



Taha's Attempt at Surpassing Current Islamic Movements: A Mystical Perspective on Ethics and Politics

In anticipation of Chap. 11's overall evaluation of the philosophical systems of Taha and Bunge, the reader may wonder whether the considerations of the previous chapters have already presaged the verdict. Does Taha lose completely to Bunge's system of scientific humanism? Would this indicate that there is no chance for Islamic modernity, in competition with Western modernity? Taha anticipates that his proposals will place him in competition with other outstanding worldview builders, such as Bertrand Russell, Karl Marx, or in our case, Mario Bunge. To set the stage, Taha boldly distances his views from all historical actualizations of Islamic civilization, past or present, other than the Koranic and Prophetic examples. He identifies himself as neither a follower of the monarchic Sunni tradition nor a follower of the Shia path.¹ He sides neither with Islamist reform movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, nor with orthodox ones, such as the Salafi movement.² He opposes both theocratic models of the current rival regimes of Iran and Saudi Arabia,³ each of

¹ Tāhā 'Abd al-Rahmān, *Thughūr al-Murābaṭah: Muqārabah I'timāniyah li-Ṣirā'āt al-Ummah al-Hālīyah* (Rabat, Morocco: Maghārib lil-Dirāsāt fī al-Ijtimā' al-Insānī, 2018), 79.

² Tāhā 'Abd al-Rahmān, *Rūḥ al-Dīn: Min Dīq al-'Almāniyyah ilā Ṣ'at al-I'timāniyyah* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thāqāfī al-'Arabī, 2012), 357.

³ It is important to note that Taha, as far as I can tell, is silent about the Moroccan monarchic system of the 'Alawī dynasty (assumed power in 1669 CE). The king of this dynasty claims not only to be heading a religious state, but also that he is the "commander of the

which claims to implement and promote the Islamic way of life, as conceived since the Islamic awakening of the 1980s.⁴ Instead, Taha envisions a non-sectarian, non-partisan, and non-state sponsored version of Islam. In all of these positions, he is consistent with his philosophical principles, pursuing spiritual ideals that have never been fully actualized—despite various pretensions to the contrary over the fourteen-century-long history of Islam. Whatever anyone may cite as a historical counterexample to Taha's claims, his answer is ready: he philosophizes universal ideals for the future and for lofty ambitions. Hence, Taha's Islamic modernity would still hold a chance for success—as long as it avoids the mistakes of failed and failing Muslim and Western actualizations alike.

The aftermath of the Arab spring provoked Taha to sharpen his responses to the challenges of modernity, to further establish himself as a leading philosopher for the current Arab world. Following his *Spirit of Modernity*, over an extended period he published eight additional books in ten volumes, with strong socio-political engagement. Some outcomes of the Arab spring were relatively positive, particularly in Tunisia and Morocco. Many political prisoners were liberated, free speech was expanded, and governance democratized. Other outcomes were disastrously negative, particularly in Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Egypt. These countries suffered variously from military coups, proxy war, mass killings and mass imprisonment of protesters, the fleeing of millions (Syria), and destruction of urban infrastructure in addition to famine (Yemen). Amid this turmoil in the Arab world, Taha continued to propose philosophical solutions inspired by the ethical orientation of Islamic mysticism.

In the Islamic experience, mysticism, or *al-taṣawwuf*, emerged as a critical response to two earlier and dominant scholarly influences⁵: Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*),⁶ in particular the controversies between rigid formalist schools, and the polemical identity politics of Islamic theological

believers," *amīr al-mu'minīn*. This is in effect a declaration of a caliphate, yet one allied to the West.

⁴ Ṭāhā, *Thughūr Al-Murābaṭah*, 92.

⁵ Abdelmajid Charfi, *Islam: Between Divine Message and History*, trans. David Bond (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

⁶ For an authoritative, comprehensive, and comprehensible survey of this discipline see: Wael B. Hallaq, *Sharī'a: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

doctrines, *kalam*.⁷ Historically speaking, in order to have an articulate response to both the jurisprudential and theological literatures, minds as weighty as those of al-Ghazali (twelfth century) and Ibn Arabi (thirteenth century) were needed. Both mighty authors were encyclopedic philosophers as much as they were mystics. To follow in the footsteps of al-Ghazali, a critical, twenty-first-century response to contemporary Islamic jurisprudence and theology has to be in effect a ‘new mysticism,’ responding to the doctrinal and sectarian disagreements of Muslims. This is what we find in Taha’s eloquent works, *The Poverty of Secularism* (*Bu’s al-Dahrāniyyah*),⁸ and *The Spirit of Religion: From the Narrowness of Secularism to the Spaciousness of Fidelity* (*Rūḥ al-Dīn: Min Ḍiqq al-‘Almāniyyah ilā Si‘at al-‘Iṭimāniyyah*).⁹ The rest of this chapter articulates this aspect of Taha’s vision by explaining the cognitive basis of ethical mysticism, how it reforms both Islamic and secular political movements, and finally how to situate it all within cosmic environmentalism.

1 HUMAN COGNITION AND THE LIMITATIONS OF POLITICAL SECULARISM

Taha’s neo-mystic¹⁰ vision is novel and politically timely. He warns us that common and traditional claims should never be taken for granted—especially the famous claim that modernity requires a separation between religion and politics.¹¹ For Taha, separation between religion and politics, or between religion and the state, is synonymous with secularism. Thus, unlike the *epistemic* secularism articulated in Chap. 3, for Taha secularism is *political* secularism. Taha’s *Spirit of Religion* is dedicated to refuting the claims that religion and politics should be completely disconnected, as traditional Arab secularists propose; or absolutely connected, as the mainstream Islamic position maintains. Let us present Taha’s rebuttals to both camps, starting with his criticism of the political secularists.

⁷ For a comprehensive and comprehensible survey of this discipline see: Tilman Nagel, *The History of Islamic Theology from Muhammad to the Present*, trans. Thomas Thornton (Princeton, NJ: Markus Weiner Publishers, 2000).

⁸ Ṭāhā ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, *Bu’s al-Dahrāniyyah: al-Naqd al-‘Iṭimānī li-Faṣl al-Dīn ‘An al-Akhlāq* (Beirut: al-Shabakah al-‘Arabiyyah lil-Abḥāth wal-Nashr, 2014).

⁹ Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*.

¹⁰ Taha does not describe his view as neo-mystic. His own term is instead the spirit or soul of religion.

¹¹ Ṭāhā, 23.

1.1 *Taha's Criticism of Political Secularists*

In the Arab-Islamic context, the justification for a secular separation between religion and politics is that politics is related to the realm of the seen world, where justice is a matter of human affairs, while religion is related to the unseen world (*al-ghayb*), the spirit world or the afterlife, where justice is not a matter of human political endeavor.¹² Taha argues that the secular rejection of the influence and importance of the unseen world is completely wrong, for three reasons.¹³ First, the window of human sensation, our only access to the seen world of the present, is extremely narrow. It is not open to past memories, future hopes, and future fears in equal measure. In other words, the cognitive contribution of the seen world in the present time (*‘ālam al-shahādah*) is overwhelmed by the cognitive contributions of the unseen worlds of past knowledge and anticipated future. Second, what one senses in one's own space and time is mostly not the same as for everyone else, since others have different perceptions, tied to their own space and time. Third, even if perceptions across individuals are identical, or even speaking of those of a single person, the contribution of the senses to a particular cognitive consideration in a particular context—such as, when in the midst of appreciating the writing of an elementary school student—will not be the same in a different context—such as when in the midst of disdaining the writing of a well-known obscurantist ideologue. In sum, the justification of the political secularists for a separation between religion and politics is negated by the conjunction of localization of the individual in space and time, plurality of human perception, and multiplicity of cognitive considerations, all of which make the immediately present seen world but a very tiny aspect of the whole, an aspect whose cognitive contribution is completely overwhelmed by the contributions of the unseen world.¹⁴

In Taha's view, whatever their walks of life or their ideological choices, humans are inhabiting two worlds: the material seen one; and the unseen one full of past memories, future hopes, and abstract ideals. In opposition to the political secularists, Taha argues that the basic cognitive faculties of the human are in fact designed (by God) to be intimately focused upon the *unseen*, not the seen. So, our memory remembers what has ceased to

¹² Taha, 24.

¹³ Taha, 24.

¹⁴ Taha, 24.

exist, our reason abstracts from present material entities to what does not exist in matter, and our imagination creates what never existed. All of this amounts to the fact that we are mostly not satisfied with what exists.¹⁵ Humans continuously agitate to exit from the sensed existence; they aspire for better worlds and devise technologies never seen before.¹⁶

The point Taha makes out of this is that human primordial creation, *fitrah* (see Chap. 9, Sects. 2.1.3, 2.1.4), reminds the human of his original spirit (*rūh*), which is always hungry for the progress inspired by the unseen. In this way, Taha indirectly acknowledges the universality of flux and change in the world, coming closer to the *epistemic* secularism defended in Chap. 3, openness to foundational change. Yet, he does so without the important ratio-empirical qualification.

Traditional political secularists uphold the human as the origin of laws and ideals, in place of the divine. By denying the supremacy of the unseen, secular politics in the West transforms what was once divine majesty into mere nationalistic majesty.¹⁷ In this process, political secularism creates secular idols, as seen in flags, insignias, and new secular rituals, such as those involving national anthems and patriotic celebrations. These elements evidence a determined will to forget the unseen (*taghyīb*). But denying the deeper dimensions of existence does not make the unseen go away. In trying to replace the unseen that they are trying to escape, political secularists eventually fall into glorifying ethnic nationalities, and worshipping the leaders, the party, the ideology, or the so-called our way of life.¹⁸

1.2 *Political Secularist Wine in Modern Islamic Movement Bottles*

Taha insists that the secularists' whimsical "will to replace the unseen by another" has to be countered by the "will to remember religious spirit." Yet, Taha tells us that despite taking allegiance to religion, modern Islamic movements also got it wrong, insofar as they adopted the same rigid material techniques and strategies of the secularists: concentrating on formal

¹⁵ Ṭahā, 35.

¹⁶ Ṭahā, 33.

¹⁷ Ṭahā, 25.

¹⁸ Ṭahā, 25.

laws, outward appearances, and governmental powers, all of which are antithetical to spirit. Overall, Taha critically evaluates the contemporary ideological debate in the Islamic world, as distributed through the following six positions.

1. Westernized, secular Arab academics, media figures, and intellectuals call for a separation between religion and politics.
2. Corrupt secular Arab governments nevertheless seek to connect religion and politics, by making religion serve the politics of the government; thus they politicize religion (they are *tasyīsiyyīn*).¹⁹
3. Pragmatic Islamic movements, such as the Moroccan or Egyptian versions of the Muslim brotherhood, conversely want politics to serve religion; thus they religionize politics (they are *tadyīniyyīn*).²⁰
4. The militant traditionalists of Salafism, and followers of other radicals such as Sayyid Qutb and Mawdudi,²¹ do not see a connection between religion and politics since for them both spheres are already identical spheres; thus they fuse the two (they are *taḥkīmiyyīn*) and seek to dominate social life by way of particular legal rulings of the canons (*aḥkām*).²²
5. Current Iranian theology and Arab followers of the Shia “guardianship of the jurist” (*wilāyat al-faqīh*) also do not see a connection between religion and politics since both spheres are already identical in nature; they seek the domination of the jurists over the people (they are *tafqībiyyīn*).²³
6. The final position is the proposed cosmological ethics of the new mysticism that Taha invents. It sees an original unity that prevents religion and politics from being maturely separate entities; Taha calls this additional group *ahl al-tazkiyah*, those who seek the domination of self-purifying ethics.

Thus within this six-fold classification, there are four ideological variations concerning religion and politics: position (1) upholds complete

¹⁹ Ṭahā, 328.

²⁰ Ṭahā, 335.

²¹ For a comprehensive recent survey, see: François Burgat, *Understanding Political Islam: Environmental Justice and Citizen Science in a Post-Truth Age*, trans. Thomas Hill (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2020).

²² Ṭahā, 367.

²³ Ṭahā, 400.

separation, positions (2) and (3) uphold a strong connection, positions (4) and (5) a total identification, while position (6) expresses a desire to reexamine the relationship between power and worship, by establishing a dialogue between the seen and the unseen. Taha's view challenges both of the common views, that politics and religion are either completely different domains or completely identical ones. He argues that they rather *share the same domain*, since both of them *have the goal of managing the world (tadbīr) and seek the means to do so*. Amazingly then, Taha maintains that political and religious practices are parallel paths within the same world. However, virtuous travel along the political path elevates management of the seen world to the status of the holy (*tadbīr tasīyydī*),²⁴ while in the opposite direction, virtuous travel along the religious path showers the higher values and meanings of the holy down upon the seen world (*tadbīr ta'abbudī*).²⁵ Taha argues that current Islamic movements do not exemplify virtuous travel along either path and so are in need of reform.

2 ETHICAL MYSTICISM AND THE REFORMATION OF ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS

Since Taha considers himself a Muslim philosopher, he does not use the word 'Islamist' (*islāmī*) to refer to any particular Islamic religious perspective or movement. Instead he uses it to mean 'religionist,' that is, someone who unjustifiably religionizes their political affairs (*tadyīnī*). Between the secular path to power or to a political outcome, with its clear rejection of the unseen on the one hand, and the spiritual application of higher values, on the other hand, lies the problem of modern Muslim religionists who admit the unseen while still seeking political elevation. In particular, seeking the virtues of the spiritual realm is the opposite of seeking the pleasures of this world, and there is nothing more material than seeking the pleasure of power.²⁶ Taha concludes that the religionist path, taken by Islamic movements, is rather a form of masked secularism (*tadbīr mushtabih*).²⁷ As a result, religionists will eventually have their 'will to win politically' (*irādat al-taghallub*) overcomes their 'will to be spiritually

²⁴ Ṭahā, 328.

²⁵ Ṭahā, 323.

²⁶ Ṭahā, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 342.

²⁷ Ṭahā, 328.

straight' (*irādat al-istiḳāmah*).²⁸ This analysis shocks both traditional Arab secularists and Islamists, because seeking power for itself becomes an ethical sin regardless of the ideological flag of choice.

Anyone can convert to Islam by stating the *shahadah*, which is *Ashhadu an la Ilaha Illa Allah wa anna Muhammadan Rasul Allah*.²⁹ This means *I recognize that there is no god other than the God, and that Muhammed is the messenger of God*. Taha, with his linguistic inclinations, takes the first half that statement to its maximum semantic capacity. So, he attacks the religionist's obsession with particular Islamic rulings for fault of recognizing religious commands (*shuhūd al-awāmir*) without recognizing the noble goals or intentions behind those commands—that is, without recognizing God, the commander (*shuhūd al-āmir*).³⁰ Justice can be achieved only if one observes the ideal intentions and plans of the law Giver—God—not by being only a passive law receiver of certain legal particulars.³¹ By and large, with regard to divine command (*āmiriyyah*), Muslim religionists give recognition to its instrument—a commander (*āmir*, as in Emir)—without evaluating the goals or the wisdom behind the worldly acts of command (*āmiriyyah*), which can have multiple applications.³²

To exemplify, some Muslims recognize that alms should be given in a certain percentage, yet without evaluating (recognizing) whether or not the alms they give actually relieve poverty—the actual objective of the law Giver. Taha notes that in Arabic the vision of the eyes is called 'opinion' (*ra'y*), while the spirit's vision is called testimony (*shuhūd*, translated as *recognizing* earlier). In turn, the vision of the spirit cannot be realized until the spirit (*rūḥ*) is resurrected from the grave of the psyche (*nafs*), by acts of purification (*tazkiyah*).³³ These involve the abandonment of any desire, fear, or goal other than accepting the natural course of the Creator. Religionists, in their quest for power and political outcomes, of necessity lack this necessary purification. Thus, they are prevented from spiritually recognizing the legislative wisdom or objectives of Koranic rulings.

At this point, Taha's philosophy is moving not only beyond traditional political secularism and contemporary religious movements, but also

²⁸ Ṭahā, 334.

²⁹ *Ashhadu an lā Ilāha Illā Allāh wa Anna Muḥammadan Rasūl Allāh*.

³⁰ Ṭahā, 320.

³¹ Ṭahā, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 390.

³² Ṭahā, 322.

³³ Ṭahā, 321.

beyond the literalist traditions of Islamic law (*ḥākimiyyah*)—both of Sunnism, and of the contemporary Shia “guardianship of the jurist” (*wilāyat al-faqīh*), at the very same time. Thus, in Taha’s view, Sunnis of the Arab world, in particular the Muslim brotherhood and Salafi movements, sought the domination of Islamic laws upon the political sphere, but without recognizing (evaluating) the historicity, applicability, and justice of those rulings (*‘adiliyyah*). The Sunnis had in mind the ideological goal of a utopian government that had not yet seen the light, whereas the Shia attempt came to fruition with its takeover of the 1979 Iranian revolution, to favor the primacy of laws at the hands of an exclusive clergy.

Taha recognizes a commonality between current Shia and Sunni political-religionist paths. Both groups rely on certain historical developments of jurisprudence, concentrating on narratives (*riwāyat*) rather than on *exemplary behavior*, appearances rather than *sincerity*, and group defense rather than the *individual self*.³⁴ In response, Taha calls for establishing a theory of “the living jurist” (*al-faqīh al-ḥayy*). This living jurist should be any lay Muslim, regardless of his or her walk of life. The central premise is that the concept of jurisprudence in the Koran (*fiqh*) refers in many instances to “the understanding of the heart,”³⁵ in relation to actions or thoughts, appearance or intentions.³⁶ Taha’s argument seeks to individualize the ethical considerations of Islamic law, which eventually would lead to pluralism, and diversity of ethical judgment.

As for his particular criticism of the Shia “guardianship of the jurist,” Taha notes that originally there was no such thing as guardianship, simply because one’s worshipping cannot substitute someone else’s. In Islam, everyone is responsible for their duties to God individually, based on the verse “Everyone of them will come to Him singly on the Day of Judgment.”³⁷ This means that first, every Muslim is required to be a deep thinker of their own heart (*faqīh*), and there is no need for an exclusive clergy.³⁸ Second, every Muslim is a *faqīh* of their own faith, and there is no supremacy of the law aspect of religion over the rest of the aspects of religion. Third, every Muslim is a deep thinker, *faqīh*, of their own soul, since the soul is the source of one’s religiosity.

³⁴ Tāhā, 434.

³⁵ Tāhā, 421.

³⁶ The Qur’an 7:179, “They have hearts wherewith they understand not”; and 63:3, “a seal was set on their hearts: therefore, they understand not”.

³⁷ The Qur’an 19:95.

³⁸ Tāhā, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 420.

Taha's individualistic and relativistic 'living jurist' conception hinges on the idea that ethical behavior according to good intentions is effective, while behavior according to mere legalistic appearance leads to sinful hypocrisy and a regime of punitive enforcement. By contrast Taha's 'living jurist' conception leads to *guardianship of the knowledgeable society over itself* (*wilāyat al-mujtama' al-mutafaqqih 'alā nafsih*), to replace the clerical and governmental path of the Iranian-Shia "guardianship of the jurist." Taha seeks to make the ethical considerations of Islamic law relevant to civil society rather than to government, which eventually would lead to the end of punitive enforcement, state centralization, and the top-down decrees of guardian jurists.

By his etymological analysis of relevant Koranic concepts, and by coordinating those findings with the realm of political action, Taha provides to contemporary Muslims valuable and revolutionary results contrary to the Sunni and Shia mainstreams. By setting Islamic ethics on the foundation of individual sincerity, away from collective state enforcement; on the foundation of local civil society, away from the governmental clerical class, Taha has made a major contribution to the advancement of Islamic political philosophy.

3 ETHICAL MYSTICISM AND THE REFORMATION OF POLITICAL SECULARISM

Arab political secularism has as one of its inspirations modern rationalism. In context this is the view that reason rather than religion is the basis of knowledge, and that reason and knowledge should be the basis for action. Being generally advocates of rationalism, Arab political secularists must respect the three fundamental laws of logic: the law of identity, namely that something is equal to itself; the law of non-contradiction, that the conjunction of an assertion and its denial is always false; and the law of the excluded middle, that propositions are either true or false with no option in between. Taha takes off from there and proposes new rationalist principles that are not confined to the realm of ideas, but that also apply to virtuous action.

In this expansion of logic, one can see an analogy between the culture of the ancient Greeks and their logic, with its emphasis on contradiction or conflict, and Taha's new logic of action, with its emphasis on Koranic practical morality. Logic is centrally concerned with the problems posed

by contradiction or, metaphorically, conflict. The mythology of the ancient Greeks saw an original struggle between the Titans—the children of Heaven (Uranus) and Earth (Gaia)—and their father. Cronos, the youngest son of Uranus, led the rebellion, and overthrew and castrated his father. In turn Zeus, the son of Cronus, overthrew his father and defeated the Titans. Then man tricked Zeus into accepting an inferior sacrifice, and in retaliation Zeus withdrew the secret of fire from him; but the Titan Prometheus stole fire and gave it back to man, earning him from Zeus a never-ending punishment of torture, until his rescue by Hercules.

In stark contrast to this epic of primeval conflict, the Koran recounts an original harmony between God and humankind. An ensuing philosophy of trust is articulated in Taha's newer work, *The Poverty of Secularism* (*Bu's al-Dahrāniyyah*),³⁹ which is mainly a reflection on these Koranic verses:

2:30 “And when your Lord said to the angels, I am going to place in the earth a successor [*khalifah*; that is, humankind], they said: What! will you place in it such as shall make mischief in it and shed blood, and we celebrate your praise and extol your holiness? He said: Surely I know what you do not know.”

33:72 “We did indeed offer the Trust to the Heavens and the Earth and the Mountains; but they refused to undertake it, being afraid thereof: but human undertook it; He was indeed unjust and foolish.”

Working out from these verses, Taha's ethical rationalism contemplates how the human, as the Creator's successor, is entrusted with managing the world. This contemplation leads Taha to naming his philosophy *trusteeship* (*al-i'timāniyyah*)⁴⁰ and to augment the laws of logical rationality with the principles of “trusteeship rationality.” Taha derives these new principles by way of variations on the fundamental laws of logic.

First, the law of identity becomes a principle of *witnessing* or *recognizing* (*shahādah*), where the identity or nature of anything is not established

³⁹ Tāhā, *Bu's al-Dahrāniyyah*.

⁴⁰ See Hashas, “Taha Abderrahmane's Trusteeship Paradigm: Spiritual Modernity and the Islamic Contribution to the Formation of a Renewed Universal Civilization of Ethos”; and Hashas, “The Trusteeship Paradigm: the Formation and Reception of a Philosophy,” in Hashas and Al-Khatib, eds., *Islamic Ethics and the Trusteeship Paradigm: Taha Abderrahmane's Philosophy in Comparative Perspectives*, 37–61, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004438354_004.

solely by individual sensation and examination, but also by the reports of the Koran, Muslims, and all creatures.⁴¹ So, one's own status as a witness, as a self-standing observer, as a self-standing entity, is coupled with that of others, which expands the narrowness of self-identification that otherwise leads to self-worshipping.

Second, the law of contradiction is extended to *faithful responsibility* (*amānah*). Rather than only avoiding contradictory statements, actions are also required to be consistent, by assuring that responsible and irresponsible acts are not intermingled. Fixation on possessions is replaced by a focus on responsibility regarding those possessions, along with responsibility to other humans and to the rest of creation, as the cited verses envision. "Faithful responsibility" is in other words the principle that ethical contradiction should be avoided.⁴² In faithful responsibility, reversing environmental degradation becomes a priority, because humankind does not possess this or that part of creation, but is supposed to be the wise guardian of it (*khalīfah*).

Third, the law of the excluded middle is applied to the requirement of self-reformation and purification (*tazkiyah*).⁴³ Islam is concerned with moral progress and the perfectibility of the self. In the Islamic concept of self-reformation, the individual flourishes with the group and vice versa. Rather than forcing a choice between the individual and the group, or between moral and material progress, Taha's Islamic version of the law of the excluded middle imposes a different binary choice on the self-reformer by asking, is this action permitted (*ḥalāl*) or forbidden (*ḥarām*)? The individual is left with no choice but to reject what is forbidden and to progress along the path of moral perfection.⁴⁴

In sum then, beyond the abstract rationality of the ancient Greeks, or of the medieval Hellenistic Muslim philosophers,⁴⁵ Taha's new principles of ethical Islamic rationality are the expansion of identity, consistent fulfillment of responsibilities, and self-reformation that excludes the forbidden.⁴⁶ Taha, a university professor of logic himself, does not even come close to rejecting the laws of logic. Rather, he extends their scope from the realm of ideas to the realms of action and ethics.

⁴¹ Ṭahā, *Bu's al-Dabrāniyyah*, 15.

⁴² Ṭahā, 15–16.

⁴³ Ṭahā, 17.

⁴⁴ Ṭahā, 18.

⁴⁵ Ṭahā, 20.

⁴⁶ Ṭahā, 14.

From a philosophical point of view, Taha's modifications are in harmony with systemic philosophical traditions. On this Rescher states:

(1) Rationality consists in the intelligent pursuit of appropriate ends. It pivots on the use of intelligence or reason, the crucial survival instrument of the human race, in the management of our affairs. (2) The three main contexts of rationality are the *cognitive*, the *practical*, and the *evaluative*. All are united in the common task of implementing 'the best reasons'—reasons for *belief*, *action*, and *evaluation*, respectively.⁴⁷

Epistemic secularism's openness to foundational change (Chap. 3) leaves an opening for Taha's attention to the unseen world. Foundational change usually comes from discovering new aspects of reality, grasping new connections, and the plurality of human points of view. Many of the fundamental conceptions of science are trans-empirical: heredity, the interiors of stars, and causation, to name only three (see also Chap. 7, Sect. 3.1). They are unseen and untouched, mental constructions concerning the past, present, and future of reality. In this way, in an Emersonian sense, scientific theories are spiritual (see Chap. 3, Sect. 8)—although not in Taha's sense, because he overlooks the ratio-empirical requirements of epistemic secularism. These requirements differentiate between what of the unseen is accepted as belonging to the realm of truth and reality, and what is not. Though scientific theories are in a sense spiritual, they make for a rationally organized spirituality and an empirically supported spirituality. Without these qualifications, the hunter-gatherer's spirituality, the spirituality of medieval magicians, or new-age spirituality are all on equal footing: they all deal with the unseen—and they do lift up the spirits of their believers.

The matter of ratio-empirical warrant makes for a crucial divergence between the philosophies of Taha and Bunge. Still their ethics converge, for Taha's ethical rationality is in harmony with Bunge's supreme value of sustainable global welfare. Sustainable global welfare, or equitable prosperity, as the satisfaction of needs and legitimate wants and the mutual but cooperative sovereignty of the peoples of the world in pursuit of it, remains the worldwide common ground of modernity.

⁴⁷Nicholas Rescher, *Rationality: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Nature and the Rationale of Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 1. Emphases are mine.

4 ETHICAL MYSTICISM AND COEXISTENCE WITH THE CULTURAL AND NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Sections 1.2 and 2 described how Taha has in effect seen the bids of current and past Islamic traditions and raised them: calling their religiosity out as only superficially Islamic, he has surpassed their proposals and outbid them, offering a more ethically just understanding of Islam, designed to avoid their pitfalls.

Taha uses a parallel strategy to deal with the ideal of solidarity in the Western application of modernity. Solidarity belongs to a constellation of related ideals and concepts such as cooperation, participation, social network, acknowledgment of the other, respect, and coexistence.⁴⁸ Thinking within Taha's conception of the spirit of modernity, solidarity is an aspect of the principle of *universality*, and in particular of its foundation of *generalizability* (Chap. 5, Sects. 3.3 and 4.4). Taha enjoins us to rethink the false tacit principles of the Western experience of modernity; thus, we are to rethink the Western ideal of solidarity. Taha sees the central problem with the Western version being its attachment to the material and sensual aspects of human interaction, without coupling that with attention to sentimental and ethical considerations.⁴⁹ In his analysis, this leads to forgetfulness of the organic nature of the cosmos. So, Taha asks, how did the Western application of solidarity fail?

Taha answers that, rather than seeing multidimensional connections in the world, and a consequent universal solidarity, sensual and material Western solidarity was based on three *separation projects*: separation from traditions, from nature, and from place. Separation from traditions—religious, political, or social—was aimed at expunging sacredness from the cultural inheritance of the West. The purpose of this move was to liberate the human will, that it might rule over itself.⁵⁰ Second, separation from nature was aimed at expunging sacredness from the material, natural, environmental inheritance of the West. The purpose of this move was to liberate human action upon nature, that humanity might fully exploit it. Finally, separation from place, whether large and geographic, such as with regard to national boundaries, or local and corporeal, such as with regard to

⁴⁸ Ṭāhā 'Abd al-Raḥmān, *Rūḥ Al-Ḥadāthah: Al-Madkhal Li-Ta'sīs al-Ḥadāthah al-Islāmiyyah* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi al-'Arabī, 2006), 254.

⁴⁹ Ṭāhā, 237.

⁵⁰ Ṭāhā, 238.

human bodies and their abodes, was aimed at attaining freedom of movement, ideation, and more recently, cyber-communication.⁵¹ Thus these three separation projects linked the degree of solidarity in Western society to the degree of its opposition to traditions, nature, and place.⁵²

Certainly, there are benefits to liberation from traditions, as seen in the modern explosion of new ideas. The downside, according to Taha, was that modern Westerners fell into perpetual and pervasive doubt, as if living in a permanent earthquake state.⁵³ Correspondingly, the upside of separation from the sacred status of nature was diverse technological benefit; the downside was chemical, biological, and ultimately nuclear threat, plus the depletion of natural resources. Thus modern Westerners live in incessant fear and total insecurity.⁵⁴ The upside of separation from place was greater reach; the downside was that modern Westerners were left with no central anchor. They have become lost in the vast informatic sphere like a homeless person.⁵⁵ No wonder then, modern Westerners find themselves in the era of ends; “end of nature,” “end of geography,” “end of body,”⁵⁶ or, as Freud puts it, the Killing of the Father.

The modern Westerner's fall into unsteadiness, fearfulness, and homelessness was the predictable result of breaching a central principle in ethics: the principle of mutual right and duty.⁵⁷ Taha formulates this principle as:

The ideal in ethical relationships between two parties is that every party has to preserve the rights of the other when they are humans; and when the other is not human [e.g., animals or the environment], then the human has to preserve their rights, with the consideration that the mutual rights of the two parties have to be balanced.⁵⁸

This basic principle implies a set of three further principles: duty is a condition in all ethical relationships, duty is upon the human when the other party is not a human,⁵⁹ and duties are not always equal or identical but are

⁵¹ Ṭahā, 239.

⁵² Ṭahā, 239.

⁵³ Ṭahā, 239.

⁵⁴ Ṭahā, 240.

⁵⁵ Ṭahā, 240.

⁵⁶ Taha attributes these claims in order to Giddens, Virilio, and D. Le Breton, Ṭahā, 241.

⁵⁷ Ṭahā, 240.

⁵⁸ Ṭahā, 240.

⁵⁹ Ṭahā, 240.

always balanced.⁶⁰ Taha's Islamic principles cast a novel light on the post-modern era of ends, in a way that can negate, undo, or shall we say deconstruct Freud's 'Killing of the Father.'

In Islamic metaphor, duty is owed first to the mother: the duty to repay the motherly deeds that provide natural sustenance, traditional education, and upbringing. Respect for geographic and corporeal place is seen as multidimensional aspects of respect for the universal allegoric mother.⁶¹ In proper time, the mother weans the child—for the sake of maturity and independence, not separation. In framing these ideas under the idea of motherhood, the three Western separation projects are seen as counter-productive. Without matriculation in the teachings of the traditions, it would be impossible to know how to augment or surpass them; without guarding the abundance of natural resources, it would be impossible to use them; and without residence in place, it would be impossible to escape from it.⁶² The takeaway is that human culture, technology, and social movements are offspring of the cosmic mother, and the human has to respect her rights. The goal is not separation from that mother, but respectful weaning that preserves the motherly connections.

In Arabic, all of this cluster of ideas is already embodied in the concept of mercy, *rahmah*, because it is literally derived from the term for the mother's womb, *rahim*. So, mutually merciful behavior between humans, as in rescue, aid, and disaster relief, is known as *tarāḥum*. This is understood in the Arabic ear as motherly mercy, maternal mercy, or, natural to the Arabic ear and to coin a phrase, *mutual wombmercy*.

In Taha's philosophy, this far-reaching Arabic conception of mercy not only serves as a basis for challenging the Western culture of ends and separation, but also has religious connotations. The derivational field of mercy includes "the merciful" (*rahīm*) and "the most merciful" (*al-Rahmān*), that is, God (see Chap. 5, Sect. 3.2.2). This is based not only on the Koranic verse "Say: Call upon God or call upon the Merciful; whichever you call upon, He has the best names,"⁶³ but also on many other Koranic verses that stress the notion "My mercy embraces all things."⁶⁴ Taha concludes from this that "The ideal is that creatures, whatever they are, give

⁶⁰ Ṭāhā, 241.

⁶¹ Ṭāhā, 241.

⁶² Ṭāhā, 242.

⁶³ The Qur'an 17:110.

⁶⁴ The Qur'an 7:156.

mercy to each other, acting properly in the name of The Most Merciful.”⁶⁵ As already cited in Chap. 5, Sect. 3.2.2, in the context of a discussion of Taha's style, understanding this principle has far-reaching metaphysical meaning:

The origin of everything is mercy, where it is the first of all things, for if thinkers took note of this amazing fact, that *in the beginning there was mercy*, they would have obtained satisfying answers to their questions about existence and existent things. This is like their question *Why is there something rather than nothing?* The answer [is because] mercy is a precursor, for were it not for mercy there would have been nothing [created]. *I received mercy, therefore I am.* So, the knowledge of mercy is prior to the knowledge of existence.⁶⁶

Rather than the problematic Western implementation of solidarity, and its project of separation, acknowledging the universal mercy should allow humanity to reconnect and practice solidarity with nature, traditions, and place. In order though to achieve this, there are cognitive preparations, behavioral duties, and certain self-therapies that must be followed.

For cognitive preparations, Taha suggests the following. First, “remember in your soul always that the relation of the Most Merciful with you is close; although its way is unknown, it is acknowledged with certainty.”⁶⁷ Second, “act according to the valuable relation between the name of the Most Merciful and the womb.”⁶⁸ Taha brings to the attention of his Arabic readership the universality of the merciful nature of God in traditions other than that of the Koran. Hence, the third cognitive preparation is, “acknowledge the cross-religious agreement on Mercy as an attribute of God.”⁶⁹ Taha reminds the reader that the Arabian Jewish companion of the Prophet, Abd Allah Ibn Salam, was surprised to hear the name *al-Rahman* in the Koran, for it being identical in meaning and root to the Biblical Hebrew El Rachum (אל רחום).⁷⁰ I should add to Taha's cross-religious awareness, Paleolithic and African examples, where Karen Armstrong notes that “The earth seemed to sustain all creatures—plants,

⁶⁵ Ṭahā, *Rūḥ Al-Ḥadāthab*, 244.

⁶⁶ Ṭahā, 250.

⁶⁷ Ṭahā, *Rūḥ Al-Ḥadāthab*, 247.

⁶⁸ Ṭahā, 247.

⁶⁹ Ṭahā, 248.

⁷⁰ Ṭahā, 248.

animals and humans—as in a *living womb*,⁷¹ and that “The initiates [of tribal rituals] crawl back into the *womb of the earth*.”⁷² In these cognitive preparations, God is understood as the motherly source of living creatures; of the environment and of human traditions, the latter existing within the former; and of human bodies, sustained by both. In Taha’s conception this motherly practice of mercy has to be repaid by mercy, simply because of its linguist conception. In effect, Taha’s prescriptions are in line with Rescher doxastic conception of God (Chap. 6, Sect. 4.7).

For behavioral duties, Taha articulates a variety of “wombmercy” (*tarāḥum*) duties that cover the spectrum of humans, other living creatures, things, and unknown entities. The first duty is to “Give mercy to others the way you are merciful with yourself; [that is,] in protection to the value of the human.”⁷³ The second is to “Give mercy to the non-human the way you are merciful to the human; [that is,] in protection to the value of being.”⁷⁴ The third is to “Give the universality derived from mercy priority over any other universality.”⁷⁵ Clearly, war (whether direct or by proxy) and exploitation in all forms are banned by the first; animal cruelty and environmental degradation are prohibited by the second; and even imagining space aliens and wishing to kill them is unacceptable by the third. Clearly, Western modernity has offered a proliferation of the contrary maladies.

As for self-therapies, Taha notes that those who fulfill the cognitive preparations and abide by the three wombmercy duties have to sustain their being, by emulating a certain ideal. This ideal is of course that of The

⁷¹ Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth* (New York, NY: Canongate U.S., 2005), 42. Emphasis is mine.

⁷² Armstrong, 143. Emphasis is mine.

⁷³ Ṭāhā, 252.

⁷⁴ Ṭāhā, 253. A reviewer raised the following problem with Taha’s argument, rephrased here as follows. According to Taha, that I received mercy is a necessary precondition for my existence (indeed, mercy is a necessary precondition for any existence). But then, from the fact of my existence, which I know immediately, I can deduce that I received mercy. In this way, contrary to Taha, it would seem that the knowledge of existence is prior to the knowledge of mercy.

The difference between the two is ultimately that Taha takes as primary both the existence of mercy and knowledge of it, while considering that people are puzzled about existence; on the other hand the reviewer takes as primary both his own existence and knowledge of it, while perhaps implicitly considering that people find the existence of mercy more puzzling than that of themselves.

⁷⁵ Ṭāhā, 254.

Most Merciful, so Taha offers first: “witness in the commands of The Most Merciful, manifestations of his mercy, not tyranny.”⁷⁶ Second, “in order to understand the manifestations of his mercy, follow the path of contemplation, not [abstract] thinking only.”⁷⁷ (This alludes to Taha’s conception of ultra-rationality; see Chap. 5, Sect. 4.3.) And finally, “in your path of acting properly, take the path of resembling the ethics of The Most Merciful, not the path of making The Most Merciful similar to the human.”⁷⁸

As described in Chap. 5, Sect. 3.2.2, Taha derives the centrality of mercy from contemplating God’s name, *The Merciful* (*rahmān*). He sees this as a way to resolve many of the modern maladies brought about by those who insist, to the contrary, on contemplating the centrality of the human (*inasān*). Here again it is worth recalling something that was cited in Chap. 5, Sect. 3.2.2, in the context of Taha’s style. Taha’s argument is that an Islamic practice of solidarity, contrary to the Western version, is a practice of mercy:

For those who practice solidarity [*mutadāmin*], by virtue of harmonizing their behavior with the good and natural order of things [*takhlīq*], the anxiousness to destroy the [traditional Islamic] heritage vanishes, through the consideration that one of the goals of heritage is to provide the human with the power of the past, manifested in preserving *his memory*. Preservation of memory is the value that brings to the human, permanence free of instability. For those who practice solidarity, by virtue of harmonizing their behavior with the good and natural order of things, the anxiousness to destroy nature disappears, through the consideration that one of the objectives of nature is to provide the human with the power of the future, manifested in preserving *his offspring*. Preservation of offspring is the value that brings to the human security, free of fear. For those who practice solidarity, by virtue of harmonizing their behavior with the good and natural order of things, finally, the anxiousness to destroy space disappears, through the consideration that one of the aims of space is to provide the human with power of the present, manifested in persevering *his identity*. Preservation of identity is the value that brings to the human residence, free of homelessness. Said briefly, the practitioner of solidarity with all beings—or the mercy practitioner [*mutarāḥim*]⁷⁹—is a stable, secure, and resident human.

⁷⁶ Ṭāhā, *Rūḥ Al-Ḥadāthah*, 257.

⁷⁷ Ṭāhā, 258.

⁷⁸ Ṭāhā, 259.

⁷⁹ Ṭāhā, 260.

5 CONCLUSION

Philosophizing is a highly imaginative enterprise. Its cognitive aspects call for conceptualizing actual reality by way of novel, trans-empirical ideas and relationships never seen (recognized) before their invention. Its practical branches, ethics and political philosophy, call for reforming and reformulating human society.

Reformation and innovation, attempts to surpass current models, can bring great benefit, or great harm—and sometimes do both, in different ways in the same society. In 1917 Russia leaped to giving women the right to vote, even prior to the liberal United States, where women's suffrage was only granted in 1920. Soon after though, the votes of both Russian women and men were rendered meaningless, as the same underlying revolutionary ideology also enabled authoritarian rule, bloody purges, and the Gulag. In 1978, China's then-'paramount leader,' Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997), announced a new "Open Door Policy"⁸⁰ that abandoned the Party's previous economic ideology, to combine political communism with massive foreign direct investment and market capitalism. Against Western economic advice at the time, this combination resulted in multiplying the Chinese GDP 95 times⁸¹ within four decades. Yet, while lifting hundreds of millions of Chinese out of poverty, it also moved high-paying manufacturing jobs from the West to low-paying jobs in the East—and enabled a vast increase in consumerism, depletion of non-renewable resources, plastic garbage accumulation, pollution, and authoritarian state power. A third example is the unheralded and unconventional manufacturer of expensive electric cars, Tesla, whose stock valuation surpassed that of the Japanese giant, Toyota,⁸² historically a producer of reliable,

⁸⁰ There had been a previous "Open Door Policy" instituted by Western powers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

⁸¹ Data show a GDP rise from nearly \$150 billion in 1987 to \$14,300 billion in 2019. In World Bank, "GDP (Current US\$)—China | Data," accessed August 7, 2020, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=CN>.

⁸² Shares of Tesla climbed in value to "\$207.2 billion, surpassing Toyota's \$201.9 billion," even though "Tesla produced 103,000 vehicles in the [same period], or about 4% of the almost 2.4 million made by Toyota." In Reed Stevenson, "Tesla Just Dethroned Toyota as The World's Most Valuable Automaker," *Fortune*, July 1, 2020, <https://fortune.com/2020/07/01/tesla-stock-price-tsla-shares-market-cap-toyota-worlds-most-valuable-automaker-clon-musk/>.

affordable, and highly popular cars. Yet, in many parts of the United States, as well as other countries, electric power is generated by burning coal. In these contexts, the supposedly green electric car is really the last thing the world needs, the coal-fired car. In short, surpassing limitations with creativity will always have, shall we say, enormous potential, both positive and negative.

Humanity will always need to surpass limitations with creativity: in a sense, to modernize. Can the potentially negative aspect of modernity be surpassed, to leave only its beneficial aspect? Taha excels at innovatively going beyond the conceptions of both current Western and Muslim applications of modernity. He criticizes the limited perspectives of traditional political secularism and current and past Islamic movements alike, and proposes ethical mysticism as the solution. Within that framework, he offers reformist prescriptions for both political secularism and current Islamic movements—as well as prescriptions for how to live one's life in awareness of, and as a resident in, the larger cosmos.

In Taha's philosophy, the factors of time, the plurality of human perceptions, and the multiplicity of cognitive considerations make the immediately present seen world but a very tiny portion of reality, one that is completely overwhelmed by the influences of the unseen world; yet one that can be harmonized with the rest, through a virtuous ethical worldview. Contrary to the current Sunni and Shia mainstreams, Taha bases his Islamic ethics on individual sincerity, away from totalitarian state enforcement; on local civil society, away from the clerical class. These innovations make for a new form of Islamic political thinking. Finally, the duty to repay motherly mercy, rooted in cognitive contemplation of the cosmic natural mother and the concomitant behavioral duties to others, humans and non-humans alike, can truly enhance environmental sustainability. Bunge would not agree with Taha's route through divine motherly mercy, but he would approve of the final destination: environmental sustainability and some form of popular self-governance, common grounds for modernity.

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