Book Reviews

Quest for Divinity: A Critical Examination of the Thought of Mahmud Muhammad Taha

Mohamed A. Mahmoud

Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2007. 309 pages.

This important book critically examines the religious and political thought of Mahmud Muhammad Taha, a significant twentieth-century reformist thinker who is hardly known outside of Sudanese studies. Other works in English on Taha include Abdullahi al-Na`im's translated *The Second Message of Islam* (Syracuse University Press: 1987), written by a disciple whose own reformist positions derive from Taha's methodology and thought. This study provides an introduction to Taha's thought for scholars of twentieth-century Muslim reformers. It highlights the radical nature of his Sufi-grounded thought and the originality of his interpretations of the Qur'an and the hadith based upon Muslim scholars as well as western Darwinian and Marxist-Hegelian thought. The author stresses the importance and originality of Taha's thought within the broader context of the contemporary Muslim world. His appearance on the scholarly "radar screen" has not yet fully been realized; indeed, al`Na`im has drawn more attention in the West than his mentor Taha ever did.

As the founder of the nationalist al-Hizb al-Jamhuri in 1945, which later became the Republican Brotherhood (al-Jamhouriyeen), Taha was both a significant political figure and a controversial theologian who was famously tried and executed for the "crime" of apostasy in 1985. His execution is widely viewed as having sparked the democratic uprising (intifada) that overthrew Numeiri's military dictatorship, which had engineered his execution.

Like other aspects of Islamic theory and practice, the early or even pioneering developments that took place in Sudan are ignored in favor of the better known cases of Egypt, Pakistan, or elsewhere. Taha's ideas were taking shape in the 1940s through the 1960s, well ahead of such better known figures as Muhammad Sa`id al-Ashmawy or Mohamed Arkoun (just to cite

two examples), and yet they are often viewed as more significant modern pioneers. Indeed Taha is a forerunner, albeit unrecognized, for the nascent progressive Muslim movement that is developing today, represented by Omid Safi's *Progressive Muslims* (Oneworld: 2003) and Khalid Abou El Fadl's *Speaking in God's Name: Authority, Islamic Law, and Women* (Oneworld: 2001).

The book has added value in that it accesses the relevant literature in both Arabic and English, which western scholars are often unable to do, and that English and Arabic are employed to help the scholar understand the considerable nuance of Taha's ideas. It is a positive development in the scholarship on Taha that his original thinking is grounded first and foremost in radical Sufism. Here and throughout the manuscript, the relevant traditions and scholarship are extensively researched and footnoted. Moreover, Mahmoud's book is the most elaborate examination in English of Sudan's Sufi intellectual and philosophical tradition, so far as I am aware. This is another value of the book, for the populism – in which Sufism is a grounded reality in Sudan – has mainly been treated as an ethnographic or folk curiosity, not an intellectual tradition.

The genius of the Arabic language is underscored, as the author generously treats language, exegesis, and the rich contextual meanings of language to the Sufis in the second and third chapters. He examines the central dilemma of Qur'anic interpretation and interpreters – that it is divinely revealed, ahistorical, and timeless in one human language (Arabic), while its interpretation has been based in the historical context in which it was revealed in a human setting. As a radical Sufi, Taha sees the book and Muhammad's spiritual narrative as the story of the human soul. Like other radical Sufis, he considers the divine punishment of Hell as problematic, since God's compassion supersedes all else. Thus, they question the eternity of Hell, for it reflects the revenge of a malicious God, which, they argue, is surely not the case. Readers in comparative religion and philosophy will find such passages fascinating.

The author takes up time-honored western philosophical queries about determinism and free will and divine punishment as universal questions, but with different interpretations in Islam. He points out that the question of human free will or divine will was one of the earliest and most divisive questions in Islam. Taha's insistence on determinism is associated with his Sufism, and thus he opposed such free will Mu`tazalite Egyptian writers as Mohamed Abduh. In spite of his determinism, however, Taha develops a philosophy of social and political action, for which he is best known.

Chapter 5 details the "Second Message of Islam" that is at the heart of Taha's reformism. The "Second Message" begs the question that if there is a "second" message, who is the messenger? Since Prophet Muhammad is the last Messenger (*ras ´l AllŒh*), the answer leans to Taha himself. The author relates that in the more liberal 1960s, Taha began to assert his own authority as an interpreter of the Qur'anic texts with a relentless pursuit of the state-appointed `ulama (the religious scholars who ultimately passed judgment upon him). Moreover, the society of the "second message" is a socialist one, presenting yet another political problem for the Republican movement, as Sudan became more capitalist under Numieri. The "earthly paradise" becomes a communist one, affording the author an opportunity to make perhaps the most important insight in the book: Taha's second message has a messianic character and that for Taha, Islam's golden age lies not in the past, but in the future.

Mahmoud explains well the radical core of Taha's thought in a vital distinction made between "believers" (*mu'min ´n*) and "those who submit" (*Muslim ´n*) as stages of spiritual development, recognizing that the members of the early Muslim community were the former. This leads into a significant discussion of jihad, which Taha sees as belonging to the Madinan period and thus as related to the need for defensive war, not the distorted view of some Islamists who divide the world into *dŒr al-Úarb* and *dŒr al-IslŒm*, thereby segmenting the world into the Muslims and the unbelievers.

On the significant issue of slavery in Islam, the author sees Taha as having much in common with other modern Muslim apologists in that slavery was normative during Muhammad's time and that advocating manumission was meant to move toward gradual abolition. Like the other great monotheistic faiths, however, Islam never fundamentally rejected the institution. This is an important section, given the human rights record of the current Islamist regime, under which the revival of slavery in Sudan has been a major issue.

Taha is perhaps best known for his progressive views on women, and his Republican movement attracted many female followers. However, Mahmoud's treatment goes well beyond anything so far written on the subject. For example, his critical treatment of Taha's support of *kafŒ'ah* (equality of standard in Muslim marriage) has been used to aver marriages between "Arabs" and non-Arabs, thus effectively supporting discrimination. Ultimately, for Taha, the male-female bond is a Sufi mystical one. But since Adam and Eve are primary and secondary, respectively, Taha's gender views may not be as revolutionary as believed. His radical view is one of full legal equality for women by removing the historical Shari`ah disabilities placed upon them.

The last chapter is unusual in that "*Ta‹w¥r* (evolution), Shari`ah, and Art" are treated together. As the "second message" evolved, so did the Shari`ah as key to his thinking. However, for those looking for an all-purpose reformer in Taha, he will not be of much assistance to human rights activists. He justifies the *Úadd* punishment of stoning for adultery on the ground of its "reciprocity" (*mu`Ëwadah*), a central idea for him, that of balance between the pleasure sought in the sexual act with the pain of punishment. The pain of stoning helps to relieve the pain suffered in the afterlife and thus restores a lost equilibrium. By logical extension, flogging alcoholics will bring them to their senses.

The treatment of art in this chapter is novel, but it perhaps might stand on its own in a separate chapter, since Islam's ban on representational art is rarely discussed theologically or philosophically. It responds to the question of how a great religious civilization gained a global following without the use of propagandistic art. The roots are, of course, in the Prophet's rejection of all idolatry – but this has been extended to music and performance. Taha applies his familiar apologetic logic, maintaining that their banning was provisional and that the creative human process is to be supported with the ideal of bringing religion and art together in harmony.

Taha is unlike other modern Muslim reformers and, as Mahmoud concludes, his "experiment" was one of the twentieth century's boldest and brightest. But he has not received adequate attention, perhaps because of Sudan's overall marginality to the Islamic world. "Thanks" in part to the presence of an extremist Islamist government in Sudan since 1989 and the safe haven Osama bin Laden received there from 1990-96, Sudan has attracted the wrong kind of attention. This book brings to light one aspect of the country's important revolutionary and original history of theorists and practitioners.

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