

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Saba Mahmood: Secularization, Practice, and the "Ethical Turn"

Bryan S. Turner*

INTRODUCTION: PIETY AND SECULARIZATION

IN HER TRAGICALLY short life, Saba Mahmood (1961–2018) established an international reputation for her critique of conventional secularization theories, her appreciation of religious practices, and her contribution to the so-called "ethical turn" in religious studies. Apart from edited works and numerous articles, she published two major volumes: *Politics of Piety. The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005; second edition 2012) and *Religious Difference in a Secular Age. A Minority Report* (2015). *Politics of Piety* is probably the more celebrated work. It was simultaneously provocative and influential. Based on her ethnographic study of a piety movement in Cairo, it describes the pious woman (the *da'iya*) who calls on the community to follow the true path of Islam. In modern Islam, these mosque movements call the faithful to a greater and more comprehensive piety. They were politically important in a context where educated scholars and preachers who had been trained in government-administered religious institutions were "no more than state functionaries and bureaucrats" (Mahmood 2012, 64). Against this elite, there emerged the self-trained preacher for whom *da'wa* (call, invitation, appeal, or summons) was a vocation rather than paid employment.

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The volume—the arguments of which were found in earlier publications (Mahmood 2001)—challenged the assumptions of liberal feminists that Islam (and religion more generally) promotes a mindless adherence to traditions that are the epitome of patriarchy. It confronted secular views of agency and subjectivity by demonstrating how women versed in such pious activities were actively engaged in ethical practices of self-cultivation. In the second edition, in response to feminist criticism, Mahmood emphasized her "insistence on inserting questions of embodiment and ethics into the analysis of politics" (Mahmood 2012, ix). It was a challenge to what one book review identified as the "polarized secularism-religion dichotomy underpinning feminist discourse" (Suhraiya Jivraj 2017, 249).

THE STATE AND THE CREATION OF MINORITIES

Her attack on standard accounts of secularization in Muslim majority societies was the principal focus of her later work on *Religious Difference in a Secular Age. A Minority Report* (2016). She addresses secularization from the perspective of state formation and provides a critique of secularism from the perspective of epistemology.

Even for the expert, this is a difficult text, demanding of the reader familiarity with Egyptian history, the constitutional history of modern Egypt, the construction of minorities by legal enactment (especially the Copts), the management of religions by the state, and the shortcomings of a definition of secularization that is based on some notion of a "wall" separating state and religion. Mahmood's aim is to develop a more complex historical and conceptual account of the underlying assumption that the modernization of a society necessarily involved expunging religion from society and politics.

The secularization debate in sociology of religion shaped dominant assumptions through much of the last century. Two key figures in the British context were Bryan Wilson (1966) and Alasdair MacIntyre (1967). Their work, which was influential in Europe and the United States, was eventually challenged by a growing interest in individualized spirituality or religion outside the framework of the churches. The focus on the organized religion of the churches has been described as the "default view," with its concentration on "creed, canon, cult and cathedral" (Spickard 2017, 5). In general terms, the secularization thesis was addressed to Western Christianity in societies where Muslims are a minority. In this context, Mahmood's account of Egypt is valuable in providing an account from the perspective of a Muslim majority society. Responding to these