

Portfolio Part 3_Lucenti

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A profile of a significant thinker associated with Muslim politics

One of the most influential thinkers who "revolutionised" Islamic thought, with great repercussions on the declination of the link between Islam and politics in the last century, is undoubtedly Muhammad Shahrur. Born in Damascus in 1938, he became emeritus professor of civil engineering at the University of Damascus. It will be his interest in the philosophy and history of Islamic thought that makes him internationally known, with tangible and direct effects on contemporary Islamic thought and politics. In particular, his first book, *al-Kitab wa-l-Qur'an: Qira'a mu'asira* (The Book and the Qur'ān: a contemporary reading) published in 1990, will foment immediate reactions from the Muslim world, between the general enthusiasm and the sale of many copies¹ on one hand, and the censorship and the prohibition of the work by some countries on the other. Nevertheless, despite the suspension and banishment of the book in a few Muslim countries (e.g., Egypt), pirate editions saw the light and photocopies of the volume (e.g., Saudi Arabia) circulated widely. He has been defined as the Luther of Islam and his interpretation as the Copernican revolution of Islam. This last definition derives from the observation that, just as for centuries it was believed that the sun revolved around the earth, in the same way for centuries a reading and interpretation of the Qur'ān has been dictated by human superstructures, not by the meaning of the text itself. His famous phrase "Read the Qur'an as it was revealed last night" well conveys the idea of a "languid" and rational approach to the sacred text, which gets rid of all preconditions and foreknowledge to respond to the spiritual needs of today's men and women. The success of Shahrur and his work is undoubtedly linked to the phenomena of mass education and mass communication and the consequent process of fragmentation of religious authority in Islam. The acknowledgment that "the 'ulama no longer have, if they ever did, a monopoly on sacred authority" (Eickelman & Piscatori, 1996) is strongly related with Shahrur's book's success (p.131). If previously everyone read the same texts, following the general education and expansion of the means of communication, anyone can access other "versions" and interpretations of the religious fact. As Eickelman points out "multiple means of communication have eroded the frontier between 'authorized' and 'illicit' communications, making the control of information and opinion much more difficult than it was in prior eras and fostering, albeit inadvertently, a fragmentation of authority and a civil society of dissent"² (Christmann, 2009, vii).

The Quran, Morality and Critical Reason. The Essential Muhammad Shahrur (Christmann, 2009) claims the role of the first and organic academic restitution of this author's work in English for an international audience. The thought of this author is illustrated in a complete and complex way, starting from his ideas on the state, civil society, and democracy in Qur'anic thought, to values in modern society, tyranny and terrorism. This book concerns not only the

¹ Tens of thousands of copies sold throughout the Arab world, the first reprinting only three months later and a Beirut edition in 1992 (Christmann, A).

² Forewords.

first and most controversial volume of 1990 (which was also the most successful and widespread), but also the following ones. An account of Shahrur's thought and work is also available on the author's website: <https://shahrour.org/>. In the impossibility of retracing the multiple theories and arguments of this author, we will try to summarize only some of the most essential points of his thought, some of which are controversial and have aroused open criticism from other Islamic intellectuals and authorities. Someone has come to call him worse than Salman Rushdie "because he proclaims his faith in Islam but advocates a critical stance toward established conventions of authoritative learning" (Christmann, 2009).

Shahrur argues that it is necessary to reinterpret the ideas imposed by religious authorities and tradition and to apply the precepts of Islam to contemporary reality. One of the author's assumptions is that if a reform of Islam is necessary, it must certainly not be sought in the attempt to restore the "original" interpretations that were widespread in seventh-century Arabia or "through an adoption of the archaic worldviews of our Salafi forefathers. Such reforms, we believe, are utterly fruitless and bound to fail because they possess an inherently atavistic nature that is incompatible with the modern episteme that demands plurality, tolerance, and progressive thinking" (p.42). The author postulates that the reading of the sacred text is a hermeneutic-interpretative act influenced by the historical period and by the experience of the believer or the reader. Even if no one is excluded from this process of understanding and interpretation, the interpretations are still only "valid" and applicable in the contingent period in which they occurred. Therefore, the handing down of "fixed" and "immutable" interpretations of the religious text over the centuries represents an artifice resulting from an incorrect understanding of the "rational" value of the sacred text, which speaks to contemporary man who will read and interpret it on the basis of the demands of his time and of his era. The "political" repercussions of Shahrur's thinking are evident insofar as they dismantle the institutional apparatus that has historically claimed authority over the exegesis of the Qur'an. Another fundamental assumption for the author is the criticism that historically has seen the Sunna and the aḥādīṭ overstep the Qur'an itself. These secondary texts have often overstepped the same law and have partially replaced the Qur'an, which instead represents (or should represent) "the law", the "word of God". "The Sunna of the Prophet is culturally and historically conditioned, and that it lacks the universality of Allah's Book [...] Muhammad's Sunna cannot be perceived as being outside the law of historical development and needs to 'stay' in seventh-century Arabia" (Christmann, 2009, p.72). The theme of women in Islam is also addressed by the author, who assumes that the feminist discourse has failed in its intent to promote full equality of the Muslim woman as it focused on the female condition's improvement at the time of Muhammad. However, the best conditions of the woman at that time do not coincide with the best conditions ever, "and since during Muhammad's time women were not working as judges and preachers and since they did not occupy high political positions, this was seen as the maximum amount of women's liberation that we, today, are not allowed to further extend" (Christmann, 2009, p.220). However, for the purposes of our discourse, the most relevant part of the author's thought is the one called "political Islam". The author takes a very firm stand against the positions of the 'ulama and the Islamists - which he considers to be very similar - as both have moved away from the purely spiritual message of the Qur'an and have politicised its interpretation through a series of laws, rules and prohibitions more congenial to the will of human persuasion and control than to the divine will.

Through the depoliticisation of Islam, that is the clear separation between state and religion, this reformist of Islam proposes a thought opposite to that of the Islamists, convinced that

politics and laws in the name of God are congenial only to those who want to maintain the political power. Compared by Mudhoon (2009) to Ibn Rushd (Averroes), revelation and reason are not contradictory, but complementary, the understanding of his thought should nevertheless take place in a dialectical way by dialoguing with those who have criticised him, not only in the West, but above all in the Islamic world itself (Lahham, 2012). As Nibras Breigheche, first woman "Imam" in Italy recently told me, "Shahrur's thought presents interesting and shareable aspects, there are however some assumptions that are not acceptable from my point of view, such as the refutation of validity of the Sunna and aḥādīṭ".

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