"Politics of Religious Freedom and the Minority Question: A Middle Eastern Genealogy"
Saba Mahmood, Associate Professor of Anthropology, U.C. Berkley
Berkley Center Conference Room 3307 M Street NW, Suite 200, Georgetown University
October 4, 2010 6:00-7:30 pm

Saba Mahmood presented her forthcoming paper entitled "Politics of Religious Freedom and the Minority Question: A Middle Eastern Genealogy" at Georgetown University's Berkley Center on Monday night. She was introduced by **Jose Casanova**, Professor of Sociology at Georgetown University and the head of the Berkley Center's Program on Globalization, Religion and the Secular.

Mahmood began her presentation by saying that **the right to religious liberty created a new kind of polity**. In the Middle East, this shift began in earnest during the 16th century. Mahmood traces the change back to the imposition, by European powers, of special "dispensations" for Christians in the Ottoman Empire. Mahmood said that **her research seeks to discover "how the discourse of religious liberty has participated in creating the idea of religious minorities," and investigates how the international and national protection of minorities allows for the "codification" of the minority within the larger community**.

At this point, Mahmood harkened back to the **Treaty of Westphalia in 1648**, which she said created a situation **where the subjects of a kingdom were not forced to practice the religion of their rulers**. Mahmood explained that this event was driven by practical motivations such as acquisition of territory. She also stated that the Treaty of Westphalia helped found the idea of the "sovereign state." This is important because Mahmood believes that national sovereignty and religious sovereignty were linked from inception. When the European powers forced concessions from the Ottomans with regards to allowing Christian merchants and missionaries access to their lands later in the 16th century, **the idea of religious liberty became a cudgel with which the West could beat the Middle East**. No such liberties were extended to non-Christians in Europe. This, Mahmood said, was the beginning of a cynical game that the West would play with the Middle East through the present day. The pattern of using "religious liberty" to weaken Middle Eastern countries repeated itself in 1878 with the Treaty of Berlin and again in 1919, with the so-called "end of empires" period after World War I.

Mahmood then explained **that the very idea of being a minority in the Western sense required certain modes of thinking about one-self and the society that one lives in**. She organized her argument into two claims; Claim 1a.) For a group to be regarded as a national minority, it has to show verifiable cultural and linguistic traits. 1b.) This group must also subjectively identify as a part of the minority group. In other words, they must differentiate themselves. Claim 2a.) Minorities know that their difference makes it likely that they will be prevented from integrating into the majority population. 2b.) The likely rejection makes the minority group fearful that their unique identity will be overwhelmed by the majority culture and/or language.

The enforcement of religious liberty not only protects the rights of the minority, Mahmood explained, it also changes the relationship between the minority and the state in which they live, often putting them in opposition.

Mahmood then focused her attention on the Coptic Christians of Egypt. Mahmood said that there were two aspects of the "older" relationship between Muslims and Copts that made it different from other cases. First, the Copts lived for centuries under the system of "dhimmitude." While the ruling Muslim majority allowed Copts and other minorities certain freedoms, such as dealing with family and religious issues, there was an assumed inequality, with Muslims on top and the religious minorities on the bottom. The freedom to worship, according to Mahmood, did not "assume the modern concept of freedom." Everyone was a part of the larger community, regardless of religion. The second aspect was the historical strain between the Copts and other branches of Christianity. She explained that the Byzantines oppressed the Copts, while the Romans tried to convert them to Catholicism. Both looked down on their Egyptian co-religionists. The attempts to convert the Copts to other forms of Christianity continued for centuries, with American protestant sects' attempts being the latest.

The high point for Copt/Muslim relations in Egypt was the early 20th century, when the two groups came together in defiance of British colonialism, Mahmood said. The British even offered the Copts certain concessions in exchange for their cooperation, but they refused saying they were no different than the Muslims. When the first Egyptian constitution was written, the Copts did not object to Islam being made the official religion. After all, they were all Egyptians. In 1952, the first signs of stress began to appear. Nasser failed to deliver on promises of democracy, instead instituting a series of socio-economic policies which devastated the Coptic aristocracy economically and froze them out of political life to a great extent. **This had the unintended consequence of making the Coptic Church hierarchy the primary avenue between the government and the Coptic people, a situation which causes tension today**. Since this time, Mahmood said, Egyptian life has become increasingly "confessionalized." There has been state sponsored violence against Shiite's and Ba'hai's in Egypt, while Copts have suffered attacks and have been unable to seek justice against the perpetrators, a form of state complicity according to Mahmood. Recent events have caused some in the Coptic community to question their ancestor's decision to forgo minority status in the initial post-colonial years.

There are a variety of opinions within the Coptic community as to how to go about addressing grievances against the Egyptian government. Some, like **Magdi Khalil**, believe that the only way is to adopt the terms of "the minority" as it is understood in the West. Others, such as **Samir Morcos**, think otherwise. Mahmood said **that Egyptian life is now full of terms like "sectarian strife" and "religious freedom" that would have been unusual in earlier times**.

The present manifestation of the religious liberty argument as a weapon, according to Mahmood, begins with the **1998 International Religious Freedom Act**. This Act required sanctions against any country that was found to be violating its citizen's religious freedom. Of course, the President was given the power to waive the Act, allowing it to be used as a weapon against countries such as Iran, while Saudi Arabia and others were given a waiver. Mahmood characterized the Act as "the result of twenty years of lobbying" by the evangelical Christian community and as a "re-moralizing" of US foreign policy. It has since been used by members of the American Coptic community to pressure law makers to, in turn, pressure Egypt. The conservative movement has been particularly active in utilizing this tactic, Mahmood said, recruiting a young American Copt named Michael Meunir to run for Congress in Virginia. Mahmood stated that, while the initial pressure from conservative and evangelical groups was generally aimed at the Mubarak regime, it inevitably became an issue of all Muslims as oppressors of Christians. It is, Mahmood noted**, another example of a global power's ability to shape what religious liberty means in the Middle East**.

Mahmood concluded her presentation by saying that **being a religious minority in the post-colonial world meant calling into sharp relief the differences between groups**. She said that there was an **"unstable synergy" between the protection afforded to religious minorities by the international community and the resentment that that protection breeds among the majority populations**. She called this the "key source of their (minorities) vulnerability." **The structural dependence on supra-national support causes an amplification of differences by minority groups to garner attention for their cause**. In order for Copts to have their concerns heard by the international community, they must suffer as much as minorities elsewhere. That discourse introduces instability, Mahmood says. It sets Copts even farther apart from Egypt's mainstream then they might otherwise be. In the end, it makes living together more difficult, the opposite of the intended goal.