

Towards an Islamic Theology of Liberation

Does the work of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha announce the birth of an Islamic theology of liberation? In any case, reading this major work by a Sudanese sheik (The Second Message of Islam, *Al Risala Al Tania Min El Islam*, Khartoum 1971) cannot leave one indifferent. The deep convictions of this believing Moslem, his mastery of theology, and the power of his argument in favor of a radically new interpretation of his faith, in open rupture with the dominant fundamentalist creed, testify to the importance of this contribution to Islamic renewal which, in Many respects, recalls the Christian theology of liberation.

Taha finds in Islam two messages from God (in Arabic *Risala*), one immediate (the first *Risala* in Islamic texts) the other ultimate (the "second" *Risala*). To understand the second *Risala* clarifies the debate, permits us to understand the first, and see why the dominant Islam is content with it.

True faith is impossible without adherence to the second *Risala*, which can be summed up in a single phrase: humanity was created in the image of God. Because of this we are free, responsible, and perfectible. The lives of individuals are a constant struggle to realize divine perfection, though there is always the possibility of distancing ourselves from God. The life of societies as well has no meaning other than their struggle to progress in the direction of perfection.

Taha deduces from this message a radical conclusion: the ideal society, which must be the objective of all social struggles, that which creates the Most favorable conditions for individuals to develop towards God, that without which faith will always remain the victim of the limits which society imposes on the flourishing of responsible individual freedom, cannot be other than a society which is socialist and democratic.

Socialism, according to Taha (who uses the Arabic term *Ishtirakiya*) is synonymous with equal access to all of the material riches which human genius can create. It is thus actually more like the concept of communism (in Arabic *shiyuiya*) than like the experience and programs of historic socialism in the modern period. For, according to Taha, in so far as these social conditions are not created, individuals remain imprisoned by the egoistic compulsions which limit their ability to realize their potential to grow towards God.

Taha also discusses the relationship between humanity and nature in terms of the second or ultimate message of Islam. Nature is as much a divine creation as humanity, which forms an integral part of nature. Nature is not, therefore, a collection of things placed at the disposition of humanity. We can not grow towards divine perfection unless we establish with nature a real equilibrium, deepening our knowledge of the universe as an organized totality. This rule thus defines both the end of and the conditions for the organization of production. •

In its turn, socialism (or communism) has no meaning unless it is democratic, that is to say, in Taha's terms, unless it is founded on the absolute liberty of individuals. For this liberty is the condition for responsibility, the guarantee that the choices that individuals are led to make in each instant, in all their relationships, can lead them towards (or away) from God.

Taha distinguishes the project which he defends in the name of Islam from that of the historic socialism of the modern period. The Soviet model, among others, according to him, rested on the egoistical compulsions of individuals --a characteristic which Soviet society shared with modern capitalist societies. The contempt for democracy in the Soviet Union came, Taha argues, from this contradiction between the end which it proclaims (socialism as the abolition of injustice) and its materialistic

philosophy, which ultimately forced the party to have recourse to the manipulation of individual egoism. But if faith cannot flourish in the modern world (including the Islamic countries), it certainly couldn't flourish in any of the earlier systems (including, once again, in Islamic territory) because the injustice created by this recourse to individual egoism perpetuates itself. Without true faith, socialism is impossible. So goes the "second" or ultimate message of Islam in the theology which Taha proposes. This message Islam shares with all of humanity's other forms of religious expression. For Islam thus conceived has always existed. It is not to be dated from the Koranic revelation. It is the "religion of God," that is to say it has existed in all times, and is expressed in, among other things, the Jewish, Christian, and other revelations.

But the "religion of God" (Islam), while it has known earlier expressions, is also present in the Koranic revelation, which contains, alongside the "ultimate" message, a more immediate and conjunctural one. For God is always present. He intervenes in the lives of both individual human beings and the lives of societies. He sends messages, commandments which address the people in language they are able to understand at any given moment. These messages, which are conjunctural, help individuals and societies to correct themselves, to take one small step (but not necessarily anything more) on the road towards God. This is why they can seem contradictory, if one takes them literally and gives them an absolute significance which they don't have.

In the Koranic revelation, as in the Tradition (the *Sunna*), it is thus necessary to distinguish between the ultimate message and the conjunctural commandments. In his careful, scholarly textual analysis, Taha argues that the ultimate message occupies a dominant place, at the beginning of the Revelation, in the Meccan *suras*. Here the Revelation concerns itself not with the development of society but only with the essence of the faith (the human being, free and responsible, was created in the image of the one all powerful God). On the contrary, the opportunity having offered itself to organize a slightly better society than that which existed in the Arabia of the day, at Medina, around the Prophet, a society capable of taking a few steps on the road towards God, God did not hesitate to intervene to help humanity in structuring it. Taha argues that the commandments made to this society should thus be read as conjunctural, not as the final image of the ideal society, the realization of the absolute. In this context Taha treats eight distinct questions which Moslems generally consider to be regulated by the Law (the *Sharia'*) as it was expressed in the Medina community:

- 1) Holy War (the *Jihad*),
- 2) slavery (*Al Riq*),
- 3) capitalism (*Al Rismalia*) --one can read this as the question of economic management of society by means of private property and licit commerce,
- 4) the inequality of men and women,
- 5) polygamy,
- 6) divorce and repudiation (*Al Talaq*),
- 7) the veiling of women (*Al Hijab*), and
- 8) the separation of men and women in social life.

By means of a careful analysis of sacred texts, Taha defends his theology, putting the accent on all of the nuances which demonstrate, according to his reading, the conjunctural character of the solutions brought by the law in its time and place. Each of the chapters concerning these eight questions carry a title in the same form. Holy War is not fundamental in Islam, Polygamy is not fundamental in Islam etc .

Unfortunately Moslems, like many other peoples, were satisfied with the immediate message and its commandments. In putting the accent on obedience to these, they

spared themselves the far more difficult task of progressing along the road indicated by the ultimate message --the road towards God. They ritualized and dogmatized religion. This satisfied the reactionary forces of domination and exploitation. Taha concludes with severity: they have not created an Islamic community (*muslimoun*) but only a community of believers (*muiminun*).

Taha tried to preach actively against the conservative, ritualistic, formalist interpretation of Islam, which respects only the immediate message, and for an interpretation which put an accent on the ultimate message, calling people to action for the transformation of society in a direction favorable to the development of faith. He did this through his writings and through his words, and he organized around himself a body of militant students dedicated to his vision.

This was his crime, in the eyes of the politicians who, behind the mask of political Islam, reject democracy, give aid and comfort to capitalism, taking absolute power, and reducing their people to moral slavery. He was condemned to death by the "tribunals" of the Islamic Brotherhood, under the direction of the imposter Tourabi. He was hung --at the age of 70. His books have been forbidden and burned.

translated from the original French by Anthony Mansueto