

Dossier: Saba Mahmood in memoriam

The radical intellectual legacy of Saba Mahmood

Ratna Kapur

But what I have come to ask of myself, and would like to ask the reader, as well, is: Do my political visions ever run up against the responsibility that I incur for the destruction of life forms so that ‘unenlightened’ women may be taught to live more freely? Do I even fully comprehend the forms of life that I want so passionately to remake? Would an intimate knowledge of lifeworlds that are distinct from mine ever question my own certainty about what I prescribe as a superior way of life for others?¹

Saba Mahmood’s work marks a turning point in critical thought and has become part of the canon across a range of disciplines including Islamic studies, postcolonial and feminist theory as well as cultural anthropology. In opening space for thinking beyond the limits of the liberal imaginary, Saba’s scholarship encouraged a radical reframing of intellectual thought. It was an invitation to become more aware of the parochialism of our own positions and the hubris with which even avowedly critical and progressive scholars operate. It pushed back against the presumed self-sufficiency of western liberal knowledge, exposing it as divisive, exclusionary and implicated in the harms, injuries and tragedies that we see unfolding across the globe, not only in authoritarian regimes but also liberal democracies.

It not possible to do full justice to Saba’s oeuvre in this short contribution. I will therefore highlight two features of her work that have been radical and transformative. My insights are offered both in celebration of her work and as a lament over the loss of an eminent intellectual and dear friend. First, I highlight her work on the veiled subject and its challenge to liberal

individualism, drawing largely on her path breaking first book, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005).² Second, I present her analysis of secularism which culminated in her last book, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (2016).³ I dwell at greater length on the latter text, given that discussion of it was cut off prematurely by Saba’s death. My discussion homes in on how these texts have unmasked the exclusionary and retrogressive features of the liberal imaginary, while also taking us beyond it.

The radical veiled subject

Politics of Piety unsettled the Eurocentrism of cultural anthropology, political theory and feminist politics. The book provides an ethnographic analysis of the practice of veiling amongst the Muslim women’s revival or *da’wa* – a conservative mosque movement in Cairo in the 1990s. Saba analyses the role of piety as an ethical practice in spiritual pursuit reflected in part by the practitioner’s personal choice and active desire to veil. It is a practice that permeates every aspect of the adherent’s life and includes women who are highly literate and socially mobile. They are actively engaged in the process of self-making in and through the ethical parameters of Islam. Saba offers a critique of notions of agency based on western conceptions of rationality and liberal conceptions of freedom that necessarily require an ‘Other’ to flourish. She traces how these concepts have been aggressively asserted in the post-9/11 era, where feminists have joined liberal

democratic governments in their excoriations of Islamic practices, including the practice of veiling. She provides a powerful rebuttal of this position by dissecting and disrupting the lines between the religious and the secular. She foregrounds the lifeworlds of non-liberal 'Others' in non-Western societies that are foreclosed by positions that view veiling exclusively as a tradition that invariably subordinates and from which women *must* be rescued. In the process, she demolishes the assumption that the non-Western 'Other' simply acts out of deference to tradition or an antiquated cultural code by default or lack of choice.

Politics of Piety offers an incisive critique of agency as aligned with either liberal autonomy or resistance. The critique argues against the rescue or saviour mentality that informs human rights, especially feminist endeavours, and encourages greater reflection on the imperialist tendencies and righteousness nestled in such pursuits. In this text, as in much of Saba's scholarship, there is a renegotiation of the feminist political project, to ensure that it does not remain static, become dogmatic or morph into a salvific force that broaches no challenge or interrogation. Saba practiced the very ethics that she witnessed in her subjects and was willing to pose enormously challenging questions:

What do we mean when we as feminists say that gender equality is the central principle of our analysis and politics? How does my being enmeshed within the thick texture of my informants' lives affect my openness to this question? Are we willing to countenance the sometimes violent task of remaking sensibilities, life worlds, and attachments so that women like those I worked with may be taught to value the principle of freedom?⁴

In *Politics of Piety*, feminists in the global north and south are singled out as invariably adhering to a specific form of liberal agency, one that is sexualised, unveiled and rational / without the trappings of tradition. Saba's analysis reveals how the issue of the veil cannot be reduced to being for or against the practice; or as operating along a gender equality/tolerance divide. These binaries miss the challenge posed by the subjectivity of the veiled woman and her *decision* to wear the veil as an ethical practice as well as a tool of emancipation. The practice of wearing the veil not only transcends the liberal framing of life along a public and private divide, it also cannot be understood within a politics of 'resistance to relations

of domination, and the concomitant naturalisation of freedom as a social ideal.'⁵ The practice of veiling is not understood within the terms of subordination or oppression, but as an ethical practice that reflects another way of being and living in the world. In interpreting ethical subject formation in relation to the pietistic Muslim woman through Foucault's analysis of the technologies of the self, Saba brought into crisis the 'unfettered' liberal autonomous subject to which Western feminism has attached itself.

The book exposes the patronising and imperialist approach of feminists and liberal intellectuals towards Muslim women especially in the post-9/11 era that witnessed the resurgence of old colonial tropes about the 'Other' and claims about the civilizational superiority of the West. Saba points to the need to bring humility to our global quest to liberate women. She pointedly asks,

[D]oes a commitment to the ideal of equality in our own lives endow us with the capacity to know that this ideal captures what is or should be fulfilling for everyone else? If it does not, as is surely the case, then I think we need to rethink, with far more humility than we are accustomed to, what feminist politics really means.⁶

The turn to the ethical subject is a turn that compels the progressive scholar to take seriously another's worldview. It pushes us to interrogate how our own interventions can inflict harm and result in epistemological erasures. It is an argument that has enormous appeal to those scholars who are either seeking, familiar with, live alongside or within alternative lifeworlds. It is a politics that proposes a space from which to challenge cultural relativists, religious nationalists of the Hindutva, Islamist or Buddhist Singhalese variety, and other orthodox positions, while also remaining critical of liberalism as the default position for progressive and feminist politics in these despairing times.

The Janus-face of secularism

Saba's work on agency and the religious subject cannot be separated from her second major contribution – analysing the relationship between secularism and religion at a structural level and its devastating impact on religious minorities. In her book *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*, Saba traced the many contradictions in secular governance and how it is implicated in solidifying

religious difference and division.

In bringing religion 'out of the closet' Saba does not seek to reinforce subordinating or retrograde practices, nor does she accept that the evacuation of religion from liberal thought is an accomplished fact. She engages critically with the concept of secularism, tracing the work that it does in liberal democratic and authoritarian spaces, and its impact on minority rights in both contexts. She argues that while at a formal level the minority is projected as an equal citizen in law, this claim neglects the power inequalities that have produced the very category of the minority through the privileging of majoritarian norms. These norms remain obscured from view by political secularism's claims to neutrality.

Secularism is largely conceived of as a progressive end goal marking the transition of society from the irrational dark ages of religious domination and belief into the period of rational thought and modernity. It is purportedly achieved through the separation of religion from the state and the neutral role of the state in matters of religion. This teleological narrative and minimalist formulation presents secularism as an end goal that will ultimately resolve religious conflict. Building on critical scholarship that has challenged this classical account of secularism, Saba puts into crisis the received wisdom about secularism as a social and political ideal, by setting out its genealogy and demonstrating how it has in fact exacerbated religious conflict.⁷

Drawing on the work of Talal Asad, Saba sketches the discursive operations of political secularism that produce and naturalise the public and private domains, and through which the modern secular state reorganises religious life. In establishing these domains, secularism determines and regulates the content and shape of religion and its concomitant practices. Far from separating religion from the state, Saba demonstrates how secularism is implicated in producing religious difference and religious inequalities. It claims to relegate religion to the private sphere while at the same time regulating any number of aspects of socio-religious life, thereby falsifying the public/private distinction. In other words, it both regulates and constructs religion as a space free from state intervention, which requires that it be called upon to adjudicate the line between the public and private. This also means that when courts are called upon to determine whether a particular practice is an essential part

of religious belief or a practice that can be regulated through the public order exceptions to religious freedom, 'secular' judges are engaged in nothing short of theological reasoning.

Saba demonstrates how religious liberty and minority rights took shape in the nineteenth century and within the context of the nation-state and global political inequality. She traces the Protestant origins of the distinction between religion and secularism and how this distinction is framed, sustained and maintained by the modern secular state. The analysis makes evident how religious majoritarianism is implicated in secularism, so that religious difference cannot be understood or settled simply by 'the heavy hand of the law.'⁸ The resolution of sectarian or religious conflict cannot be pursued through a better model of secularism or through more secularism, given how secularism is itself implicated in producing the conflict.

In *Religious Difference*, Saba compares how the right to freedom of religion, which is a key component of secularism, functions in secular democracies in Europe as well as in Egypt to regulate and contain the rights of religious minorities through a majoritarian lens. This comparative analysis may at first glance seem counter-intuitive. The open recognition of Islam as the official religion of Middle Eastern states, including Egypt, and as integral to national identity, seems to be illustrative of their lack of commitment to secularism, which demands state neutrality. This lack is further evidenced in the conjoining of religion and citizenship through the existence of separate family laws as opposed to a shared civil code delinked from religious affiliation.⁹ These features are also present in a range of Asian countries which are also hence presumed to be non-secular.

However, Saba persuasively demonstrates how religion also remains a predominant feature in the separation model of secularism based on State neutrality, where Christianity is central to the identity of Euro-Atlantic states. She illustrates how this fact is at times openly acknowledged by intellectuals, politicians and even the judiciary.¹⁰ She singles out the case of *Lautsi v Italy* decided by the European Court of Human Rights in 2011, which upheld the right of Italian public schools to display the crucifix in the classroom.¹¹ The Court held that Christianity in Europe is linked to the Enlightenment values of liberty and freedom of the person. While liberal demo-



cracies are more reluctant to acknowledge the presence of religion in secularism, Christianity remains integral to the national identity of some European states. The Court ultimately upheld the right to display the crucifix in public schools, stating:

It can therefore be contended that in the present-day social reality the crucifix should be regarded not only as a symbol of the historical and cultural development, and therefore identity of our people, but also as a symbol of a value system: liberty, equality, human dignity and religious toleration, and accordingly also of the secular nature of the state.¹²

As becomes evident, the religious majoritarianism informing secularism is obscured through the ruse of neutrality and its histories cast as universal. Saba captures this seamless equation of secularism and Christianity in a quote from Jürgen Habermas:

Egalitarian universalism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and social solidarity, of an autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, of the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct

heir to the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of continual critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it. And in light of the current challenges of a postnational constellation, we continue to draw on the substance of this heritage. Everything else is just idle postmodern talk.¹³

As Saba remarks this statement attributes the entire development of secularism and democratic governance to a Judeo-Christian ethics of justice and love. It not only reinforces and reproduces a historically inaccurate narrative, but also draws attention to how Christian norms, values and sensibilities are instantiated into narratives about European identity and become part of common sense thinking about secularism.¹⁴ An account that simply speaks to the deficiencies of secularism in non-Western contexts does not grasp how secularism structures the practices of religious belief and practices in the western, liberal democratic world. Saba's analysis reveals how the precarious positions of minorities in liberal and authoritarian contexts is continuously produced and sus-

tained.¹⁵ Instead of offering a solution to the problem of religious tensions and demolishing religious hierarchies through the pursuit of equality, secularism is implicated in creating them. Saba argues that modern secular governance has played a prominent role in transforming pre-existing religious differences, producing communal strife, and making religion salient to both the minority and majority communities.¹⁶ In this narrative, neutrality is unmasked and the modern state exposed as being deeply involved in managing and regulating religious life including by adjudicating on matters of religious doctrine and practice. The continued presence of religion in the public arena is not a sign of incomplete secularisation, but part of the structural paradoxes of the secular project that has helped to shape relations between the minority and majority.¹⁷

Recuperating radicality from the despair of progressive politics

In exploring alternative subjectivities with reference to the veil as well as exposing the integral relationship between secularism and religion, Saba opened herself to excoriating critiques from the progressive left and feminists. With regard to the veil, the critiques centred on Saba's ostensible negation of Muslim women's desire to be free from traditional practices. Similarly, her work on secularism has been challenged as undermining the possibility of an exit for those caught in the web of religious fundamentalism. Yet in interrogating and reframing questions of secularism, religion and equality, Saba did not seek to demolish these concepts. Her position is more nuanced and thoughtful than these critiques suggest.¹⁸ Saba's arguments are informed by a desire to recuperate radicality from a progressive politics that remains lodged in despair and hopelessness. Her insights are designed to sharpen our intellectual tools in order to push back against Islamophobia as well as the limits of western liberal thought, without slipping into the position of a cultural relativist.

With regard to the veil, she demonstrates how a logic that insists on disrobing the Muslim woman perpetuates a colonial fantasy that this single, essential act of unveiling will ensure her liberation from patriarchy and the oppressive practices of her culture. Penalising her failure to do so severely constricts and distorts the eman-

atory principle of gender equality by equating it with the right of women to wear what they want in public – *except* when it is a veil. These strategies fail to appreciate how the meaning of the veil, for some Muslim women, cannot simply be inscribed within secular assumptions about choice and freedom. For committed practitioners of piety, 'the veil' is not simply what they opt to wear – a garment that can be donned or removed as required – but rather signifies a mode of being, an elision of self-conception, interiority and identity.

Similarly, while some of her critics expressed the fear that her analysis of secularism could play into the hands of religious fundamentalists to advance their anti-western, anti-secular agendas, Saba's analysis reveals how right-wing and conservative forces have proven adept at being able to advance their ideological agendas in and through liberal values, including the discourse of secularism and its constituent elements, equality and tolerance. These political processes speak to the urgent need to retrieve and counter these encroachments through a focused critique. Saba's work can encourage thinking in a more productive and radical direction, including the exploration, recovery or seizing of heterodox and esoteric components within different philosophical traditions that have been marginalised or obscured in the hegemonic claims of religious fundamentalists.

The critiques of Saba's work in these areas speak to a deep reluctance on the part of the left, including critical and feminist scholars, to engage the terrain of religion. In fact, such critiques invariably and reflexively fall back on uninterrogated understandings of secularism and liberal individualism as a political counter to religious and right-wing agendas. Such reluctance cannot countenance new conceptions of freedom or alternative lifeworlds that have the slightest traces of 'religion'. And yet the questioning of secularism, equality and agency does not imply support for the rhetoric of cultural relativists, or ideologues of various persuasions. In fact, the analysis seeks to recuperate a radical political agenda, by occupying the semantic and political 'nonliberal' space that has too easily been ceded to reactionary forces and orthodoxies by progressive, leftist and feminist forces out of fear that it may mark them as 'religious' or unsecular. Indeed, it opens the possibility that has eluded postcolonial scholars to ground their positions outside of the violent legacies of the Enlightenment rather than

to seek solutions from within them.¹⁹

In questioning assumptions about religion and politics in liberal thought and feminism, Saba dared to explore spaces that were deemed off limits in left politics or taboo in feminist advocacy. In the process, she turned the gaze back on progressive politics and encouraged engagement in a politics of 'self-parochialization' reflected in the opening quote of this piece.²⁰ Quite specifically this process involves surrendering our conceits, engaging with another's worldview and demonstrating a willingness 'to learn things that we did not already know before we undertook the engagement.'²¹

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Notes

1. Saba Mahmood, 'Feminist Theory, Agency, and the Liberatory Subject: Some Reflections on the Islamic Revival in Egypt', *Temenos: Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 42:1 (2006), 61.
2. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
3. Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).
4. Mahmood, 'Liberatory Subject', 62.
5. *Ibid.*, 39.
6. *Ibid.*, 62.
7. For other accounts see Hussein Ali Agrama, *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Mayanthi Fernando, *The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007); Ratna Kapur and Brenda Cossman, *Secularism's Last Sigh? Hindutva and the (Mis)Rule of Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). See also Saba Mahmood and Peter Danchin eds., 'The Politics of Religious Freedom,' *South Atlantic Quarterly* 113:1 (2014), and the 'Teaching Law and Religion Case Study Archive', curated by Winnifred Sullivan and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, available at <https://sites.northwestern.edu/lawreligion/> The site builds on the earlier joint research project 'Politics of Religious Freedom' with Saba Mahmood and Peter Danchin.
8. Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). Mahmood argues that

the moral injury experienced by Muslims in the Danish cartoon controversy was not addressed in the debates. Such an injury cannot be expressed in terms of rights and is hence incommensurable with a rights discourse. As she argues, the rights of minorities are framed, judged and litigated within the larger context of the rights of the majority. This framing remains incapable of fully grasping the nature of the injury or even the deeper epistemological challenge being presented by the 'Other'.

9. Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 149–180.

10. See Mahmood's critique of Taylor, *A Secular Age*, which describes secularism as a unique achievement of 'Latin Christianity', which is itself portrayed as homogeneous and with little acknowledgement of its encounters with its 'Others': Saba Mahmood, 'Can Secularism Be Other-Wise?', in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, eds. Michael Warner, Jonathan Vanantwerpen and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 282–299.

11. Joseph Weiler represented *pro bono* 18 European states who challenged the lower chamber's ruling upholding the ban on crucifixes in Italian public classrooms. Weiler argued that the lower chamber disregarded the religious dimension to Europe's history and that '[I]t is not the case that the cross is only a national symbol as some people would hold. That is nonsense. The cross is a national symbol and a religious symbol ... It is both and it is understandable'. George Weigel, *The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America and Politics Without God* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 19. See also Joseph Weiler, *Un'Europa Cristiana: Un Saggio Esplorativo* [Christian Europe: An Exploratory Essay] (Milano: Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, 2003).

12. *Lautsi and Others v. Italy*, 18 March 2011, <http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/sites/eng/pages/search.aspx?i=001-104040>, para 15.

13. Mahmood, *Religious Difference*, 8.

14. *Ibid.*, 8.

15. *Ibid.*, 6.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, 2.

18. See for example Rachel Rinaldo, 'The Islamic Revival and Women's Political Subjectivity in Indonesia,' *Women's Studies International Forum* 33 (2010), 422–431, on how a focus on the ethical subject can run the risk of overemphasising the role of individual agency in decision-making; Elizabeth M. Bucar, 'Dianomy: Understanding Religious Women's Moral Agency as Creative Conformity,' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78: 3 (2010), 662–686, on how the concept of 'dianomy' focuses on both the discursive and performative environment of religious women and better captures the model of agency being exercised.

19. Thus it challenges Chakrabarty's resignation that the post-colonial thinker must inevitably come to terms with this bind. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

20. Webb Keane, 'Saba Mahmood and the Paradoxes of Self-Parochialization', available at <https://www.publicbooks.org/saba-mahmood-and-the-paradoxes-of-self-parochialization/>

21. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 37.