IN MEMORIAM

THE THIRTEENTH ANNUAL WADIE JWAIDEH MEMORIAL LECTURE

JWAIDEH MEMORIAL LECTURE: RELIGIOUS MINORITIES AND SECULAR POLITICS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Thursday, October 2, 2014 at 7:30 PM
President’s Room, University Club
Indiana Memorial Union
In Memoriam:
Celebrating the Lifelong Contributions of a Legendary NELC Scholar at IU

In celebration of the lifelong contributions of scholarship and education by Professor Wadie Jwaideh, we are honored to present you with a copy of the lecture presented last year by Professor Saba Mahmood.

Professor Mahmood’s presentation, “Religious Minorities and Secular Politics in the Middle East, according to its abstract, focuses on the emergence of the category “minority” in modern political thought and its genealogy in the Middle East. How did this category and attendant political rationality transform the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims? How does the legacy of this historical emergence help us understand the embattled place of religious minorities in the Middle East today?

The prominence of the problems arising from Iraq and its social turmoil only underscores the ongoing relevance of this talk as it seeks to define the components comprising this society. Knowledge of such diversity, one hopes, would educate us in appreciating the value of each culture and tradition for what it has to add to any thriving civilization.

As always, we rely on your support in making the annual Wadie Jwaideh Memorial Lecture a success every year and in planning ahead for the future. We have benefited enormously from generous contributions in the past, notably from members of the Jwaideh family, as well as from a number of Dr. Jwaideh’s colleagues and students. Please help us continue this noble tradition for many years to come.

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Religious Minorities and Secular Politics in the Middle East

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The right to religious freedom is widely regarded as a crowning achievement of secular-liberal democracies, one that guarantees the peaceful coexistence of religiously diverse populations. Enshrined in national constitutions and international laws and treaties, the right to religious liberty promises to ensure two stable goods: (1) the ability to choose one’s religion freely without coercion by the state, church, or other institutions; and (2) the creation of a polity in which one’s economic, civil, legal, or political status is unaffected by one’s religious beliefs. While all members of a polity are supposed to be protected by this right, modern wisdom has it that religious minorities are its greatest beneficiaries and their ability to practice their traditions without fear of discrimination is a key marker of a tolerant and civilized polity. While it is common to conceive of religious liberty as an individual human right, a far less recognized aspect of religious liberty is its longstanding use as a technology of modern governance and its role in the maintenance of a geopolitical order characterized by the inequality between Western and non-Western forms of sovereignty. I want to suggest that the establishment of the principle of religious liberty as well as its ongoing exercise in non-Western countries continues to be shaped by this inequality--its idealistic claims notwithstanding.

My talk today is an exploration of this neglected dimension of the right to religious liberty. Focusing on the Middle East, I analyze how the discourse on religious freedom from its inception has been intertwined with the exercise of Western Christian and secular power, and how its subsequent institutionalization through national and international laws continues to be beholden to this history. A key figure in this alternative genealogy of the right to religious liberty is the figure of the “minority” that has served as a site for the articulation and justification for the exercise of European power over non-European lands and sovereignties. As I will show, from the sixteenth century onwards the discourse on religious liberty in the Middle East has been intertwined with European projects of extending “protections” to non-Muslim minorities (primarily Christian) as a means of securing European interests in the region. I will argue, such a historical project cannot simply be understood as an instrumentalization of religious minorities for geopolitical ends. Instead, one must ask as to how the very concept of “religious minority”—its space of problematization—is indebted to this history. Viewed from this perspective, “religious minorities” do not simply signify a demographic entity that are accorded a space of freedom and immunity by the institutionalization of religious liberty, but are also produced through the legal codification of this principle. One of the key questions that guides this talk is not so much what
inhibits the realization of religious freedom (as if religious freedom where an ahistorical universally valid good), but how the international regulation and protection of religious minorities makes specific notions of freedom and unfreedom imaginable and possible.

**Unequal Sovereignties and Religious Freedom**

In European historiography, the signing of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 is often narrated as a foundational moment in the emergence of the twin concepts of religious liberty and state sovereignty that not only brought an end to almost a hundred years of religious warfare among Christians but also paved the way for the eventual creation of a political order in which religious tolerance became an integral part of modern governance and state-craft. While some scholars view the Peace of Westphalia as an earlier moment in Europe’s unfolding commitment to the virtue of tolerance, others see it as a far more pragmatic instrument that helped settle longstanding territorial disputes, granting formal independence to polities struggling to be free from the Holy Roman Empire (such as the Netherlands, Switzerland, Savoy, and Milan). In this latter understanding the Peace of Westphalia is credited with establishing the principle (if not the practice) of state sovereignty with the sovereign’s right to control his territory and subjects free from outside intervention. What I want to highlight here is that in European historiography, the symbolic birth of the concept of religious liberty is deeply intertwined with the establishment of the principle of state sovereignty, territorial exchange between warring parties, and the creation of an inter-state protocol for handling what used to be called “religious dissidents” but later came to be regarded as “religious minorities.”

While the fundamental relationship between religious liberty and the doctrine of modern sovereignty in European history is widely acknowledged, far less appreciated are the exceptions this narrative enacted as the discourse of religious liberty traveled to non-European shores. Notably, the introduction of the principle and practice of religious freedom to non-Western lands was often predicated upon the violation and subjugation of the principle of state sovereignty instead of its consolidation. Consider, for example, the repeated attempts by Christian European rulers to assert their right to protect Christian minorities within the Ottoman Empire throughout the sixteenth century. As long as the Empire was strong it was able to accommodate these pressures without compromising its sov-
ereignty, but once Ottoman power started to decline it was unable to resist Western European incursions on behalf of the Ottoman Christian populations. As early as sixteenth century, Ottoman rulers had granted special privileges—known as “Capitulations” –to Western European traders that ensured a considerable degree of self-government in matters of criminal and civil jurisdiction as well as freedom of religion and worship. Historians note that these privileges soon came to apply also to European missionaries and eventually indigenous Ottoman Christian communities (what were then called “Eastern Christians”)—this de facto amounted to the revocation of Ottoman common law in relation to Ottoman subjects.

The treaties of Paris (1856) and Berlin (1878), both signed when Ottoman power was in decline, also contained provisions for religious liberty that the Ottomans and the newly independent republics were made to adopt under European pressure. For example, Article 62 (LXII) of the Treaty of Berlin, continued to provide the basis for European allegations of the mistreatment of Christian groups (often grossly exaggerated), and served as a justification for further territorial truncations overseen by the European powers. When international law emerged in the 19th century as a body of jurisprudence aimed at regulating the relations between sovereign states, the Ottoman empire was excluded on the grounds that it did not constitute a state because of its barbaric and uncivilized nature most evident in the unequal treatment of its Christian population. This exclusion legally justified numerous European interventions in the Ottoman territories while ignoring the fact that equality before the law and religious freedom in their own states, let alone the colonies, was far from a reality.

In the wake of these treaties, as the Ottomans undertook broad reforms (known as Tanzimat) they passed the sweeping decree of Hatt-i Hümayun in 1856 that ostensibly guaranteed freedom of religion to all its subjects, dismantling distinctions based on religion, language, and race, and forms of legal hierarchy between Muslims and non-Muslims. While this was the letter of the decree, historians point out that in practice formal and informal discriminations against non-Muslims continued unchecked. What I want to emphasize here is the extent to which the discourse on religious liberty in Ottoman territories at the end of the nineteenth century was linked to geopolitics and questions of sovereignty and territorial control. Religious liberty was, however, far from a stable signifier and meant different things to different actors, which were often shaped by inter- and intra-state dynamics. For the missionaries (increasingly active in the Ottoman territories by the 19th century) and their European partisans, religious liberty meant the freedom to proselytize in the Ottoman territories and
an important means for securing religious conversion to Christianity. The Ottomans, on the other hand, interpreted religious liberty “as ‘the freedom to defend their religion’” against ascendant missionary activity and to consolidate the Islamic character of the empire. For many (though by no means all) Ottoman Christian communities that continued to face discrimination, religious liberty became one of the primary idioms through which to claim Western protection against systemic discrimination and at times outright violence (as was the case with Armenian Christians). For all stakeholders, though, the struggle over the meaning and implementation of religious liberty could not but engage questions of geopolitical struggles and sovereignty, regardless of where they stood on the issue.

The Versailles Peace Conference in the year 1919 is often narrated as a transformative moment in world history that not simply heralded the end of World War I but the creation of a new international order based on the nation-state with the decisive dissolution of the system of empires including the Ottoman but also Habsburg and Hohenzollern Empires that had lost the war. While the institutional form of the nation-state was already prevalent in countries of Western Europe and North America, it was now extended by the victorious powers to the break-away states created from the fallen empires. Notably, despite the novel character of this new international order, the Versailles peace treaties repeated the old pattern of European powers stipulating minority rights over states they militarily defeated: the Allied Powers made their recognition of the newly independent states conditional upon the pledge to uphold the rights of religious and ethnic minorities within their boundaries. None of the Western European countries (Britain, the U.S., Italy, France, Belgium, and Denmark) accepted any minority provisions for their own populations. (Welsh and Irish in Britain, Native Americans and blacks in the U.S., and the Bretons and Basques in France, and the multinational Tyrol in Italy). In fact, Germany that lost the war was not subject to these conditions—an exemption whose irony was not lost on the states forced to accept minority stipulations in 1919 once the national socialist project unfolded in Germany.

**Religious Freedom and the Creation of Minorities**

Following WWII, the establishment of the nation-state as the dominant political form put into play a new rationale of governance that divided up the governed differently from the logic of empires: instead of recognizing parallel and contiguous communities distinct by virtue of their confession-
al, denominational or ethnic affiliation, the nation-state sought to represent “the people,” united by a shared history, culture, and territory, wherein each individual qua citizen was tied to the state through a legal system of rights and obligations. The terms “majority” and “minority” came to serve as a constitutional device for resolving differences that the ideology of nationalism sought to eradicate, eliminate, or assimilate. The concept of “national minority” is built, however, on a fundamental tension: on the one hand, it signifies the membership of a minority group in a national polity; on the other hand, the minority group by virtue of its cultural, racial, religious, ethnic, or linguistic difference from the majoritarian culture also represents an incipient threat to national unity. This threat is internal to the ideology of nationalism insomuch as the modern concept of nationhood regards linguistic, ethnic, and cultural characteristics as a legitimate basis for people’s claim to national self-determination and independence.

The Minority Treaties, under the auspices of the League of Nations and the International Court of Justice during the Interwar Years, were instituted precisely to regulate this dual character of “national minorities”: they were to monitor minority rights infractions committed by the newly created nation-states on the one hand, and regulate the threat irredentist movements posed to the status-quo of the system of nation-states created by the Allied Powers.

As is well known by now, the minority rights regulatory system put into place in the interwar period to police irredentist movements and violations of Minority Treaty terms collapsed with the onset of the Second World War. Not only was Hitler’s invasion of Czechoslovakia opportunistically premised on the ostensible protection of the German minority living in Sudetenland, the League of Nations failed in its mandate to curtail the rise of anti-Semitism and protect the Jews and other targeted minorities from genocide. An important factor in the discreditation of the language of minority rights was the emergence of the United States as the dominant power whose national ideology ennobled the individual as the basis for all political values, eschewing any notion of community, collectivity, or group rights. Ironically, even as the American architects of the UDHR championed individual equality as the basis of universal human rights, they refused to grant civil or political rights to African Americans who continued to suffer under the U.S. apartheid regime of racial inequality. When the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) tried to use the UDHR to make its case for racial equality in the United Nations, they were rebuffed by Eleanor Roosevelt herself who went on record to declare, “The minority question did not exist on the
American continent.” As a result, in the UDHR religious liberty came to be enshrined as an individual human right in Article 18 in which the term “community” is mentioned in relation to the individual’s right to practice his religion collectively. No mention is made of group or minority rights in regard to the exercise of religious liberty.

The discourse on the protection of religious and ethnic minorities fell out of favor for almost five decades until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1989 when it emerges once again with the creation of new republics and the displacement of peoples across state boundaries in a manner not seen since the end of the Second World War. It is in this context that the U.N. General Assembly in 1992 passed the “Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities,” and the legally binding Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in which the rights of minorities are the primary concern. Article 27 not only affirms the right of minorities to be protected against discrimination but also to be able to practice their distinct collective identity and to participate in local decision making procedures that affect them provided it is compatible with national legislation. As before, these minority rights were guaranteed by the successor states of Yugoslavia in return for European recognition in terms strongly reminiscent of the Treaties of Paris and of Berlin.

**Mutation of a Concept?**

This history of the inter-relationship between religious liberty, minority rights, and geopolitics is often read as the cynical instrumentalization of otherwise noble principles in the service of realpolitik; or as the distribution of a moral good that Western Europeans discovered for themselves that they slowly introduced to less enlightened cultures sometimes through imperial force and sometimes through soft means such as international diplomacy. Seen in this way, the principle itself—its logic, its aim, and its substantive meaning—remains unsullied by the impious intentions of the empires and states that sought to promote or subvert it. Such an argument needs to be complicated for several reasons. First, it is important to understand that European efforts to subject weaker states to accept provisions for religious freedom for minorities cannot be understood simply as an extension of a “culture of tolerance” to non-Western peoples and lands. If this were so, the European powers would have accepted similar provisions in regard to their own minorities which they refused to do throughout his-
tory. [France to this day maintains that is has minorities living within its borders that fit the description of the term as outlined in international conventions.] What we need to think about is not so much how religious liberty has served Euro-Atlantic interests in an unequal geopolitical order but how the exercise of religious liberty itself is constituted by this inequality.

Second, it would be wrong to assume that religious liberty consists of simply protecting certain groups or individuals from the exercise of state power (that is, drawing the separation between church and state firmly and resolutely). The people who are supposed to benefit most from the modern principle of religious liberty—namely, religious minorities—are not simply protected from abuses of state power but are also transformed by virtue of their subjection to the calculus of state and geopolitical power in unique and unpredictable ways. The shift, for example, from a group-based understanding of religious liberty to an individualist one in international legal discourse is not simply a conceptual shift but also transforms the substantive meaning of religious liberty as well as the kinds of subjects that can speak in its name. Furthermore, as shifting definitions of religious liberty prescribed by international legal discourse came to be adopted by nation-states, they often conflicted and overlapped with existing protocols and norms of minority-majority relations across lines of religious difference in the Middle East. In this hybrid context, claims to religious liberty made by members of a minority versus a majority often mobilized different understandings of religious liberty (ethically, procedurally, and substantively). In the next half of this paper, I want to think about these different mobilizations through the case of Christian-Muslim relations in Egypt.

Coptic Christianity and the Colonial Encounter

The Coptic Orthodox Church is an early Apostolic church established in the first century, and Copts currently make up between six to twelve percent of the Egyptian population. Under the Ottoman millet system Coptic Christians were regarded as ahl al-dhimmah, a term whose juridical implications included the obligation of the state to protect the so-called “people of the book” (Jews and Christians), including the individual’s life, property, and freedom of religion and worship. There are two key aspects of this older arrangement that stand in contrast to how religious freedom is imagined today. One, unlike the modern conception of freedom of conscience based on the individual, the freedom accorded
to the dhimmis to practice their religion was conceived in collective terms. This meant that each dhimmi community living under Muslim rule was free to manage its own religious affairs, including matters relating to family law, especially marriage, inheritance and divorce which were regarded as an inextricable part of religion. Two, the collective freedom to practice one’s religion in this earlier period did not presume the liberal individualist notion of equality that makes the modern conception of freedom of conscience possible. Instead, it was predicated upon a system of protections and obligations in which all legal subjects were first and foremost members of a religious community and each community stood in a hierarchical relation to Muslim sovereignty. Over the course of the nineteenth century, in Egypt many of the restrictions imposed on Copts were lifted (including the payment of a religious tax, the donning of sartorial markers to distinguish Christians from Muslims, exclusion from military service). Coptic Orthodox Christians are distinct from other Christian communities of the Middle East in that they are known to have shunned offers of European patronage starting from the Ottoman period until well into the first half of the twentieth century. One of the key reasons for Coptic resistance to repeated European overtures is a longstanding schism since the fifth century that divided Oriental Orthodox Christianity from the rest of Christendom. Following this schism, Coptic followers were subject first to brutal repression by the Byzantine emperors and later to aggressive proselytization campaigns undertaken by the Roman Catholic Church—all of which further entrenched the tensions and divisions between the Coptic Church and Western as well as Eastern Orthodox Christianity.

During the course of modern history, Western Christendom has continued to view the Copts as “backward” and “ignorant” people, a view upheld not only by European missionaries, but also important Orientalists like Edward Lane and colonial administrators such as Lord Cromer. During the nineteenth century, Coptic relations with Western Christendom went through a new set of tensions with fresh incursions of Protestant missions initially sent from Europe (Anglican, Episcopalian, and Lutheran) and later the United States (Presbyterians). Since none of these had success with Muslim converts, they concentrated their energies on the Copts competing with the Coptic Orthodox Church for their flock. The discourse of religious liberty was crucial to the missionaries as an instrument to proselytize freely among Muslims and Copts without constraint from existing laws and prohibitions against religious conversion. They made ubiquitous use of international diplomacy and colonial and foreign offices of Anglo-American governments in this cause. Notably, the principle of
religious liberty, far from being a secular instrument of state neutrality, was for these advocates closely woven with their desire to win Christian converts.

**Minority: What’s in a Term?**

With the spread of nationalist ideas and the promise of civil and political equality under the aegis of the modern nation-state, Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt reached a new cross-road. The early part of the twentieth century is a high moment in the history of modern Egypt, when Copts and Muslims united against British colonial rule. While the year 1919 is known in the history of international law for the institutionalization of the term “national minority”, it is best known in Egypt for the Coptic refusal to accept this term as a form of self-identification. Egyptian national historiography proudly recounts the Revolution of 1919 when Copts and Muslims mounted a heroic opposition against the British demanding an end to colonial rule. When the British offered special protections to the Copts as a minority, they rejected this offer on the basis that they were no different than Muslim Egyptian. Subsequently, when Egypt’s first constitution was drafted in 1923, Coptic leadership opposed the idea of proportionate minority representation. What was perhaps even more striking was that none of the Coptic members of the Constitutional Committee objected to the provision in the constitution that Islam was to be the religion of the state. Famously, Makram Ebeid, a prominent Coptic member of the leading Egyptian party is known to have stated that he was a Muslim by country and a Christian by religion. This symbol of the crescent and cross from the 1919 was evoked widely again in the 2011 demonstrations that ousted the 20-year old dictatorial regime of Husni Mubarak.

This narrative of national unity, however, came to be increasingly strained as the century progressed and by the time of the establishment of the Egyptian Republic in 1952 it was showing marked signs of stress. Under the charismatic leadership of the first president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, the new republic failed to deliver on the democratic promise of the earlier revolution, and created instead an authoritarian regime that eroded civil and political liberties for all Egyptians, including Copts. Nasser’s authoritarian and despotic tendencies led him to break up the autonomy and power of secular lay Copts, instead strengthening the authority of the centralized church that Nasser could more easily manipulate. One consequence of enshrining the Church as the sole representative of Copts in Egypt was that “religious affiliation became the Copts’ main marker, not
their citizenship.” After Nasser’s death (1970), many of the trends he institutionalized have been reinforced under the two subsequent regimes with the result that the diacritics of religious difference have become indelibly lodged within the problematic of citizenship. Importantly, since 1952, Egyptian civil and political life has been confessionalized to such an extent that it is impossible for most Egyptians to think about what it means to be a citizen outside the context of their religious affiliation. One of the most disturbing consequences of this polarization of religious identity in Egypt is the gradual increase in sectarian violence over the last ten years. The fact that Muslim perpetrators of violence go unprosecuted and the Christian victims are denied adequate state protection further reinforces the impression that the state agencies are deeply implicated. It is widely acknowledged that some of the attacks have been actually perpetrated by the state Internal Security Forces (ISI) who act with impunity under the cover of emergency laws that have been in effect in Egypt since 1981 and are still in place in post-Mubarak era.

**Political Equality versus National Sovereignty?**

It is within this double-edged context—of the confessionalization of Egyptian civic-public life and the increase in inter-religious violence—that many Copts have come to question their community’s earlier rejection of the term minority as a form of self-identity. For these Coptic thinkers and activists, the only way to secure government recognition of and response to Coptic grievances is to adopt the international language of minority rights, particularly their right to religious liberty. Magdi Khalil is a prominent Coptic activist who strongly endorses the use of the term “religious minority” for Copts which, he argues, not only objectively describes their demographic status but lays bare a history of religious discrimination that can only be redressed through recourse to international laws that are ultimately supra-sovereign over the Egyptian state itself. Khalil has also issued calls in the past for aggressive foreign intervention on behalf of Copts, including the use of international law and US government action (RECALL: Egypt is the second largest recipient of US aid). In contrast to Khalil, there are other Coptic thinkers such as Samir Murqus, a prominent Coptic figure in Egyptian public life who has a long history of nationalist activism. In a series of books and articles, Murqus has challenged the linkage Coptic and Muslim activists tend to draw between the realization of political equality for Copts and their designation as a “minority.” Spe-
cifically addressing activists like Magdi Khalil he argues:

[They believe] that they are bringing Egyptian consciousness to a new level that is not encompassed by the framework of national community. [In this they want to] present Muslims and Copts as a majority versus a minority, rather than citizens of the Egyptian nation. …[T]here is a fundamental contradiction between the two: the concept of minority emanates from a divisive and fractious principle whereas citizenship emanates from the principle of equality in rights and responsibilities and participation in the creation and adoption of decisions at all levels, for all citizens, irrespective of [their] differences.

These two positions, exemplified by Khalil and Murqus, define the parameters of public debate about minority rights in Egypt today. It would be a mistake to understand these two positions as peculiar to Egyptian history. Rather they exemplify the structural tensions internal to the conceptual and institutional artifice of minority rights—particularly the inequality between First and Third world sovereignty that continues to inform the discourse of minority rights. As I have shown, the discourse of minority rights in the Middle East is historically intertwined with conditions of geopolitical inequality, an inequality that has been perpetuated earlier in the twentieth century both by colonial rule and later by supra-national political forms. Given this historical imbrication, arguments such as Magdi Khalil’s that call on Western powers and international institutions to intervene on behalf of Copts cannot be understood as colonial in any simple sense insomuch as these arguments presuppose and reflect the historical reality of minority rights in the Middle East. Khalil implicitly recognizes this history and the institutional conditions necessary for securing minority rights—particularly for Christian minorities—in Egypt. For Copts such as Murqus, the history of geopolitical inequality between the Middle East and Western power is equally relevant and serves as a starting point for any reflection on the status of Copts as a minority. Unlike Khalil, however, Murqus concludes that insomuch as the principle of minority rights was the vehicle for the subjugation of national sovereignty to foreign rule, it cannot serve as the instrument for Coptic salvation. Any embrace of this principle necessarily entails the inscription of Copts in this longstanding colonialist project. While we may be tempted to side with one position over the other, it is impossible to deny the imbrication of both in the paradox that haunts the discourse of minority rights globally as well as in poco
While minority rights discourse could have taken a number of different forms in Egypt, it is religious freedom that has emerged as its primary site of articulation and struggle. When asked, informed Egyptians cite a number of interrelated developments that have contributed to the popularization of the concept of religious liberty, key among them the passage of International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) by the United States government in 1998 that has made the treatment of non-Muslim minorities in the Middle East a central point of concern. The International Religious Freedom Act was passed by the U.S. Congress mandates the U.S. State Department to monitor incidents of religious persecution worldwide with a particular focus on the plight of Christians living in the Middle East and former Soviet republics. It authorizes the President of the United States to censure (through diplomatic and/or economic means) states that are found to be guilty. While IRFA requires the President to subject states identified as “severe violators” of religious freedom to a series of punitive sanctions, it also provides for a presidential waiver that allows for exceptions when the violators are valuable trading partners or geopolitical allies of the U.S. government. Consequently, states such as Saudi Arabia, Israel, and China are now omitted from the current list whereas others such as Iran and Sudan retain their place as states requiring U.S. sanction.

A number of scholars note that the passage of IRFA by the U.S. Congress in 1998 was the result of over two decades of evangelical mobilization to forge an ecumenical vision of Christianity as a universal community that needed to be saved from non-Christian persecution. As Joshua Greene points out, one of the central aims of this movement has been to “‘remoralize’ [American] foreign policy to address religious oppression abroad”, to harness the resources of the U.S. State Department to bring about this change. The “New Evangelicals” as they have come to be called are quite distinct from their earlier counterparts in that they are far more cosmopolitan, comfortable with the language of human rights that they now use ubiquitously in their various campaigns. Freedom of religion, now the bulwark of a number of Christian organizations, is cast as a human rights issue and web sites of organizations such as the Christian Solidarity International weave in and out of human rights language to
make the case for a universal “persecuted church.”

The evangelical project to promote the religious liberty of Christian minorities living in Muslim countries, with the U.S. State Department’s force behind it, has been a boon for Coptic activists, particularly the expatriate Coptic Americans who see this as an opportunity to use their political muscle as U.S. citizens to urge their senators and congressmen to force the Egyptian government to change its policies toward Egyptian Copts. The politics of some segments of this diaspora—such as the founder of the US Copts association—are complicated. On the one hand, they connect the plight of Coptic Christians with the lack of democracy, corruption, and authoritarianism of the Egyptian government, making common cause with other victims of the state’s brutal policies. On the other hand, they also participate in the post-9/11 Euro-American demonization of all Islamist political activists regardless of their political leanings. They amplify, in fact, a rather simple line of argument popular these days among the US foreign policy circles such as the Hudson Institute. It goes something like this: Islamists are intolerant, opposed to the values of democracy and freedom, and enemies of Christians; the U.S. as a Christian and democratic nation must ally itself with the persecuted Coptic Christians so as to fight fanatical Muslims. The new alliance between certain sections of Coptic Christians, the Coptic Orthodox Church, and American evangelicals represents a departure from the past insomuch as old intra-denominational schisms have been set aside to forge a new unity. The historical pattern that continues to hold sway, however, is a global power’s ability to shape how religious liberty can be imagined and exercised in the Middle East.

Not all Coptic activists in Egypt view IRFA as a path to their salvation from communal strife. Samir Murqus, whose work I discussed earlier, has made a number of trenchant arguments against IRFA and its indebtedness to the Christian evangelical movement in the United States. The title of one of his major publications states his thesis bluntly: “Protection and Punishment: The West and the Religious Question in the Middle East; From the Law of Patronage to the Law of Religious Freedom; A Special Study of the Copts: History, Citizenship, Concerns, and the Future.” Murqus makes two related arguments in this book: one that the project of IRFA clearly is predicated on violating the sovereignty of the Egyptian nation, and two that this violation is not only the violation of its Muslim but its Christian citizens as well. He recognizes the difference in the motivation behind IRFA and those behind the older projects of Christian proselytization, but locates the continuity in the effects these projects have
produced on the lives of Egyptians, Muslims and Copts alike.

Despite the historical critique Murqus articulates, the force IRFA now commands in Egyptian public discourse is transforming how religious difference is perceived and understood among Copts. IRFA’s international reach has subject Coptic identity to a new set of demands, key among them the demand to translate across the register of religious difference to registers of ethnic, indigenous, and linguistic identity—all of which are far more legible markers of minority difference in the modern discourse on minority rights than religion. Consider, for example, a controversial talk delivered by a prominent Coptic Bishop at the Hudson Institute in 2008, a talk that was supposed to showcase the Coptic plight and IRFA’s ability to alleviate it. In this talk, addressed to the American diplomatic and general public in Washington D.C., Bishop Thomas cast Coptic religious difference in ethnic and linguistic terms. Claiming Copts as the indigenous inhabitants of Egypt and Arab-Muslims as foreign invaders, he portrayed the conversion of Copts to Islam not simply as a religious conversion but also a loss of ethnic and linguistic identity. “The Copts have been always focused on Egypt; it’s our identity, it’s our nation, it’s our land, it’s our language, it’s our culture. But when some of the Egyptians converted to Islam, their focus changed away from looking to their [own language and culture]....Arabia became [their] main focus....Are they really Copts or have they really become Arabs?....If you come to a Coptic person and tell him that he’s an Arab, that’s offensive. We are not Arabs, we are Egyptians. [So] when you look at a Copt today you don’t only see a Christian, you see an Egyptian who is trying to keep his identity against another imported identity.” Notably, in this logic conversion from Christianity to Islam is not simply a change of religion but rendered as the substitution of one ethnic identity (Coptic) with another (Arab). In this argument, insofar as Egypt is Coptic in its ethnic essence then Arab-Muslims are not only foreign to Egypt but also betray the indigenous identity of the nation. This attempt to ethnicize religious identity overlooks the fact that the spread of Islam in Egypt was gradual and entailed a complex sociological process of inter-marriage, conversion and miscegenation rather than a mass movement of Arab Muslims from “Arabia” to Egypt.

When Bishop Thomas’s address reached Egypt, it created a raging debate in the media. Many Egyptians (Copts and Muslims alike) found the Bishop’s characterization of Coptic Christianity as an indigenous ethnic identity most disturbing and difficult to sustain. While Bishop Thomas’s argument sounded foreign to many Egyptian ears, it was quite legible to his American audiences, well schooled in minoritarian claims of ethnic
and indigenous identity. It is not difficult to see how the performative demand of the political arena in which the Bishop made his case (the Hudson Institute in Washington D.C.) required him to amplify the differences between Copts and Muslims, an amplification that seemed necessary in order to capture the attention of a powerful ally who can finally make a difference in changing the Coptic situation. The performative effect of this speech act remains to be seen, but one thing is clear that the demand for the recognition of Coptic religious difference is subject to a set of transformative forces that are well be beyond the control of the subjects who speak in its name.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me make two points. One, note that for a religious minority to call for international protection—in the context of postcolonial societies—is to also draw attention to the uniqueness of the group as distinct from the majoritarian identity of the nation. While this operation enhances and articulates fractures within the identity of the nation, it also sets up an unstable synergy between the security afforded by the extension of foreign/international protection to the minority and the insecurity this protection engenders with respect to the minority’s relationship to the nation. In other words, the fact that certain postcolonial religious minorities can claim international law to protect themselves from discrimination (not all religious minorities can), this protection also becomes a key source of their vulnerability in relationship to the nation. Their condition of empowerment is also the condition of their vulnerability in regard to the nationalist project. Secondly, the structural dependence of a postcolonial minority’s struggle for survival on supra-national forms of support requires a certain amplification of their difference to draw attention to their plight. This amplification is not simply a feature of the victim’s hyperbole but a necessary feature of making one’s discrimination legible in terms that are internal to the international discourse of minority rights. As I have shown, one transformation rendered in the modern meaning of minority is the shift from religious identity to an emphasis on linguistic, ethnic, cultural, and racial identity. This shift in part owes to the ascendance of the nation-state as the primary political form and the kinds of differences that are significant to its ideological and organizational structure. As Bishop Thomas’s speech to the Hudson Institute makes clear above, in order for the Coptic plight
to register in the theater of minority rights, it must be made commensurate with other kinds of injury that are at the core of minority rights discourse in Euro-America. As a result, Bishop Thomas plays to the proclivities of his American audience and the parameters of distinction internal to the discourse of the Hudson Institute as well as other international organizations. But in making religious difference commensurate with ethnic and linguistic difference, Bishop Thomas’s discourse introduces two fundamental instabilities: (a) the suturing of religious difference to other kinds of differences weakens the very identity on the basis of which Copts claim discrimination; and (b) this amplification of differences sets Copts further apart from the Egyptian nation and its social fabric. Such a polemical accentuation of Coptic difference from Egypt’s Arab and Muslim history may well gain foreign protection, but it also makes the project of finding ways of living together more difficult. The paradox that haunts the postcolonial religious minority in this moment is precisely that the terms that render religious discrimination legible are also the terms that suture religious identity to other forms of difference, and in doing so, make the minority identity unstable as much as it weakens the possibility of forging a collective life together.
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