

RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCE
IN A SECULAR AGE

A Minority Report

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, the Middle East has emerged as the site of an unprecedented increase in violence between Muslims, Christians, and other religious minorities. While the mainstream Western media tends to present this as a product of primordial conflicts and Islam's inherent intolerance, even those critical of this interpretation nonetheless worry that the religious diversity that has characterized the region for centuries may be vanishing. This fear has only intensified following the recent exodus of Christians and Yazidis from countries like Syria and Iraq in the wake of the civil wars that have ravaged the two countries.¹ In this book I analyze the increasingly precarious situation of non-Muslim minorities in the modern Middle East, with a specific focus on Coptic Orthodox Christians and, to a lesser extent, Bahais in Egypt. While the Bahai faith is relatively new to Egypt, Coptic Orthodox Christians trace their history back to the first century, when Apostle Mark is said to have brought the faith to this land of Pharaohs and pagans. As the largest Christian minority in the Middle East, Coptic Christians have enjoyed a pride of place in Egyptian nationalist historiography for resisting British colonial occupation alongside Muslims.² Despite the wide recognition of their contributions to Egypt's anticolonial struggle, in the postcolonial period Coptic Christians have come to be treated as second-class citizens and have come to suffer various forms of social and political discrimination.

This book argues that modern secular governance has contributed to the exacerbation of religious tensions in postcolonial Egypt, hardening interfaith boundaries and polarizing religious differences. This claim will appear counterintuitive to many who

¹ Reports documenting this crisis can be found almost every day in the press. For three representative stories, see Daniel Brode, Roger Farhat, and Daniel Nisman, "Syria's Threatened Christians," *New York Times*, June 28, 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/06/29/opinion/syrias-threatened-christians.html?_r=0; Jack Healey, "Exodus from North Signals Iraqi Christians' Slow Decline," *New York Times*, March 10, 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/world/middleeast/exodus-from-north-signals-iraqi-christians-decline.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0; and Loveday Morris, "Desperate Iraqi Yazidis Flee into Syria," *Washington Post*, August 8, 2014, www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/desperate-iraqi-yazidis-flee-into-syria-after-kurdish-forces-secure-escape-route/2014/08/08/817a17ad-233a-4ee9-935e-820eb53594e4_story.html.

² I will be using the terms *Copts* and *Coptic Christians* for followers of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Generally speaking, all Christian sects in Egypt are modified by the term *Coptic*—as in the Roman Catholic Coptic Church, the Armenian Coptic Church, and so on. Yet in Egyptian political and historical discourse, *Copts* (*al-Aqbat*) invariably refers to the adherents of Coptic Orthodox Christianity, hence my usage.

believe that secularism is a solution to the problem of religious strife rather than a force in its creation. Yet, as I hope to show, we cannot understand religious conflict in Egypt today without adequate attention to how modern secularism has transformed religious identity and interfaith relations. Secularism has an inescapable character that emanates, in part, from the structure of the modern liberal state, which promises to demolish religious hierarchies in order to create a body politic in which all its members are equal before the law. The secular ideal of religious equality, introduced in the nineteenth century, transformed relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, making it possible for the latter to imagine a future of civil and political equality. Despite this foundational promise, religious minorities continue to suffer various forms of discrimination in contemporary Egypt and other parts of the Middle East. While Islamic concepts and practices are crucial to the production of this inequality, I argue 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. Furthermore, I suggest that inasmuch as secularism is characterized by a globally shared form of national-political structuration, the regulation of religious difference takes a modular form across geographical boundaries.

Two paradoxical features of this secular political rationality are particularly germane. First, its claim to religious neutrality notwithstanding, the modern state has become involved in the regulation and management of religious life to an unprecedented degree, thereby embroiling the state in substantive issues of religious doctrine and practice. Second, despite the commitment to leveling religious differences in the political sphere, modern secular governance transforms—and in some respects intensifies—preexisting interfaith inequalities, allowing them to flourish in society, and hence for religion to striate national identity and public norms. While these features characterize all modern states, in the case of non-Western polities such as Egypt they are often judged to be the signs of their incomplete secularization. My book challenges this diagnosis by asking us to attend to the structural paradoxes that haunt the secular project and how these paradoxes have helped shape the particular form that relations between Muslims and non-Muslims have taken in modern Egypt.

My analysis in this book is indebted to the burgeoning field of secular studies that has, over the past two decades, definitively challenged the conventional account of secularism as the separation between church and state, religion and law, and ecclesiastical and political authority.³ Scholars from a variety of disciplines have argued

that modern secularism is far more than this minimalist formulation allows; it entails fundamental shifts in conceptions of self, time, space, ethics, and morality, as well as a reorganization of social, political, and religious life. The secular, in other words, is not the natural bedrock from which religion emerges, nor is it what remains when religion is taken away. Instead, it is itself a historical product with specific epistemological, political, and moral entailments—none of which can be adequately grasped through a nominal account of secularism as the modern state's retreat from religion. Roughly speaking, this emergent scholarship explores two distinct, albeit related, dimensions of the secular: political secularism and secularity. The former pertains to the modern state's relationship to, and regulation of, religion, while the latter refers to the set of concepts, norms, sensibilities, and dispositions that characterize secular societies and subjectivities.⁴

This book is primarily concerned with political secularism, particularly the modern state's production and regulation of religious differences in one region of the Middle East, and the effects of this intervention on the way religious identity has come to be lived for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. In the final chapter, however, I take up the question of secularity in terms of the proper attitudes, sensibilities, and reading practices that a modern believer is supposed to bring to the interpretation of sacred history and religious truth. Because these presuppositions are not so much found in the edicts and policies of the state but permeate culture at large, the final chapter tracks their imprint through a contentious debate over the publication of a historical novel about early Christianity in Egypt.

Following Talal Asad, I conceptualize political secularism as the modern state's sovereign power to reorganize substantive features of religious life, stipulating what religion is or ought to be, assigning its proper content, and disseminating concomitant subjectivities, ethical frameworks, and quotidian practices.⁵ Secularism, in this understanding, is not simply the organizing structure for what are regularly taken to be a priori elements of social organization—public, private, political, religious—but a discursive operation of power that generates these very spheres, establishes their boundaries, and suffuses them with content, such that they come to acquire a natural quality for those living within its terms.

The state's sovereign power to define and regulate religious life is neither monolithic nor predetermined. Rather, it is shot through with a *generative* contradiction.

and Redemption; McLeod, *Secularization in Western Europe, 1848–1914*; Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*; Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*; Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

⁴ For an insightful discussion of how secularity and political secularism are related, see John Lardas Modern's engagement with Michael Warner in Modern, "Confused Parchments, Infinite Socialities."

⁵ Asad, "Trying to Understand French Secularism."

³ Agrama, *Questioning Secularism*; Asad, *Formations of the Secular*; Baubérot, *Histoire de la laïcité en France*; Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist*; Fernando, *The Republic Unsettled*; Fessenden, *Culture*

On the one hand, the liberal state claims to maintain a separation between church and state by relegating religion to the private sphere, that sacrosanct domain of religious belief and individual liberty. On the other hand, modern governmentality involves the state's intervention and regulation of many aspects of socioreligious life, dissolving the distinction between public and private and thereby contravening its first claim. This does not mean that the liberal state's ideological commitment to keep church and state apart is false or specious, or that secularism constrains religion rather than setting it free. Rather, the two propensities internal to secularism—the regulation of religious life and the construction of religion as a space free from state intervention—account for its phenomenal power to regenerate itself: any incursion of the state into religious life often engenders the demand for keeping church and state separate, thereby replenishing secularism's normative premise and promise. Consequently, the question of *how* and *where* to draw the line between religion and politics, between what is deemed public and private, acquires a particular salience in liberal politics and is constantly subject to legal and political contestation.⁶

A reader might object at this point that the model of secular liberal governance I outline above applies to Euro-Atlantic democracies, but not to Middle Eastern states that are best described as “authoritarian” because of their flagrant violation of individual freedoms and liberties. For some, this distinction means that Middle Eastern societies are inadequately secular, while for others it requires that a typology of secularism be developed so as to distinguish this authoritarian variant from the kind practiced in paradigmatically secular Euro-Atlantic societies.⁷ While I understand the importance of attending to historically specific trajectories of secularism, I do believe that this way of casting the difference blinds us to common features of the secular project shared by Middle Eastern and Euro-Atlantic societies.

⁶ This is evident in the interminable debates over questions such as: Does the French government's ban on Islamic headscarves in public schools violate a Muslim woman's right to religious freedom? Should the US government allow prayer in public schools, or fund religious programs in federal prisons? Can Germany allow Christian and Jewish religious symbols to be displayed publicly while banning Islamic ones, without violating its claim to secular neutrality? What should the proper role of Islam be in the new constitutions of Egypt and Tunisia (following the uprisings in 2011)? Do India's religion-based family laws violate the state's secular laws of general applicability?

⁷ Among the scholars who make a categorical distinction between democratic and authoritarian secularism is Abdullahi an-Na'im: See an-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State*, esp. chap. 5, “Turkey: Contradictions of Authoritarian Secularism.” This distinction now permeates popular political discourse in the Middle East, as evident in the following remark made in 2007 by a leading member of the Muslim Brotherhood: “Labeling the Egyptian regime as ‘secular’ gives it unwarranted credit. In fact, the regime is neither secular nor Islamist. It is not liberal, conservative, or socialist for that matter. The only term that could accurately describe the Egyptian regime is ‘authoritarian.’” Ibrahim El-Houdaiby, “Egypt's Two-Faced Regime: Not Secular, Not Islamic, Authoritarian,” *World Politics Review*, March 30, 2007, www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/671/egypts-two-faced-regime-not-secular-not-islamic-authoritarian#.

To begin with, liberal and authoritarian states are not mutually exclusive entities. Authoritarian practices exist in paradigmatically liberal states, just as authoritarian regimes are held accountable in national and international courts for their violation of principles of liberal governance. Consider, for example, the series of executive decisions that have authorized torture, covert surveillance of the civilian population, and the suspension of individual liberties in the United States following the events of 9/11—all of which violate liberal norms of governance.⁸ Furthermore, the hard distinction between liberal and authoritarian states does not acknowledge how liberal concepts and institutions, key among them the liberal ideal of legal and political equality for all citizens, have come to define a global norm from which no modern society is exempt. What distinguishes the secular dimension of the liberal project is an elaboration of the concept of equality in relation to religious difference—namely, the claim that all people ought to be treated equally regardless of religious affiliation. As an aspiration and a principle, religious equality signaled a sea change in how interfaith inequality was historically perceived: from a commonly accepted practice in the premodern period to a problem that requires a solution in the modern world. This aspiration is manifest in state reforms as well as the platforms of political parties and social movements; it provides the basis for a range of state laws and institutions that delimit the kind of religious claims one can make publicly. Even in the most repressive states, the variety of social movements fighting for religious equality attests to the global reach of this ideal and its promise.⁹ I take this ideal and its attendant social imaginary to be a constitutive feature of political secularism, one that is shared across the Western and non-Western divide. The impossibility of its realization should not blind us to its power, its ongoing promise, and its constitutive contradictions.

In the course of writing this book, I stumbled upon the liberal-authoritarian distinction as I tried to parse the messy and overlapping histories of the Middle East and Euro-America. In chapter 4, for example, where I offer an analysis of the similar ways in which Egyptian and European courts sanction the customs and practices of religious minorities, the temptation was strong to mute this similarity and to force my material to conform with the liberal-authoritarian nomenclature. This is not surprising

⁸ One might argue in response that the United States' respect for constitutional protections reigns in aggressive national-security practices in a manner that makes it quite distinct from authoritarian states. However, as Aziz Rana's work shows, the reverence for American constitutionalism emerged historically “in tandem with the national security state, functioning critically to reinforce and legitimate government power rather than simply to place limits on it.” Rana, “Constitutionalism and the Foundations of the Security State.”

⁹ For example, in countries like Saudi Arabia and Israel, where the religious identity of the majority reigns supreme in the nations' laws, the ideal of religious equality continues to motivate a range of social struggles against religious supremacy.

since it exerts a tremendous force on our thinking and shapes the research questions that have become classic in the study of the Middle East.¹⁰ For instance, even as scholars recognize the relative independence of the Egyptian judiciary over the long period of its postcolonial history, they regard it as an anomaly that requires an explanation, given the “authoritarianism” of the Egyptian state.¹¹ A classic question that guides numerous dissertations, books, and articles is “Why would an authoritarian regime allow an independent judiciary to develop and function?”¹² It is rare that we ask what this form of legality might teach us about the nature of modern law, the sovereign power of the state, and the constitutive relationship between the rule of law, its exemptions, and its failures.¹³ A similar problem occurs in our approach to religious conflict: while in the Middle East it is analyzed under the rubric of “sectarianism,” an understanding of the fate of Jews, Muslims, and other (racial or ethnic) minorities in Euro-America is understood to require a different analytical lens. In emphasizing these differences, we lose the opportunity to explore the structurally precarious position that minorities (religious, racial, and ethnic) have come to occupy in all modern societies, and how the modern state produces and conditions their precarity. The fact that the Egyptian state is obliged to respond to demands for religious equality, that its constitution pays homage to religious freedom, and that its courts entertain legal challenges to its discriminatory policies points to a set of liberal legal and political norms that it shares with Euro-Atlantic states that are regarded as secular exemplars.

A second objection to the characterization of Middle Eastern states as secular centers on the role Islam plays in the articulation of national identity and law, a role that clearly violates the principle of state neutrality toward religion (however formally and minimally conceived). Egypt seems to exemplify this problem. Not only does the

¹⁰There is a veritable industry of academic works on the authoritarianism of Middle Eastern states. See, for example, Diamond and Plattner, *Democratization and Authoritarianism in the Arab World*; and Platt, *Democracy and Authoritarianism in the Arab World*. For an earlier version of the argument about the exceptional character of Middle Eastern authoritarianism, see Waterbury, “Democracy without Democrats?”

¹¹Since the military coup that brought General Sisi to power (in 2013), this image of the Egyptian judiciary as an impartial body has become unsustainable. As a number of recent commentators note, however, the regime has achieved judicial subservience to its goals by appointing a series of pliable and sympathetic judges who do not necessarily reflect the standpoint of the judiciary as a whole. See, for example, Nathan Brown, “Why Do Egyptian Courts Say the Darndest Things?,” *Washington Post*, March 25, 2014, www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/03/25/why-do-egyptian-courts-say-the-darndest-things/; and Ursula Lindsey, “Egypt’s Judges Strike Back,” *New Yorker*, March 26, 2014, www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/egypts-judges-strike-back.

¹²See, for example, el-Ghobashy, “Constitutionalist Contention in Contemporary Egypt”; Ginsburg and Moustafa, *Rule by Law*; and Moustafa, *The Struggle for Constitutional Power*. While these works offer invaluable insights, the data presented often goes against the authoritarian-liberal dichotomy on which the analysis is premised.

¹³For an exception, see Esmeir, *Juridical Humanity*.

Egyptian state proclaim an Islamic identity, it also regards the shari’a as the principal source of law in the country (enshrined in the country’s constitution since 1981). While most of Egypt’s laws derive from French legal codes, Islamic concepts continue to permeate court decisions and political debates. For example, the Quranic concept of “People of the Book” (*ahl al-kitab*), referring to the Abrahamic religions, is used to extend state recognition to Christians and Jews, while members of other faiths (such as Bahais) are excluded.¹⁴ This conjoining of citizenship and religiosity is further manifest in the existence of separate religion-based family laws for Christians, Muslims, and Jews instead of a shared civil law to which all citizens are equally subject regardless of their religious affiliation.

All these features of Egyptian political life seem to violate the norm of secular neutrality, a norm that Euro-Atlantic societies are supposed to exemplify. Such an understanding, however, overlooks the centrality of Christianity, increasingly glossed as “Judeo-Christian civilization,” to the identity of Euro-Atlantic states, an inheritance that politicians, judges, and public intellectuals widely hail.¹⁵ Consider, for example, the following passage from the well-known *Lautsi v. Italy* decision (2011) of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) that upheld the right of Italian public schools to display the crucifix in classrooms:

Looking beyond appearances it is possible to discern a thread linking the Christian revolution of two thousand years ago to the affirmation in Europe of the right to liberty of the person and to the key elements of the Enlightenment . . . namely, the liberty and freedom of every person, the declarations of the rights of man, and ultimately the modern secular state. . . . It can therefore be contended that in the present-day social reality the crucifix should be regarded not only as a symbol of a historical and cultural development, and therefore of the 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.¹⁶

Note the simultaneously particularistic and universalistic nature of the claim here. While the theological and doctrinal predicates of Western Christianity made secularism

¹⁴As I explain in chapter 4, under various premodern Islamic empires, followers of non-Abrahamic religions were also granted state protection. The Egyptian government, however, refuses to extend similar recognition to Bahais.

¹⁵David Sorkin notes that the “Judeo-Christian tradition” is a term of post-World War II American coinage that had no equivalent in pre-Holocaust Europe. Sorkin, “Religious Minorities and the Making of Citizenship,” 8.

¹⁶Italian Administrative Court’s judgment, quoted in *Lautsi and Others v. Italy*, March 18, 2011, <http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/sites/eng/pages/search.aspx?i=001-104040>, para. 15, emphasis added.

possible, it is also the only religion capable of transcending its own historicity to spawn a truly universal model of secular governance.¹⁷ This assessment is now widely echoed by contemporary Euro-American intellectuals such as Marcel Gauchet, Charles Taylor, and Slavoj Žižek.¹⁸ The following comment by the much-celebrated secular liberal philosopher Jürgen Habermas captures the spirit of this valuation:

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.¹⁹

Remarkably, in one fell swoop the entire history of the development of secular institutions and democratic governance is attributed to the “Judeo-Christian” principles of justice and love. The old standoff between clerical and republican values, as well as the long history of anti-Semitism, is set aside to represent secularism as a unique achievement born of the conjoining of Christianity and Judaism. I cite this example not to highlight its historical inaccuracy but to draw attention to the centrality of Christianity within narratives of European identity. Statements such as these do not simply invoke a historical legacy in the abstract, but occur in a context where the Muslim presence in Europe is increasingly cast as a threat to Europe’s civilizational identity. These claims, however, are not simply expressions of European prejudice. They are, I suggest, symptomatic of the fundamental centrality of Christian norms, values, and sensibilities (however Judaic they are made out to be) to European conceptions of what it means to be secular. Prejudice against European Muslims today (and European and non-European Jews of the past) is constitutive of, and emanates from, this self-understanding of Europe as essentially Christian and simultaneously secular in its cultural and political ethos. This is an argument I elucidate in the chapters that follow.

Far more importantly, for my purposes, the purported incommensurability of non-Western and Western secularism (the former deficient, the latter accomplished)

¹⁷ On this point, see Hirschkind, “Religious Difference and Democratic Pluralism.”

¹⁸ See, for example, Gauchet, *Disenchantment of the World*; Taylor, *A Secular Age*; Žižek, *On Belief*. See also my response to Taylor’s characterization of secularism as a unique achievement of “Latin Christendom” in Mahmood, “Can Secularism Be Other-Wise?”

¹⁹ Habermas, *Time of Transitions*, 150–51, emphasis added.

fails to grasp how secularity structures the practice of religion in polities like Egypt. It overlooks the fundamental ways in which key aspects of the secular episteme cut across the Western and non-Western divide, such as the concept of empty homogeneous time as a precondition for the politics of the nation-state.²⁰ It also fails to appreciate the shared history of the institutionalization of the modern state, whose political rationality is predicated upon the private-public distinction that, in turn, is foundational to the promise of civil and political equality. Under this arrangement, religion is relegated to the private sphere, which is also the legal and discursive domain of sexuality and the family, often entwining their moral and political fates. While religious morality has always been concerned with sexuality, as I will suggest in chapter 3, their delineation as quintessential elements of private life under secular modernity has created an explosive symbiosis between them that is historically unique. This is evident in how sexuality has come to serve as a flashpoint in a number of struggles over what it means to be religious or secular in the world, including in conflicts over gay marriage, the veil, contraception, HIV-AIDS, and abortion. In countries as diverse as Egypt, India, and Israel, this manifests in the exaggerated importance accorded to family law as the exemplary site for the preservation and reproduction of religious identity. Similarly, the distinction between religious *practice* (public) and religious *belief* (private), so consequential to European and Egyptian legal traditions, continues to justify state sanctions against minority religious symbols and practices in the public sphere. (The *Lautsi* decision I cite above is just one example of this; chapter 4 will present more.) We cannot make any of these related forms of secularity legible if we remain stubbornly entrapped within a logic of essential, often civilizational weighted differences that keep the boundaries of the West and the non-West intact and stable.

These shared modalities of being secular notwithstanding, it is nonetheless important to attend to the historically specific forms of life into which secular concepts and institutions were inserted in the Middle East. In Egypt, for example, the political rationality of the modern state had to adjust to the legacy of Islamic political rule, which did not simply restrain the modern state’s emancipatory project, but also inflected the way that project came to be interpreted and enacted. The fact that national sovereignty itself was predicated upon being able to claim a unique culture, religion, and language further entrenched the place of Islam in the making of Middle Eastern polities. As a result, one might say that premodern Islamic concepts of governance in a place like Egypt have rearticulated and transmogrified the principles, concepts, and institutions of political secularism, thereby giving them a specific form.

²⁰ For a discussion of the secular temporality that structures the historicity of the nation-state, see Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; and Chatterjee, “The Nation and Its Pasts.”

How do we render such historical differences conceptually visible, while at the same time being attentive to the globally shared features of secularism? One strategy within postcolonial scholarship has been to argue for multiple secularisms, dislodging a Eurocentric account by showing other ways of being secular—one Protestant, another Islamic, Hindu, or Buddhist, each offering a unique trajectory of secularism. This position recalls the debates in the 1990s waged under the rubric of “multiple modernities,” which was also meant to challenge Eurocentric accounts of capitalist modernity by drawing attention to the heterogeneous, local, and regional developments in the non-West.²¹ Despite its popularity in the academy, a number of trenchant critics argued at the time that something important was lost in this purportedly pluralist account. Timothy Mitchell, for example, pointed out that “the language of alternative modernities” implied “an almost infinite play of possibilities, with no rigorous sense of what, if anything, gives imperial modernity its phenomenal power of replication and expansion.”²² He also suggested that the vocabulary of alternatives continued to imply “an underlying and fundamentally singular modernity,” adapted to different cultural contexts, leaving undisturbed the epistemological hegemony of European forms of life and historical teleology.²³

The call for “multiple secularisms” suffers from similar problems in that it constructs the history of the Middle East either as a deviation from Western models of secularism or as a local and regional story that adds little to its conceptual formulation. I treat secularism neither as a single formation that homogeneously transforms all histories nor as a plurality expressed in local cultural forms. Rather, I suggest that secularism entails a form of national-political structuration organized around the problem of religious difference, a problem whose resolution takes strikingly similar forms across geographic contexts. In light of this, the critical issue is not so much to pluralize secularism as to conceptualize its variations in relation to a universalizing project, which, in the postcolonial context, also involves the ongoing subjugation of non-Western societies to various forms of Western domination.

This is no doubt a comparative enterprise, one that entails the analysis of how concepts travel across time and space in societies that are situated differently in a global matrix of power relations. Secularization in the postcolony is entwined with the history of power inequalities between the West and non-West, not least because

²¹ Alfred Stepan, a strong proponent of the “multiple secularisms” approach, explicitly draws upon the “multiple modernities” argument of the 1990s. See Stepan, “The Multiple Secularisms of Modern Democratic and Non-Democratic Regimes.” The notion of “multiple secularisms” is also espoused by a number of contributors to two edited volumes on the topic: Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, and Van Antwerpen, *Rethinking Secularism*; and Jakobsen and Pelligrini, *Secularisms*.

²² Mitchell, *Questions of Modernity*, xii.

²³ *Ibid.*

many of its signature concepts, institutions, and practices were introduced through (direct or indirect) colonial rule. Their ongoing exercise in the postcolonial period, as I hope to show in this book, continues to be beholden to this history of differential power. As Asad reminds us, the issue is not the Western or non-Western origins of these concepts but “the forms of life that articulate them, the powers they release or disable.”²⁴ The question that follows therefore is how these secular concepts have transformed the self-understanding of people of the Middle East, opening certain avenues of action while foreclosing others.²⁵

This book tracks the modern career of political secularism in Egypt through the institutionalization of five of its signature ideas: political and civil rights, religious liberty, minority rights, public order, and the legal distinction between public and private. This kind of work is, by necessity, recursive in that any attempt to track the Egyptian career of a secular concept or institution requires tracking its hegemonic footprints in the European landscape, not simply to register its deviations but to tame its liberatory and transcendent claims. Across the chapters of this book, I will explore different facets of the relationship between Egyptian and European articulations of secularism. In the epilogue, I gather up the diverse threads of this inquiry in order to highlight the implications of my analysis for how we might conceptualize secularism in both its unity and its dispersion. Briefly put, my argument is that even though religious minorities occupy a structurally precarious position in all modern nation-states, the particular shape this inequality takes—its modes of organization and articulation—is historically specific. Consequently, the means by which religious minorities wage a struggle against this inequality, as well as the paradoxes and contradictions such struggles generate, vary according to context (Egypt, France, Syria). While each chapter of this book elaborates a historically specific set of problems that Coptic Orthodox Christians and Bahais face in Egypt, I also show how these problems are derivative of a set of conundrums and paradoxes that the modern nation-state generates in its management of religious difference.

Religious Equality and Religious Difference

As I suggested, the inescapable quality of secularism in part emanates from the structure of the modern liberal state, which promises to demolish premodern forms of hierarchy in order to create a polity where all citizens are supposed to be formally equal in the eyes of the law. This promise, we might recall, was linked to a foundational

²⁴ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 17.

²⁵ For an illuminating discussion of this point, see *ibid.*, 212–18.

critique of ascriptive inequality and a recalibration of particularistic forms of belonging. The modern political subject had to subordinate fealty to his religion, locale, and clan to loyalty to the nation-state.²⁶ In the nineteenth century, the liberatory promise of political and civil equality transformed how Christian subjects of Islamic empires came to understand themselves in relation to the state. No longer destined to remain unequal by virtue of their faith, membership in the modern polity promised to allow them to stand as equals with Muslims (see chapter 1).

A key dimension of this transformation was the legal and political elaboration of the public-private divide, which was an important source for elaborating other modern distinctions such as secular/religious, political/civil, and universal/parochial. When Coptic Christians, at the turn of the twentieth century, tried to find themselves in this abstract language of citizenship, their Christianity posed fundamental, if familiar, problems. Their enfranchisement was predicated upon their willingness to privatize their Christianity, precisely because their religious difference was deemed to be inconsequential to their public, political, and legal status. This circumscription of Coptic Christianity to the private domain went hand in hand with the enshrinement of Islam as the collective identity of the nation. Despite the citizenry's diverse allegiances, all Egyptians were expected to recognize Islam as essential to the formation of the nation in a way that other religions were not. As I recount in chapter 2, when the first Egyptian constitution was being forged in the 1920s, Coptic Christians struggled with this condition of their political enfranchisement. Despite protestations, Coptic representatives decided to accept this wager at the time, encapsulated in the legendary statement made by Makram Ebeid, a prominent Coptic leader, that he was a "Muslim by country and a Christian by religion"—the former public and the latter private. This assessment, as I will elaborate, continues to haunt the Coptic political struggle for equality today.

This earlier moment in the making of the Egyptian nation is often read as a tragic gamble that the Copts lost to Islamic forces, who hijacked the promise of equal citizenship. Yet it behooves us to think critically about the structural challenges Coptic Christians faced, not unlike other religious minorities, in the framework of the nation-state. The parallel with the Jewish question in Europe is instructive here. As historians of Europe tell us, Jewish emancipation over the long nineteenth century was predicated upon the privatization and individualization of Jewish religious life. This often entailed both the dissolution of their autonomy over various aspects of communal life *and* their assimilation into the cultural norms of European nations

²⁶ See Wendy Brown's excellent discussion of this historical process as it pertained to the articulation of Jewish difference in contrast to gender in nineteenth-century Europe: Brown, "Tolerance as Supplement."

rooted in Christian values and sensibilities.²⁷ Despite Jewish attempts to accommodate this demand, their difference from the identity of the nation did not simply disappear. The persistence of the "Jewish question" well into the twentieth century indicates that Jewish difference—particularly embodied in the practices and lifestyles of the unassimilated Jews—could not be successfully abstracted. It continued to pose a challenge to the norms of European nations, which were putatively universal and areligious but substantively Christian. The invention of the concept of "national minority" and the minority-rights regime instituted under the League of Nations during the interwar period were meant to recognize and redress the assimilative force of nationalist politics directed against European Jews and other groups whose religious, ethnic, and linguistic profile rendered them vulnerable (see chapter 1).

In the essay "On the Jewish Question," written in 1843, the young Karl Marx perceptively diagnosed the place accorded to religious difference within the political rationality of the modern liberal state.²⁸ Marx was responding to the dominant secular liberal view in circulation at the time, most eloquently captured by Bruno Bauer, that for Jews to be truly emancipated not only did they need to renounce Judaism, but the state also needed to depoliticize religion and make it irrelevant to the civil and political status of European citizens. Once religion was abolished from the sphere of politics, Bauer predicted, Jews would no longer stand in "religious opposition to the state"—a secular prescription that rings true to our ears to this day.²⁹ Conceding that the "depoliticization" of religion represented progress over the past, Marx argued that it was wrong to conclude, therefore, that religion had become irrelevant to the political life of the liberal democratic state (what he at times refers to as the "constitutional" or "political" state). While the liberal state had made religion marginal to the exercise of popular sovereignty, religious distinctions, not unlike "other distinctions established by birth, social rank, education, [and] occupation," were allowed to flourish in political states (including North America, which Bauer held up as a model). Their power to foster and proliferate social inequalities remained unchecked.³⁰ "Man emancipates himself *politically* from religion by expelling it from the sphere of public law to that of private law. Religion is no longer the spirit of the *state*. . . . [Instead] it has become the spirit of *civil society*. . . . It is no longer the essence of *community*, but the essence of *differentiation*. . . . The division of man into the *public person* and the *private person*, the *displacement* of religion from the state to civil society—all this is

²⁷ Katz, *Out of the Ghetto*; and Vital, *A People Apart*. On forms of communal autonomy that European Jews had to surrender, see Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World*, esp. 185–223. For my discussion of this point, see chapter 2.

²⁸ Marx, "On the Jewish Question."

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

not a stage in political emancipation but its consummation. Thus political emancipation does not abolish, and does not even strive to abolish man's *real* religiosity.³¹ By sequestering religion in the private sphere, the political state in effect not only buries the inequalities that religion promotes but also *depoliticizes* them so that they appear natural and outside the sphere of politics. Note that, for Marx, the "*decomposition* of man into Jew and citizen, Protestant and citizen, religious man and citizen, is not . . . an evasion of political emancipation. It is *political emancipation itself*, the *political* mode of emancipation from religion."³² Thus, even though religion is marginalized from the conduct of politics, it is simultaneously consecrated in the private sphere as a fundament of individual and collective identity in a liberal society.

Marx, as is well known, sought complete human emancipation of man as a "species-being," which would require the abolition of religion as well as the constitutional/political state. True human emancipation, argued Marx, would ensue only when man "has become a *species-being*; and when he has recognized and organized his own powers as *social* powers (*forces propres*) so that he no longer separates this social power from himself as *political* power."³³ Following Feuerbach, Marx understood religious consciousness as an attribute of the alienated and unemancipated subject who projected his own collective human powers onto an anthropomorphized divinity. Marx proposes in "On the Jewish Question" that religion and the political state work in analogous ways in that both are projections of human power that is alienated from itself: "The state is the intermediary between man and human liberty. Just as Christ is the intermediary to whom man attributes all his own divinity and all his religious *bonds*, so the state is the intermediary to which man confides all his non-divinity and all his *human freedom*."³⁴ For Marx, as Wendy Brown argues, man attributes to "the institutions of the church and the state powers that are not their own, powers that are actually human capacities and human effects that circuitously come to be invested in church and state. . . . Indeed, the power of these institutions is largely constituted by their systematic relations of *misrecognition* and *misinvestment*."³⁵ Marx's famous phrase "Religion is the opium of the masses" captures aptly the sense that religion, for him, is the ideological obfuscation of reality. Consequently, from this conception of religion, Marx argued against Bauer's secular prescription that man should free himself from religion; he suggested, instead, that this was not possible until man liberated himself materially, that is, until he owned and controlled the conditions of his existence.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

³² *Ibid.*, 35–36.

³³ *Ibid.*, 46.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁵ Brown, *Politics out of History*, 87, emphasis added.

Much of the recent literature on religion and secularism has challenged and rethought this conception of religion as a distorted belief about the true nature of the world and human powers. Of particular importance is Asad's work, which shows that the concept of religion as belief is itself part of a normative secular framework in which religion is disinvested of its materiality.³⁶ This normative framework not only secures an ideational and subjectivist concept of religion at the expense of its material entailments, but also fails to apprehend how modern religiosity (whether as belief in transcendence, political identity, or state ideology) is enabled and spawned by the secular institutions that have become more, rather than less, enmeshed in its formulation and praxis. Indeed, if the religious and the secular are indelibly intertwined in the modern period, each conditioning the other, then the question is not so much how modern society can expunge religion from social life (as Marx envisioned) but how to account for its ongoing power and productivity in material and discursive terms. In what follows, I take up this charge by showing how religious difference has proliferated and metastasized in modern Egypt even as its *raison d'état* secularized. I hope to show how the regulation of religion under secularism has not simply tamed its power but also transformed it, making it more, rather than less, important to the identity of the majority and minority populations. This process has resulted in the intensification of interreligious inequality and conflict, the valuation of certain aspects of religious life over others, and the increasingly precarious position of religious minorities in the polity.

Religious and Minority Rights in Egypt

This book is based on over fifteen months of fieldwork in Cairo, Egypt, conducted between 2008 and 2013. When I arrived in January 2008, I was planning to work on the secularization of Quranic hermeneutics in Egyptian scholarly, political, and public life. However, once there, my attention was captured by a more persistent problem that saturated the Egyptian media: the plight of religious minorities. Media networks circulated daily reports about skirmishes between Coptic Christians and Muslims, from minor incidents to more spectacular attacks on Christian monasteries, churches, and property. The struggle of Bahais, who compose less than 1 percent of the population, provoked a raging debate on prime-time television about whether the state should recognize their religion. These public discussions stood in contrast to

³⁶ Asad, "Thinking About Religion, Belief and Politics." It is interesting to note that the idea that religion is about belief in a transcendental reality is shared by champions and detractors of secularism alike.

the silence on the matter in the 1990s, when the media rarely acknowledged the existence of minorities, much less their problems, because of strict government censorship. My curiosity was piqued. Was this an old problem that could no longer be suppressed, or had relations across confessional lines deteriorated beyond repair in the preceding decade?

At the suggestion of friends, I sought help from one of the emergent but prominent legal aid organizations, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR, est. 2002). Unlike other secular human-rights organizations that tended to stay away from questions of interreligious strife, the EIPR was unique at the time in taking up cases on behalf of religious minorities, including Coptic Christians, Bahais, and Shi'a.³⁷ More importantly, the EIPR was also distinct in its thematization of the right to privacy—around which the organization was founded and named—and its focus on questions of religion and sexuality.³⁸ In addition to launching public campaigns, much of what the EIPR did was take the government to court for violating its own constitution and laws by intervening in religious life and stipulating substantive religious values. The organization was spectacularly successful in winning difficult cases—key among them the Bahais' right to have their religion recognized on government documents, despite the state ban on their faith (see my discussion of this case in chapter 4).

I spent a year working with the EIPR and following the debates it provoked in the media and among other human-rights activists in Egypt. Much of this book is indebted to the conversations I had with the EIPR's brilliant and dedicated staff and their insights into the social, legal, and political causes of religious discrimination in Egypt today. They also painstakingly taught me the landscape of international human-rights law, its simultaneous globality and parochialism, under the shadow of which they operated. This exposure to the potential and limits of the international human-rights regime inspired me to gain a better understanding of this tradition and its historical importance for the struggle of religious minorities. To my surprise, during the course of this fieldwork I came to learn that human-rights discourse had

³⁷ The case of Shi'a Muslims (less than 1 percent of the population) is somewhat distinct in Egypt when compared to Bahais and Coptic Christians. The geopolitical alliance between Egypt, the United States, and Saudi Arabia against the Shiite state of Iran and the Lebanese political group Hezbollah has led the Egyptian government to increasingly represent the Shi'a as foreign agents whose goal is to subvert Sunni Islam. As a result, many Egyptians now believe that Shi'ism is a heretical cult (rather than a historically legitimate branch of Islam) that must be purged from the social life of the country. Under emergency law, the State Security forces have arrested, interrogated, and tortured the Shi'a in Egypt as enemies of the state. See EIPR, "State Security Court Rejects Interior Ministry Appeal."

³⁸ The EIPR's work has since expanded to encompass other issues, including advocacy for economic justice, democratic and political rights, and the reform of the criminal justice system. For the full range of issues they now address, visit the website, <http://eipr.org/en/>.

powerful religious patrons, most prominently in the American evangelical movement. With help from the US State Department, evangelicals have mobilized a successful global campaign since the 1990s to "save persecuted Christians" in the Middle East (see chapter 2). For some Egyptians, the contemporary evangelical movement is reminiscent of nineteenth-century missionaries who also mobilized in the name of religious freedom and intervened in Egyptian domestic politics (see chapter 1). For others, the evangelical movement of today is categorically different from the missionaries of the past in that it aims not to convert Coptic Christians but to bring their plight to the global stage. This debate provoked me to explore how the earlier colonial and missionary promotion of the right to religious liberty informs the present discourse and campaigns, revealing the overlaps and departures between this earlier history and the present.

Over the course of my fieldwork, as I perused the carefully crafted legal briefs that the EIPR prepared on behalf of its clients, it became apparent to me that, in addition to national and human-rights law, another legal genealogy rooted in the Ottoman legacy of Islamic rule informed these court cases. The footprints of this legacy are legible in concepts such as "People of the Book" and the juridical autonomy granted to each state-recognized religious community over what is called family law. Though initially I was inclined to read this as nothing more than a holdover from the past, I eventually came to recognize the transmuted character of these earlier concepts and arrangements and the power they command in the life of Egypt's minorities today. Chapter 1 and chapter 3 are a product of this labor.

The struggle of religious minorities in Egypt today paradigmatically unfolds around the twin concepts of religious liberty and minority rights. While the former is enshrined in the Egyptian constitution, the latter is deeply contested. Both belong, however, to the semantic and conceptual field of civil and political rights. As I show in chapter 2, their meaning has always been deeply contested in the history of modern Egypt. In the current moment, for example, most secular activists conceive of religious liberty as an individual right consonant with the international discourse of human rights. For the Coptic Orthodox Church, in contrast, it is a group right—particularly the Church's right to administer the affairs of the Coptic community, to police religious conversions to Islam, and to maintain its autonomy over Coptic family law. For ordinary lay Copts, the individualized conception of religious liberty at times offers a release from ecclesiastical control over their lives; at others, the collective protections it offers represent a welcome respite from the assimilative thrust of the Islamic national project.

As I discuss in chapter 2, these tensions between different meanings of religious liberty are not simply local. They resonate with debates in international law during

the interwar period about whether the individualized conception of religious liberty was adequate to protect a minority's way of life. As this earlier debate reveals, the issue for many European minorities was not so much freedom of conscience as it was a group's ability to establish and maintain social institutions that could, in turn, secure the passage of requisite traditions to future generations and the preservation of communal identity. If one example of this is the European Jews' attempts to push for such provisions in various minority treaties during the interwar years (see chapter 2), then the First Nations' efforts to preserve their collective autonomy over lands and resources in North America are another. The question of minority rights was thematized by liberal theorists of multiculturalism in the 1990s, such as Will Kymlicka, Charles Taylor, and Iris Young, who drew attention to the importance of communal identity to democratic pluralism, and advocated for group-differentiated rights for certain cultural groups, particularly Native peoples of North America. Their advocacy was always delimited, however, by liberalism's foundational concern for maximizing individual autonomy and freedom.³⁹ These theorists were primarily concerned with "cultural difference" and largely silent on the question of religious difference, often assuming religion to be a relatively minor attribute of "culture."⁴⁰

While the current debate in Egypt shares some of the same concerns thematized in these earlier debates about minorities, it is also distinct in certain respects. Inasmuch as religious difference is crucial to minority struggles in Egypt, it necessarily bears upon and engages questions of political secularism. The Egyptian debate on the status of minorities is also distinct in that it partakes in another genealogy, one rooted in the history of Islamic political thought and its place in the modern polity. Issues such as the proper relationship of the shari'a to Egypt's civil law, how to counterbalance the principle of civil and political equality with the Islamic identity of the state, and the place of religious minorities (such as Bahai and Shi'a) in the polity are heavily

³⁹ Kymlicka, for example, argued that group-differentiated minority rights should be made commensurate with the liberal principle of individual autonomy, which he identified as essential to the liberal concept of tolerance. See Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*. See also Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*.

⁴⁰ Religion, for example, is hardly mentioned in *Multicultural Citizenship*, Kymlicka's signature work on the topic. I suspect this is because when the multiculturalism debate peaked, the key challenge that the Euro-Atlantic states faced was how to assimilate immigrants into the cultural mainstream. In contrast, in the post-9/11 period, it is religion—particularly Islam—that poses a pressing national-security problem for these states. It is, therefore, not surprising that one of the leading theorists of multiculturalism, Charles Taylor, who had little to say about religious difference in his earlier ruminations on multiculturalism, has turned his attention to the problem of how religious diversity should be managed in a liberal polity. Compare, for example, Charles Taylor et al., *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"*, with his more recent focus on religious diversity in Maclure and Taylor, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*.

debated and contested. The political theology of the Egyptian state therefore navigates between liberal and Islamic traditions, even if one commands a much greater force in this negotiation than the other.

Like religious liberty, the concept of a national minority is also deeply contested in Egypt today. When I first started working with the EIPR, I was struck by the fact that the term is not recognized legally, even though it saturates public debate. While both the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Egyptian government eschew the term, the fact that Copts command their own religion-based family law constitutes an example of group-differentiated rights often associated with minority politics. For many nationalist Copts, the term remains sullied by its colonial deployment, when the British used it to sow divisions between Muslims and Christians in order to secure their rule.⁴¹ For these activists and intellectuals, the minority designation sets the Copts apart from the nation's identity, distancing them further from the ideal of universal equality and citizenship. The statement by Makram Ebeid quoted above ("I am a Muslim by country and a Christian by religion") is exemplary of this stance, and is often repeated with great national fervor. However, there is now a strongly dissenting view among Copts who call upon their coreligionists to embrace the designation "national minority" in order to make their subordination visible in a language that has traction in international and human-rights law. These voices draw upon an earlier moment in history, often ignored by nationalists, when, in the 1910s and 1920s, an important contingent of Copts tried to insist on their status as a minority in order to highlight the systemic religious discrimination they faced and to suggest political means of redress. In the early part of the twentieth century, these Coptic activists tried to cast the assignation of confessional community (*millet/ta'ifa*) aside in favor of using "nation" (*umma*) and "minority" (*aqalliyya*) to claim equality with Muslims. While I explore this point in detail in chapter 2, it is important to underscore how deeply contested any invocation of these concepts—religious liberty and minority rights—is because of their enmeshment in histories of colonial rule and missionary campaigns as well as in ongoing projects of Western hegemony in Egypt. In other words, Egypt's differential sovereignty in relation to Western power crucially determines the meaning and praxis of these concepts. This is manifest not only in the colonial history these concepts recall in the present, but in the significant power that human rights and international law command in settling domestic conflicts in Egypt today. In contrast, violations of minority rights and religious liberty in Euro-Atlantic societies are rarely if ever adjudicated on this terrain.

⁴¹ For a review of this debate, see my discussion in chapter 2.

The fact that religious liberty and minority rights figure prominently in the struggle for religious equality in Egypt is not surprising: both work to highlight histories of subordination and provide the means for redress within the framework of the nation-state. Both concepts bring the issue of difference back into the disembodied language of civil and political rights. The demand for minority rights emerges when the hegemonic construction of the nation can no longer assimilate or incorporate its Others. Similarly, the call for religious liberty often marks a fissure from majoritarian religious norms that stand in for national culture. Both concepts are, in an important sense, diagnostic of the religious inequality that permeates the social life of a secular liberal polity, an inequality that constantly calls into question the undelivered promise of formal political equality. One might say that the concepts of religious liberty and minority rights are symptomatic of both the promise *and* the limits of political secularism: the former in its claim to make religion indifferent to the distribution of rights and freedoms, and the latter in its inability to eradicate parochial communal affiliations from the social and political identity of its citizens. This paradox, which is internal to political secularism, informs each chapter of this book.

Secular Objections

At this point, I would like to briefly address some common objections that readers may raise against my analysis of secularism. One might argue that I have painted too bleak a picture of secularism, in which it is nothing more than the exercise of state and (neo)colonial power, and that I have ignored its more promising and liberatory dimensions: the protection it extends to individuals and religious minorities to hold and practice their religious beliefs freely without state or social coercion; or its guarantee that a citizen's religious affiliation is inconsequential to her civil and political status in the eyes of the law; or that it allows believers and nonbelievers to speak their mind without fear of state or social discrimination. These are not negligible freedoms, as anyone who has been harassed for his or her religious (or nonreligious) beliefs knows full well. Furthermore, the history of religious persecution has taught us to be wary of fusing the identity of the state too closely with institutions of ecclesiastical power. If the Christian inquisition is an early example, then more recent ones from Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Iran should surely make us cautious about abandoning the principle of state neutrality toward religion.

While I appreciate the protections and freedoms that secularism might extend to religious dissenters and nonbelievers, I would also like to point out that political secularism is not *merely* the principle of state neutrality or the separation of church and

state. It also entails the reordering and remaking of religious life and interconfessional relations in accord with specific norms, themselves foreign to the life of the religions and peoples it organizes. This dimension of political secularism—shot through as it is with paradoxes and instabilities—needs to be understood for the life worlds it creates, the forms of exclusion and violence it entails, the kinds of hierarchies it generates, and those it seeks to undermine. The two dimensions of political secularism—its regulatory impulse and its promise of freedom—are thoroughly intertwined, each necessary to the enactment of the other. A scholarly inquiry into this dual character, its limits, contradictions, and violence, should not be mistaken as a denunciation of secularism or as a call for its demise. Secularism is not something that can be done away with any more than modernity can be. It is an ineluctable aspect of our present condition, as both political imagination and epistemological limit. To critique a particular normative regime is not to reject or condemn it; rather, by analyzing its regulatory and productive dimensions, one only deprives it of innocence and neutrality so as to craft, perhaps, a different future.

One of the greatest difficulties in conceiving of liberal secularism as something other than the principle of state neutrality toward religion is that it puts into peril the possibility of civil and political equality, and thus the promise of a humanity freed from servitude to divine and clerical authority. Secularism temporalizes divine power, makes its transcendental claims immanent and worldly. To suggest that secular liberal politics is never free of religion threatens the hope that in the face of irredeemable religious strife there can be a neutral arbiter who can adjudicate the conflict by stepping outside the fray. It seems to me that to talk about secularism in today's world is to engage in what Quentin Skinner once called "evaluative-descriptive" speech acts, wherein to describe a political system is also to commend it by treating the normative claims of a given system as the grounds for assessing its superiority.⁴² It is perhaps for this reason that when I have questioned the secular state's promise to deliver religious equality, I have been at times accused of infidelity to the principle itself, as if to interrogate secularism's promise is to reject the ideal. But the secularist hope that a truly secularized state *will* deliver us from religious conflict and prejudice is premised on a fundamental misunderstanding of what exactly the state is (or can be) neutral toward. As Marx argued, the secular liberal state does not simply *depoliticize* religion; it also embeds it within the social life of the polity by relegating it to the private sphere and civil society. This book tries to track this double movement in the social and political life of Egypt.

⁴² Skinner, "Empirical Theorists of Democracy and Their Critics." See David Scott's discussion of this point in relation to liberal democracy, "Norms of Self-Determination."

Many critics of Egypt's discriminatory policies toward religious minorities argue that if the state were to be truly secularized—that is, if it became neutral in regard to its Islamic identity as well as those it governs—then it would eliminate interreligious conflict. While there is no doubt that this would improve the life of Egypt's religious minorities, it ignores the fact that the modern secular state is not simply a neutral arbiter of religious differences; it also produces and creates them. To think through *this* problem, one has to begin by recognizing the contradictions and inequalities that political secularism itself generates and the religious presumptions it embeds in the legal and political life of the nation. My suggestion is not that religious conflict is an inevitable or solely a product of secularism. But inasmuch as secularism is one of the enabling conditions of religious conflict today, it behooves us to understand its paradoxical operations so as to mitigate its discriminatory effects.

It may be obvious to readers of the debate on secularism that this text eschews any use of the term *postsecular*, which has become fashionable these days in certain academic circles. This eschewal registers my basic disagreement with the assumptions this term entails. At the most fundamental level, the term *postsecular* expresses a sense of surprise that, despite the prediction that religion would wither away in modern society, it continues to be important to political and social life. Thus, in Jürgen Habermas's influential formulation of the term, despite "secularistic certainty that religion will disappear world-wide in the course of modernization," it continues to maintain "public influence and relevance."⁴³ This understanding, in its temporal accent on the *post*-, suggests that there is something unexpected and novel about the persistence of religion in the present. Yet, as much of the critical scholarship on the topic suggests, religion has been a constitutive feature of secularism throughout its modern history. There is nothing new about the copresence of the religious and the secular.

Perhaps most importantly, the term *postsecular* in its prosaic observation that religion is part of the secular present implicitly subscribes to a conventional theory of secularization that Charles Taylor aptly calls a "subtraction theory," wherein the secular is assumed to be that which remains after religion is taken away. The idea that secularism is devoid of religion is common among its champions and detractors alike. Christian fundamentalists and Islamists, for example, oppose secularism for undermining the place of religion in public life, and secularists champion it as an antidote to the rise of religious politics. Both subscribe to the same dichotomous view of religion and secularity, and hence fail to take stock of their mutual imbrication and interdependence. This anemic understanding of secularism (as the absence of religion) does not account for its substantive shape and form, the political and social

arrangements it engenders, and the ethical/moral commitments it normalizes. In this important sense, secularism is not simply another term for modernity; it is indexical of those social phenomena, institutions, and practices in which the distinction between the religious and the secular is recurrently salient and often contested.

A Comment on Method

Before I proceed, a few words about the kind of anthropology that lies at the heart of this book. As I mentioned, I could not have written *Religious Difference in a Secular Age* without conducting fieldwork with the EIPR and other minority-rights groups in Cairo. However, as I worked with these activists, I realized that the assumptions that informed their work were not simply "theirs" but belonged to a global political discourse that exerts an immense force on our collective imagination. The temporality and historicity of this discourse are quite distinct from the one that informed the actions of the Egyptian activists; the disjuncture between them was not always visible to the activists or me during the course of my fieldwork. Upon my return from Egypt, as I began the process of analysis and writing, I was compelled to dig beyond the ethnographic encounter to grasp fragments of the past congealed into the present, their temporal weight pressing into it. This process in turn 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.

Even though *Religious Difference in a Secular Age* is not an ethnography in the classical sense, an anthropological mode of inquiry is crucial to this book's architecture.⁴⁴ In the chapters that follow, I track not the ideational life of a concept but its practical and material unfolding in a society that is historically distinct but also shares a global grammar of legal and political governance. Too often, anthropology is understood to be consubstantial with its method (participant observation and fieldwork) and a genre of writing (ethnography). Yet anthropology, in my view, is also a mode of analyzing distinct forms of life through a study of concepts internal to them, embedded and realized in social practice. To the extent that anthropology is a study of concepts in practice, the method of participant observation is a useful tool but should not be taken to stand in for anthropological analysis itself. In my view, "understanding" in anthropology implies not simply objectively recording how people in a given

⁴³ Habermas, "Notes on a Post-Secular Society."

⁴⁴ For some excellent ethnographies of Coptic Christian life, see Heo, "The Bodily Threat of Miracles" and "The Virgin Made Visible"; Guirgus, *Les Coptes d'Égypte*; and Shenoda, *Cultivating Mystery*.

society think or behave, but juxtaposing the constitutive concepts and practices of one form of life against another in order to ask a different set of questions, to decenter and rethink the normative frameworks by which we have come to apprehend life—whether one's own, another's, or those yet to be realized. It is this understanding of anthropology that animates this book.

Arc of the Book

This book is divided into two parts. In part 1, I track key shifts in the meaning and practice of the concepts of religious liberty and minority rights between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as they traveled through Western Europe, the Middle East, and Egypt. In this part of the book, I attempt to establish a broad historical framework that I believe is necessary for analyzing the current interreligious conflict in Egypt. Part 2 of the book focuses on three sites of controversy about the proper place of religious minorities in the Egyptian polity: incidents of interreligious marriage and conversion; the civil and political status of Bahais in the face of a state prohibition on their faith; and the publication of an acclaimed novel about the early history of the Coptic Orthodox Church. The first two controversies elaborate key structural features of political secularism and its management of religious difference, while the last is a rumination on secularity, particularly the relationship between history and revelation. In what follows, I briefly delineate the central arguments of each chapter.

Chapter 1 begins with the period when the discourse of religious liberty and minority rights was first introduced into what now constitutes the modern Middle East as a means of extending European Christian power over the territories and populations ruled by the Ottoman Empire. As early as the sixteenth century, Christian European states had been successful in exacting concessions from the Ottomans to represent and protect Eastern Christians (as they were called at the time) living under Ottoman rule.⁴⁵ Initially granted as part of routine imperial policy, the European states' right to represent and protect Ottoman Christians took on a different cast as Ottoman power declined over the course of the nineteenth century. These concessions came to serve as a means of, and justification for, subverting Ottoman

⁴⁵ Eastern Christianity comprises four branches: Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Church, the Nestorians, and the Eastern Catholic Church. Their followers span the territories of the Balkans, Eastern Europe, Asia Minor, the Middle East, Africa, India, and parts of the Far East; hence the name, Eastern Christians. Coptic Christianity is part of Oriental Orthodox Christianity, which includes the Syrian Orthodox, the Armenian Apostolic, the Ethiopian Orthodox, and the Indian Orthodox churches. This branch of Christianity broke with the Chalcedonian consensus in 451 AD, which is why its followers are also referred to as non-Chalcedonians. For more on this history, see chapter 5.

sovereignty over its Christian subjects and truncating its territorial boundaries. While Ottoman rule had been predicated on the norm of religious inequality, the Empire's slow and painful attempt at transforming itself into a republic led to the adoption of the concepts of religious liberty and minority rights. Parallel to the European experience, the implementation of these concepts aimed less at instituting interconfessional tolerance than at establishing the principle of state sovereignty and reorienting the parochial loyalties of its subjects to the emergent nation-state.

The history of the rise of the modern state in the Middle East is inextricable from the expansion of European colonial power into the region. An analysis of the development of secularism—its key concepts and institutions—in the region, therefore, needs to be situated within the framework of differential power relations that came to connect the Middle East to Europe. This is nowhere as evident as in the consolidation of the legal concept of minority in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth. As the second half of chapter 1 shows, British and French colonial powers made ubiquitous use of this new demographic identity in order to solve practical problems of colonial governance. Their divide-and-rule policy is well known in the scholarship on colonialism. Less known is the manner in which colonial powers subjected preexisting religious differences to a new grid of intelligibility. Under colonial rule, minority identity (bestowed by the state) became, paradoxically, sutured to a private attribute (religion), toward which the state claimed to be neutral. In contrast to scholars who tend to read this paradox as colonial hypocrisy, I suggest that it is diagnostic of the dual impetus internal to political secularism—namely, the modern state's disavowal of religion in its political calculus *and* its simultaneous reliance on religious categories to structure and regulate social life, thereby indelibly linking the private and public domains that the secular state aims to keep apart.

I continue my examination of religious liberty and minority rights in chapter 2, as I track their career in modern Egypt from the turn of the twentieth century until the present. I start with the 1920s, when the question of Coptic rights—and the term *minority* itself—was vigorously debated. When Egyptians drafted their first constitution in 1923 in anticipation of their independence from colonial rule, they faced a formidable challenge. How could the disembodied language of formal civil and political equality address the Muslim-Christian inequality that striated social life? Some Muslim and Coptic drafters of the constitution proposed that Copts should have proportionate representation in the parliament so as to secure Coptic interests that would otherwise be ignored. For others, to legislate minority participation within the parliament was tantamount to turning religious groups (*tawa'if diniyya*) into political groups (*tawa'if siyasiyya*). Ultimately, the proposal for Coptic proportional representation was rejected

because of the secular assumption that to give religious minorities a political voice was to compromise the principle of state neutrality toward religion.

The debate over accommodating religious minorities within the political structure of the state in the 1920s appears tame when compared to the rancorous exchange that erupted between Copts and Muslims over the drafting of a new electoral law in 2012. Through a close reading of this recent debate, I offer some reflections on what has changed for the Copts since the early 1920s, when the political horizon for a Muslim-Coptic partnership seemed open. Key to the current state of affairs are the consolidation of militarized state rule and the (neo)liberalization of the economy, which has accelerated since the 1970s. The radical privatization of the economy, ironically, has made religion far more central to Egyptian public and political life than it was in the 1920s. The rise of the Islamist movement is the most notable face of this development, but the other side of economic privatization is the increasingly central role the Coptic Orthodox Church has come to play in the provision of social and welfare services to lay Copts. As a result, the Church stands as the sole political and social representative of Copts today, a position of unparalleled power in the history of Egypt. Rather than understand this as the failure of secularism to take hold in Egypt, I hope to show how these developments are part and parcel of the secularization of Egyptian society.

Chapter 3 focuses on the issue of interreligious marriage and conversion, which is a key site of incendiary violence between Muslims and Christians in Egypt. While this conflict is deeply gendered, Egypt's religion-based family laws and the inequitable regulation of religious conversion play a pernicious role. Egypt's granting of juridical autonomy to Christians and Jews ("People of the Book") over family affairs is often presented as a continuation of ancient shari'a norms. However, drawing upon the work of a range of historians, I argue that family law, as an autonomous juridical domain, is a modern invention that did not exist in the premodern period. It is predicated upon the public-private divide so foundational to the secular political order, and upon a modern conception of the family as a nuclear unit responsible for the reproduction of the society and the nation. Religion, sexuality, and the family are relegated to the private sphere under this system, thereby conjoining their legal and moral fates. As a result, family law has come to bear an inordinate weight in the reproduction and preservation of religious identity. The Coptic Orthodox Church, for example, views any state-mandated reform of family law as an unlawful incursion into its sphere of juridical and ecclesiastical autonomy; and Christian-Muslim conflict often unfolds over the terrain of interreligious marriage and romantic liaisons.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ A very similar situation prevails in other countries with religion-based family-law regimes. See, for example, Yükeş, *Human Rights under State-Enforced Religious Family Laws in Israel, Egypt, and India*; and Agnes, "The Supreme Court, the Media, and the Uniform Civil Code Debate."

Through a careful analysis of some of the most well-known controversies over Coptic conversions to Islam between 2006 and 2012, in chapter 3 I develop an analytical framework for thinking about the explosive entwinement of religion, sexuality, and the family within Egyptian social life today. In a nutshell, I argue that interreligious conflicts of this kind are a product of the simultaneous privatization of religion and the family under modern secular governance, further exacerbating premodern patterns of confessional hierarchy and gender inequality.

If, indeed, family law is the means by which the Egyptian state acknowledges and regulates the presence of permissible religious difference in the polity, what is the status of those confessional groups that the state does *not* recognize? I take up this question in chapter 4, where I focus on the small Bahai minority through a close reading of Egyptian court cases dealing with their right to religious liberty and, by extension, their civil and political status in the polity. As I show, the Egyptian courts grant Bahais the right to hold their beliefs but use the concept of public order to deny them the right to manifest their beliefs in public, which, the courts argue, includes proclaiming their faith on government-issued documents. The legal grammar that the Egyptian courts use, particularly the secular concept of public order, bears strikingly familiarity with the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights on religious minorities in a range of countries, including some that espouse a distinctly secular identity (France, Switzerland, and Turkey) and others that proclaim to be Christian (Italy and Greece). The analogous deployment of public order and religious liberty, as well as the majoritarian bias of the law, regardless of the national identity of the state (religious or secular), I argue, is instructive for explicating the shared legal grammar of political secularism that cuts across the Western and non-Western divide.

The final chapter is somewhat of a counterpoint to the book's focus on political secularism in that it takes up the question of how secularity conditions even the most polemical Christian-Muslim debates in Egypt today, key among them secular conceptions of temporality, history, and revelation. These assumptions were at play in the controversy that erupted over the publication of the novel *Azazel* (2008), which won several literary awards and was translated into a number of languages. *Azazel* is a piece of historical fiction located in the early history of Christianity in Egypt (319–431 AD) when the Christological debate split Christendom apart (between the Chalcedonians and the anti-Chalcedonians), a schism that eventually led to the consolidation of the Coptic Orthodox Church. The novel provoked an outcry among Coptic clerics, who charged that it defamed Christianity and misconstrued the doctrinal schism in order to legitimize an Islamic interpretation of Jesus Christ. While the Coptic Orthodox Church tried to get the novel banned, its secular readers (Christians and Muslims) and the author, Youssef Ziedan, asserted that the novel was

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an enlightened critique of religious violence and that the novel's protagonist, an ascetic Christian monk, was a symbol of the human quest for freedom and truth against ecclesiastical power.

Key to the novel's architecture is the author's claim that it is a historically accurate account of the Christological schism, a claim that the Coptic Orthodox Church countered with its own interpretation rooted in competing historical sources. Their conflicting versions of early Christian history notwithstanding, the clerics and the author shared the assumption that for revelation to be authoritative it had to be grounded in historically verifiable events. Both arguments relied on a secular conception of history as a repository of "real events" that occurred in calendrical (rather than sacral) time, unbound from eschatological events and temporality. It is this conception of history and temporality that provides the ground over which religious skeptics and enthusiasts alike argue about their interpretation of religious truth, a tradition of argument that belongs to the secularization of religion and scripture that dates back to the nineteenth century. In concluding this chapter, I reflect on the relationship between secularism and secularity, particularly the place a positivist notion of history occupies in settling what appear to be incommensurable religious worldviews.

Finally, I close the book with a short epilogue in which I reflect on the ideal of religious equality, its significance as a legal mandate versus as a human aspiration that characterizes our modern secular imaginary. I suggest that these two dimensions of religious equality are distinct, neither reducible to the other, and each requiring different kinds of social action. Inasmuch as secularism reduces the ideal of religious equality to a politics of rights and recognition, it privileges the agency of the state, which is far from a neutral arbiter of religious differences. In such a context, I ask what social, ethical, and moral resources are available in a secular polity to realize interreligious equality, resources that do not reflect or serve the imperatives of the state.

PART I