

Chapter 8

The Political Theology of Taha Abderrahmane

Religion, Secularism, and Trusteeship

Mohammed Hashas

ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces some major aspects of Taha Abderrahmane's political theology as presented in his various works, with major reference to his *The Spirit of Religion: From the Narrowness of Secularism to the Openness of Trusteeship* (2012). The chapter centralizes his concept of "spiritual self-criticism," which he uses as an apparatus for the formation of what I refer to here as "trusteeship society"; the latter is a critical synthesis of the secular and religious societies and ways of governance of human affairs. Abderrahmane's "trusteeship paradigm" briefly engages with secular-religious analytical frameworks as proposed by Cox Harvey, Talal Asad, Olivier Roy, Asef Bayat, and Charles Taylor. The argument here is that trusteeship paradigm faces serious limitations to be implemented in the Arab-Islamic plural societies, let alone the Euro-American secular-liberal societies; the *homo moralis* it calls for to lead spiritual self-criticism for human renewal may not be appealing to the plural religious and philosophical views present in society. Still, its call for a radical ethos remains relevant for societies in predicaments, be they secular, religious, or secular-religious societies.

INTRODUCTION

It did not take Cox Harvey a long time to revise his ideas, first penned in *The Secular City* (1965), about the triumph of secularism, the rise of secularization, and the decline of religion, as he saw it in the 1960s. Twenty-five years

later, he revised his views about his earlier claim; then, half a century after, he writes that religion has still a role to play in the present and future; it is not a “return” to religion but an “affirmation” of a human dimension that has always been there, and it is reappearing, particularly because of globalization phenomenon; this affirmation has multiplied the versions of secularism as well, and is no longer limited to the “Western” versions(s), as he says in the new introduction of the same book (Harvey 2013). He also hopes that civilizations will converge in the future, and “[I]t is for this goal that a new theology of the secular/religious should strive” (Harvey 2013: p. xxxix).

Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (2007) opens a window beyond the strict secular/religious divide, when he speaks of the experiences of belief and unbelief, and their conditions, and the “middle way” that tries to overcome the sense of “fullness” of belief or its counterpart, the sense of “exile” or *ennui* and emptiness. He calls this the “immanent frame” or “immanent order” or “immanent real” (Taylor 2007: pp. 542–543); it is a form of “post-secular/post-religious” order, to rephrase it as such, whereby the modern person remains open to the idea of the “transcendent” but at the same time does not negate it and keeps focused on human society and what humanity does and achieves independently.

This condition of the “middle way” is not far from the idea expressed sociologically by Asef Bayat in his argument of the “post-Islamist” society, whereby believers in an ideologized context of political Islam, that is, Iran in his case, move from what could be referred to here as “fullness”—in the words of Charles Taylor—to the sense of “middle way”; that is, secularity creeps into the once very religious public sphere and society to allow for alternative ways of seeing the world, society, and politics; in such a way the orthodox comprehensive view of religion, Christianity in the study of Taylor and Islam in the study of Bayat, become part of other possible ways of belief, and unbelief, in society. Certainly, a difference between the two analyses surfaces: Taylor analyzes an already secular context, the modern Western context, while Bayat analyzes a secularizing context, the Iranian, and by large Islamic, context. But since these two contexts have different histories of religion and their implementation in society, it is not impossible that their current and future comprehensions and experiences of religion-secularism intertwine; societies do not have to go through the same historical periods and chronological developments; their developments can intertwine intellectually without going through the same historical events or experiences; that is why this reference to two contexts and concepts—Taylor and Bayat, the middle way or immanent frame, and post-Islamist society, respectively—is not far from corresponding to current realities. I will return to this point by the end of the chapter. These intertwining territories of the religious-secular were previously also captured in distinctions in the phases of secularization

Jose Casanova proposed in his work of 1994, and further clarified since then (Casanova 1994, 2009). The anthropologist Talal Asad has navigated the formations of Christian and Islamic secularization processes to argue that the religious and the secular are not fixed and stable categories, cannot be spoken of as one that comes after the other, and that they depend on each other; they overlap (Asad 2003: pp. 25–26).

It is with these frameworks in mind that one can, in retrospect, understand the thesis of the political sociologist Olivier Roy: the “failure of political Islam,” which is the title of his book of 1992, first published in French (Roy 2007). Roy summarized this failure in two factors: intellectual, and historical, or practical; intellectually, political Islam failed to produce a different society that could charm its adherents, the Muslims, and the non-Muslims alike; it failed to be revolutionary or a real alternative to the capitalist-liberal or socialist versions of society; it thus failed to be a successful model where it has seized power till then (the year of 1992), that is, in Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and in different ways in other societies; this failure does not mean its end or demise; it just means that it has failed to “invent a new society,” in the words of Roy. The slogan of “Islam is the solution” that the Muslim Brotherhood, and other religious-oriented movements raised, failed to deliver prosperity and liberty to their followers and societies when they reached power in few Arab societies like Egypt and Tunisia during the so-called Arab Spring revolts of 2010–2011, though they hardly ruled for long and alone; they were soon overruled by the military, as in Egypt, or had to cohabitate and rule in coalitions as in Tunisia. Obviously, political Islam is plural, and works within certain historical backgrounds of the geography wherein it functions, and blaming it for all the predicaments and crises in Muslim majority societies does not stand; various internal and external factors influence its functioning and dysfunctioning, especially on the historical/practical level; still, its failure on the intellectual level remains visible and undeniable, as Roy, among others, noted. Similarly also goes the argument of Massimo Campanini in his *The Islamic Alternative* [*L’Alternativa islamica*, 2012]; within the globalization phenomenon, whereby local identities emerge to face hegemony, Campanini explains the failure of this “alternative” in three major reasons: (1) the unending neocolonial interference of Europe, the United States, and Israel in the region, (2) terrorist extremism, and (3) the failure of the Arab Spring (Campanini 2012, 2019). Local scholars have responded to these sociopolitical predicaments differently since the second half of the nineteenth century, either through pan-Islamism, pan-Arab nationalism, pan-liberal leftism, or, after 1967, through national Islamism, national secularism, or radical extremism. All these major tendencies have grappled with religion either to use it as their ideology of renewal or to domesticate it to overcome its power. In the Arab world in particular, and until the recent Arab revolts

of 2010–2011, the dominant winning ideologies and political systems were either the authoritarian-secularism in the “republics” or conservative-state-Islamism in monarchies (Hashas 2018).

Beyond the religious versus secular schism in the intellectual debate as well as the political scene, one particular view has profoundly theorized a third way in which the two (religion and secularism) intertwine substantially; this third way is known as “trusteeship” (*al-i’timaniyya*, in Arabic), or equally as “trusteeship paradigm” and “trusteeship critique,” as proposed by the Moroccan philosopher Taha Abderrahmane (b. 1944, also written as Abdurrahman Taha), whose work is only recently being known gradually in non-Arabic scholarship (Lahoud 2005; Hallaq 2013, 2019; Hashas 2013, 2015, 2019a, b, 2020; Moosa 2014; Kigar 2015; Bevers 2016; Borik 2016; Mimouni 2016; Belhaj 2018). This chapter introduces some major aspects of Taha Abderrahmane’s political theology as presented in his various works, with major reference to *The Spirit of Religion: From the Narrowness of Secularism to the Openness of Trusteeship* (2012). The chapter centralizes his concept of *tazkiyya*, which I translate as “spiritual self-criticism,” a concept he uses as an apparatus for the formation of what I refer to here as “trusteeship society”; the latter is a critical synthesis of the secular and religious societies and ways of governance of human affairs; the “trusteeship paradigm” contributes to the current scholarly discussions on the “secular-religious” as proposed by scholars like Cox Harvey, Talal Asad, Olivier Roy, Asef Bayat, and Charles Taylor. The argument here is that trusteeship paradigm faces serious limitations to be implemented in the Arab-Islamic plural societies, let alone in the Euro-American secular-liberal societies; the *homo moralis* it calls for to lead spiritual self-criticism for human renewal may not be appealing to the plural religious and philosophical views present in society. Still, its call for a radical ethos remains relevant for societies in predicaments, be they secular, religious, or secular-religious. The first part of this chapter introduces five premises of this framework, then it introduces the two major ways of seeing that it works within, the “world of presence” and the “world of transcendence,” to be followed, thirdly, by the introduction of the concept of *tazkiyya*, or “spiritual self-criticism,” as the apparatus of “trusteeship paradigm”; finally, a reflective closure synthesizes this call and presents both its limitations and potential in the current discussions and polarized debates over the secular and religious.

THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND: FIVE PREMISES

The world of trusteeship of Taha Abderrahmane is based on some premises that he considers fundamental from an Islamic worldview. I synthesize them

in the following. First, when speaking of theology, and when proposing a project for thought for the public, one cannot be neutral; one has to situate his-her stance, and Abderrahmane asserts both his belief in Islam and his project as being true to the Islamic faith and spirit. It is not possible to be neutral in discussing human affairs, and it is not a fault to be subjective, he says, while at the same time maintaining acknowledgment of the other and their right to differ, and to be joined in their causes when they are right and just (Abderrahmane 2012: pp. 16–18).

Second, oblivion is a primordial human characteristic; human beings do forget their responsibilities and contracts with their Creator first, and with their peers second. Modern times may be one of the most human ages of oblivion, “greater oblivion,” but for each oblivious world there is an alternative to remedy it. In the “oblivious world,” man forgets his “vertical memory” that connects him to the original world; there are “oblivion apparatuses” that work for the empowerment of such oblivion. The way of confronting this oblivion is through “vertical memory” by means of “dhikr” (i.e., constant spiritual invocation of the divine) (Abderrahmane 2012: pp. 13–15). The approach Abderrahmane proposes then is a “spiritual and invocative approach,” “vertical and not horizontal,” as he calls it (Abderrahmane 2012: p. 17); “invocation is existence and oblivion is non-existence” (*al-dhikru wujudun wa’l-nisyanu ‘adamun*), he says (Abderrahmane 2012: p. 14).

Third, this world is called “the world of presence/testimony” (*‘alam al-shahada*), while the other-world is called “the world of transcendence” (*‘alam al-ghayb*). In a later work, Abderrahmane uses the concepts of “the world of sovereignty” (*‘alam al-mulk*, literally “the world of possessions/property”) and “the world of divinity” (*‘alam al-malakut*, literally “the world of metaphysics”) to refer to this-and-other-worlds, respectively (Abderrahmane 2017). Or, simply put, “the world of divinity” could also be referred to as “the world of intimate connexion with the Ultimate Reality” or “the world of sublime *ishq* [pure and elevated passion],” in contract to the world of “possessions” and “sovereignty.” More on this distinction of worlds will be said below.

Fourth, human existence is “expansive” and “two-dimensional”; it does not limit itself to either/or, this-world or the-other world; human existence comprehends both worlds. The “vertical man” invokes transcendence in the present world, while the “horizontal man” sees only the present one, and his life is then “limited” or “contracted” (Abderrahmane 2012: pp. 14, 31). There is an “original unity” (*wahda asliyya*) between the two worlds, thus between the secular and the religious (Abderrahmane 2012: p. 19); this original unity is a “trust” (*amana*), a divine trust, hence the name of “trusteeship” as a framework of this theological outlook.

Fifth, the relationship between religion and politics is “existential”; there are no clear moments or fields of their separation; they originally intertwine though there are laws that separate between the two spheres; when man is active with body and soul in the present world, his existence is being actualized, in a process of “actualization” or “activation” (*al-inwijad*); and when he is active with his soul in the transcendent world only, his existence is existent, in a process of “existentialization” (*al-tawajud*) (Abderrahmane 2012: p. 36). The horizontal man keeps moving toward the expansive world, in a form of “constant voyage” (*al-irtihal al-da'ib*) (Abderrahmane 2012: p. 33). This voyage is, or is supposed to be, ascending, from the world of testimony/presence to the world of divinity/transcendence, for the sake of guarding the “trust” and thus the well-being of man, society, and the world. But this is not always the case; there is ascension and descension. And here comes the religious versus secular divide.

When man seeks ascension, he seeks perfection, the sublime; ascension is the way of making the world of transcendence—and its infinite ways of interpretations and experiences—descend to this-world of presence; it is a form of calling transcendence to become apparent in this world, and close to people and their intellectual abilities and sensations; it is a form of “testifying” (*tash-hid*) transcendence, that there is an absolute that humans seek to achieve and grasp; this shows a form of interaction between the religious and the secular; there are no real boundaries between the two. This is a form of navigation, or existentialization (*al-tawajud*) referred to above. Man here seeks expansion, through the activation of the “vertical memory” that reminds him of “original unity” and “trust” (Abderrahmane 2012: pp. 51–90).

Contrariwise, when man seeks descension, he seeks sovereignty, and possession of the world; descension is the way of making the world of presence dominate over the world of transcendence, to the extent of demurring or veiling it; it is a form of *invisibilizing* the transcendent, and making it absent (*taghyib*)—or “absenting it from,” as it were—from the present, absent from sight, and thus from being visible and practicable. This movement, or voyage, shows a form of interaction between the secular and the religious, the profane and the sacred; here, too, there are no strict boundaries between the two spheres. This is a form of actualization (*inwijad*) in the present world at the expense of the transcendent. Man, here, seeks dominion over man and nature by the activation of his egoistic and selfish desires, devoid of ethical guidelines and service to the different other and nature. The horizontal man here is limited in sight, and sees only this-world to reign over and control, and does his best to veil the possibilities of the world of transcendence that could challenge his dominion and ego. Such a form of unethical dominion reflects the “greater oblivion”—referred to earlier—of trust over the responsibilities toward humanity and the cosmos (Abderrahmane 2012: pp. 91–131).

TWO WAYS OF SIGHT: PRESENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE

These premises set, now comes the axis around which all revolves: man in social life. For a world of trust, ethics, and sharing—or what Abderrahmane calls the awaited for “civilization of ethos” in *The Question of Ethics: A Contribution to Ethical Criticism of Western Modernity* (Abderrahmane 2000: p. 146)—man has to change from within, moves from a self-centered image of his sovereignty over the world to an image of responsibility toward it. Such a change would impact the dialectics between the way of presence and transcendence, descension and ascension, described above. And it is here that he takes more time to theorize these dialectics, their interaction, and the permeation of each other. Briefly, Abderrahmane contends that there are two major ways of managing or governing (*tadbir*) human social affairs: either through religion or through politics. These are two different ways of seeing the world, two ways of sight, two ways of testifying and marking one’s presence and-or transcendence: the way of religion *testifies* the presence of transcendence in the present world, and the way of politics *invisibilizes* transcendence and makes presence the only way of seeing and managing the world.

The first way of testimony (*tariq al-tashhid*)—that is, the way of religion—is based on three principles: (a) the principle of innateness or naturalness (*mabda’ al-fitra*), which protects the human bond with the transcendent world through the idea of tawhid or Oneness of God; (b) the principle of differentiation or preferability (*mabda’ al-tafadul*), which believes in a faith that is advanced in its rationality and norms compared to other faiths, without this leading to denigrating or condescending to the latter; and (c), the principle of complementarity (*mabda’ al-takamul*), which demonstrates the comprehensiveness of the religion and its harmony when looked at fully and not partially; particular laws and prescriptions make sense when considering the whole worldview of the religion in focus. These principles allow for the attainment of different levels of human expansion, happiness, and eternity through ethics and spiritual elevation (Abderrahmane 2012: pp. 22–90).

As to the way of invisibilization (*tariq al-taghyib*)—that is, the way of politics—it is equally based on three principles: (a) the principle of appropriation (*mabda’ al-nisba*) of things and energies, by which man believes that what he has or is endowed with is one’s own creation from eternity; here man gradually empowers himself with comprehensive sovereignty and authority attributes that are originally those of the Creator; this usurps human power, and is often used to one’s own benefits; this opposes the idea that there is One Lord, and human beings are vicegerents on earth and not its absolute lords; (b) the principle of sovereignty or power (*mabda’ al-sultan*), by which

man uses the powers delegated to him by his people or through some form of sociopolitical or religious legitimacy to claim sovereignty over people as if he were their Lord; here, he seeks to divinize his powers, which gains him more and more powers, and can lead him to oppress the minorities or the ones different from him and his clan/tribe/party/culture/religion/thought, and so on; (c) the principle of contestation (*mabda' al-tanazu'*), by which the political stakeholders enter into tough competition for the sake of maintaining presence in society and power over it as much as possible; for this reason, various means of political maneuver are used, apparently all under the umbrella of laws, but under the table illegal, and unethical, means are used, as if it were a war, a war of words (*harb kalamiyya*). Here Abderrahmane invokes and cites some classical texts of modern political philosophy to speak of Manichean standards, the general will, the sovereign, willed servitude, and use and abuse of minority-majority concepts (Abderrahmane 2012: pp. 91–179).

Overall, Abderrahmane considers that man in the way of religion seeks a spiritual path to answer innate human needs, individual and social, and keeps absolute sovereignty to be the domain of the absolute sovereign, God, while his counterpart, the man in the way of politics seeks self-gratification to answer appetitive needs, and thus wears the mask of the Absolute Sovereign, though he does not believe in such a sovereign, since he focalizes this world of presence, and not that of transcendence; if ever he refers to the latter, he does so to use it for his own possessive appetites, even when he claims to be working for the public good and the social contract he is bound to (Abderrahmane 2012: pp. 91–179).

TWO WAYS OF GOVERNANCE: THE SECULAR AND THE RELIGIOUS

In *The Spirit of Religion*, Abderrahmane distinguishes between two common forms of managing social affairs in detailed argumentation: the secular, and the religious. Succinctly, I synthesize some major points on each here. For secularism: (1) it has multiple definitions, one of the most common is its separation between religion and politics; the other one is the dominance of reason and science in the management of human affairs; it centers this-world, and the other-world is for individuals to think freely, in the private sphere, individually or in community; Abderrahmane lists the Arabic equivalent translations of secularism: *al-'ilmaniyya* (from the root *'ilm*/science) and *al-'almaniyya* (from the root *'alam*/world), and prefers the term *al-dahraniyya* as a more appropriate Arabic equivalent (from the root *dahr*/time or lifetime); so, when the term *secularism* is used here to refer to Abderrahmane, its Arabic equivalent in original references is *al-dahraniyya*;

(2) there are multiple forms of secularism, like the radical French *laïcité*, and the soft one like American secularism; (3) there are historical and intellectual stages of secularism in the so-called West; (a) it started with separation from the Catholic Church, with the maintenance of faith in Christianity, as was the case during the Reformation period; (b) then it moved to separation from Christianity as such, with the maintenance of the idea of faith as a source of ethics and morality; here appeared the idea of “civil religion” of Rousseau and “positive religion” of Auguste Comte; (c) subsequently, secularism dissociated itself from religion but maintained the idea of ethics, like the fundamental values of love, solidarity, liberty, and equality, which became secularized since the French Revolution. In *The Misery of Secularism: Trusteeship Critique of the Separation of Ethics from Religion* (2014), Abderrahmane details four forms or stages of this separation, and critiques them from within his trusteeship paradigm apparatuses; the fourth stage, after the three previous ones (a-b-c above), is distantiation from ethics (Abderrahmane 2014: pp. 31–70). In *Post-Secular Loss: Trusteeship Critique of Deserting Religion* (2016), he describes and critiques this fourth stage in a long text that grapples with figures like Marquis de Sade (d. 1814), Friedrich Nietzsche (d. 1900), Sigmund Freud (d. 1939), Georges Bataille (d. 1962), Jacques Lacan (d. 1981), and Luc Ferry (b. 1951) (Abderrahmane 2016). These intellectual projects fall within the stage of overcoming ethics, according to him, which is the latest stage of secularism and human ultra-centrism. The point here is that secularism, which claims to separate religion from politics, takes the comprehensive place of religion, and issues laws and permeates human life, public and private, as does religion; it enters and grapples with the space religion has in human life; it, therefore, cannot claim neutrality nor a sharp distinction of its sphere from that of religion. Secularism also privatizes religion, its competing field of energy, in rituals and spirituality. Abderrahmane says that secularists cannot be neutral; they bear memory and come with a tradition or worldview in mind; and the laws they make permeate not only the public life but also the private life of individuals in society, and this blurs the boundaries between the secular and the religious.

As to religion, Abderrahmane gives it primarily a spiritual role, even when it permeates social life with its rituals, teachings, and legal prescriptions. However, after his critique of “Western” secularism, as well as its deformed applications in Islamic majority societies, he launches his critique to two major forms of using religion in politics. He coins various concepts but I synthetically simplify his critique here. Abderrahmane argues against two main versions of political Islam, each of which is of two types, but to avoid over-conceptualization and intricate translations from Arabic, I leave them stretched out in four categories; the English rendering is my own:

- 1) *The secular-religionists (ahl al-tasyis)* who use religion for politics, as do most political leaders in Islamic majority societies; according to this view, religion follows politics; only some rituals are maintained at the state level to keep a reference to religion and the transcendent, while the rest is managed without such a reference.
- 2) *The religio-secularists (ahl al-tadyin)* who use politics for religion, as do major Sunni Islamic movements and parties; accordingly, politics follows religion; followers of this trend work within secular institutions and defend only some religious rituals for identity affirmation; Youssef al-Qaradawi (b. 1926), Muhammad ‘Imara (b. 1931), and Mohammed Salim al-‘Awwa (b. 1942) are theorists of such a trend (Abderrahmane 2012: pp. 344–355); they have used concepts like the Islamic state, the civil state, and Islam as religion and politics; hence, they have worked within religion versus secularism framework, as if they were antagonistic entities with no intertwining territories.
- 3) *The hakimists or sovereignists (ahl al-tahkim)* are literalists, as were the Kharijities in early Islamic history, and Abu al-A‘la al-Mawdudi (d. 1979) and Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) in modern times (Abderrahmane 2012: p. 367); according to Abderrahmane, these literalists have misunderstood what *hukm* and *hakimiyya* mean, and what are their conditions; these interpreters remain at the outer level of the meaning of applying legal rules and obligations (*al-amiriyya* level), while true *hakimiyya* means a profound understanding of God’s sovereignty (*al-hakimiyya* level) over all His people and Creation; God’s sovereignty/*hakimiyya* requires an understanding of what transcendence means, and how its attributes could be implanted and implemented in the world of presence; literalism can do utter injustice to transcendence.
- 4) *The fiqhologists or the Khomeinists (ahl al-tafqih)*, who interpret God’s sovereignty as a top-down approach, as applied by the Khomeinist interpretation of the Twelver Shi‘a thought since the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1978. Abderrahmane critiques them for being literalists, too, and for focalizing law instead of ethics and the inner side of man, and for the monopoly of religious thought in the hands of few experts of *fiqh*; he proposes the “live jurisconsult” (*al-faqih al-hay*), who centralizes ethics and spiritual guidance and their relevance to the modern individual and society, instead of the “technical jurisconsult” (*al-faqih al-sina‘i*), who centralizes law from a top-down approach. The “live jurisconsult” is the epitome of the profound internal and external ethics of the early pious “imams,” and is different from the “technical jurisconsult” who focalizes law and seeks to impose it through the modern *Wilayat al-Faqih* (Abderrahmane 2012: pp. 399–445).

In *Posts of Resistance: A Trusteeship Approach to the Current Struggles of the Umma* (2018), Abderrahmane comes out, for the first time, with a direct and staunch critique of especially Wahhabi Islam of Saudi Arabia, and *wilayatal-faqih* (guardianship of the jurisconsult) of Khomeinist Iran; in the book, he critiques how their rivalry for power and hegemony, through the use of religion, has played against the ethics of religion, and the well-being of the Islamic community, especially against the Palestinian Cause. *Posts of Resistance* may be considered a case study of his theory and critique as introduced especially in *The Spirit of Religion*; in *Posts of Resistance*, he clearly restates that the so-called Islamic state is impossible, and is a contradiction in terms; the nation-state is secular and seeks the full sovereignty of man, and the states in the Islamic majority societies are like the European nation-states, and worse in their use of violence. As to the application of shari'a, he says, "the application of shari'a within the framework of the state as known in modern times is impossible" (Abderrahmane 2018: p. 221). This goes in full line with the argument of Wael Hallaq in *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (2013), where he argues that shari'a as known in premodern times has nothing to do with the way it is applied by some states and political Islamic movements in modern times; it lacks the classical moral compass that was its core message (Hallaq 2013); this argument is further developed in *Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurahman Taha* (Hallaq 2019). As to the violent radicals like al-Qaeda and ISIS (the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria), Abderrahmane does not consider them within the "Islamic" framework since they are utterly violent; he devotes a space to refute violence in *The Question of Violence* (Abderrahmane 2017d).

Abderrahmane argues that all the four types of politicizing religion above use the same apparatuses and methods secularists use; he does not see them as different from each other. They both seek power and sovereignty; religionists invoke the transcendent world in the present one, and the secularists focalize only the present, all for power and dominion, but they both neglect the axis of any change they seek: the individual. To borrow a phrase from Heidegger's interview that he asked to be published posthumously—conducted in 1966, and published in 1976, five days after his death—"[O]nly a god can save us" (in Wollin 1993), Abderrahmane thinks that only a "new man" (Hallaq 2019), the vertical man, can save us, religionists and secularists, Muslims and non-Muslims. This new man needs a moral compass, to become a *homo moralis* of the awaited for "civilization of ethos." Below are basic characteristics of this new man whose way can correct the errors of the first two ways, the secular and the religious, always according to Abderrahmane.

THE WAY OF TRUSTEESHIP: THE *HOMO MORALIS* AND SPIRITUAL SELF-CRITICISM

After having sketched out some basic definitions of the religious and secular ways, Abderrahmane proposes that “spiritual practice” (*al-‘amal al-tazkawi*), and not only spiritual belief devoid of practice, is the way to enrich man with new energy; the new man needs change from within, and religious elevated ethics, internal and external, have this power. At the heart of this apparently simple thesis are the premises of the worldview underlined in the beginning of this chapter, in the lead of which is the concept of “trust,” thus the whole paradigm of “trusteeship.” In a definition, he says, “trust (*al-i’timan*) is then a form of deposit by which all that God has created for man are deposits in his hands, which he can possess as he wishes, and use as he likes, on the condition that he guards their rights” (Abderrahmane 2012: p. 474). The condition of guarding rights here means that there are ethics to follow to realize it; and these ethics are originally religious, revealed to man, unveiled to him. In an earlier text, in *The Question of Ethics*, he says, “religion and ethics are one; there is no religion without ethics and no ethics without religion” (Abderrahmane 2000: p. 52). He adds, “there is no man [i.e., human being] without ethics [. . .]; there is no ethics without religion [. . .]; so, there is no man without religion” (Abderrahmane 2000: pp. 147–149). Without going into details about the three levels of rationality, and the three levels of ethicality he develops in other works (Abderrahmane 1989; Hashas 2019a, b), suffice it to underline the idea that, according to him, ethical practice expands human rationality and understanding of the world, and with it grows, more and more, one’s spirituality, or what I translate here as one’s “spiritual self-criticism” (*al-‘amal al-tazkawi* or *al-tazkiyya*, which literally means “self-purification doing/practice”). It is because Abderrahmane’s spirituality—and its various levels, inspired by his Sufi background and solidified through his academic background as a logician—is very rational, constantly on the move for the better and engaging with modern scholarship, that I translate the concept of *tazkiyya* as “spiritual self-criticism.” The new man, the *homo moralis* he calls for, cannot be spiritually irrational; on the contrary, he is engaged intellectually with modernity and its challenges, and with humanity, its predicaments and its future. The new man’s mission is to work for good, ethically, while keeping the divine as the source of inspiration and guidance; his sovereignty on earth knows it has beyond it the ultimate sovereign; this recognition of the ultimate prevents it from abusing its sovereignty and powers in this world of presence; this recognition is spiritually liberating, and not self-centered and egoistic (Abderrahmane 2012: pp. 469–491); this recognition is a form of worship in its core; thus, the man of trust, the trustee, or the vertical man, is a man of transcendence, humility, sight, and testimony (Abderrahmane

2012: p. 504). Spiritual self-criticism makes human life a space of the sacred, of transcendence, wherever and whenever (Abderrahmane 2012: p. 501). Without this spiritual self-criticism, it is easy to fall under the influence of “unconscious secularism” (*al-‘ilmaniya al-ghafila*) that does not appear different from religiosity at the surface (Abderrahmane 2012: p. 212). The space between the secular and the religious becomes blurred, that is why constant spiritual resistance is the way to distinguish between the two worlds, and to tread through them reflectively.

Abderrahmane argues in length about some major features of “spiritual self-criticism” (*al-‘amal al-tazkawi*). He describes it as such: (a) it is radical, and not superficial; it touches the deepest side possible in man; (b) it is complete/ full, and not partial, so that it moves the whole of man and not only his parts; (c) it is transformative, and not only altering or influential; (d) it is revolutionary and not only progressive; (e) it is permanent, and not only temporary; it does not have an ending point; (f) it is gradual, continuously gradual, and not interruptive; (g) it is peaceful, and not violent; man has to choose it as a path at will and not by force (Abderrahmane 2012: pp. 264–68).

According to Abderrahmane, “spiritual self-criticism” brings “spiritual resistance” (*al-muqawama al-tazkawiyya*), which is different from two other types of resistance, which are violent according to him. Spiritual resistance differs from “power-seeking resistance” (*al-muqawama bi’l-sultan*); the latter takes form in three ways: revolution (*thawra*), rebellion (*tamarrud*), or coup d’état (*inqilab*); all the three are violent, and seek power (*sultan*), and lack spiritual in-depth and ethos. Spiritual resistance also differs from “rational or demonstrative resistance” (*al-muqawama bi’l-burhan*), through “elections” because the electoral process is often violent too, psychologically and linguistically violent, since the competing camps often use rough language, and sometimes unethical means to win over their competitors; even this most common means of rotating powers in modern societies is critiqued in this paradigm since it seeks power for the sake of power; hence it uses illegitimate means whenever it has the chance to (Abderrahmane 2012: pp. 289–291).

Spiritual resistance is based on the practice of “spiritual disturbance” (*al-iz‘aj al-ruhi*)—which he sketches out in other subcategories—for the sake of justice, liberty, good, and excellence; it is the apparatus the *homo moralis* uses for justice and liberation. It requires a profound inner exercise of self-criticism and spirituality; that is why it is profoundly nonviolent. Abderrahmane, however, says that violence is not avoided for fear; it is avoided because the new man does not seek power, but only change for good; that is why it seeks the change of man (Abderrahmane 2012: pp. 296–315). Spiritual disturbance is more powerful and efficient than “physical *jihad*.” Physical *jihad* could be allowed in utmost cases for defense only, though it could have negative consequences even in the cases of defense; that is why

“spiritual disturbance” is of the highest ethical value and of the profoundest efficacy (Abderrahmane 2012: pp. 312–313). For instance, after the Second Palestinian Intifada of 2000, Abderrahmane wrote *The Arab Right to Philosophical Difference* and defended two ideas from within his ethical framework: the need for a philosophical awakening (*qawma falsafiyya*) in the Arab world, and the need for a political awakening (*qawma siyyasiyya*) based on it, otherwise the Arab world would remain mimetic and consumerist of both philosophic and political external ideas (Abderrahmane 2002: pp. 171–186). At the more local level, for the Arab world, he proposes the “living nationhood” (*qawmiyya hayya*), and not nationalism, as the concept that can unite energies ethically for a revival; this national awakening is impossible without a profound ethical impetus, that is why he proposes internal change first, and the physical change is its complementary and practical side (Abderrahmane 2002: pp. 193–203).

Abderrahmane has further developed this paradigm of trusteeship in later works (Abderrahmane 2014, 2016). For instance, he has used the trusteeship paradigm in his trilogy published in 2017 as *din al-haya*, which can be rendered literally, roughly, as *The Religion of Piety*, but *The Religion of Sight and Testimony* is more an adequate translation, if his philosophy is wholly taken into account. In this trilogy he, again, underlines the importance of spiritual self-criticism (*al'amal al-tazkawi*) for any individual and societal change, be it in Muslim majority societies or in modern societies at large. He also argues at length against the permeation of epistemic secularism, and takes the media as well as the female attire of the veil (*hijab*) as case studies of such a permeation (Abderrahmane 2017a, b, c). Most recently, he has further developed his concepts of the trusteeship paradigm in communication with and in opposition to the concepts of secularism (Abderrahmane 2020a, b).

REFLECTIVE CLOSURE

This said, what does Taha Abderrahmane tell us precisely about the state and change in Islamic majority societies? Is his call feasible? Can his paradigm, and his various concepts, be used as state apparatuses to change society and state institutions? Or is his call directed toward free individuals and communities, away from state institutions and apparatuses? In nondemocratic contexts, how far can free individuals and communities enhance change using trusteeship paradigm and, for example, its apparatus “spiritual disturbance” to promote change? Can this paradigm be used differently, according to contexts, democratic and nondemocratic? Where can it fare well?

Answers to such questions have to read this philosophical-theological paradigm in two different contexts, which intertwine and confluence: (1) the internal context, that is, the context in which this new paradigm speaks to its own tradition and vital domain, the Arab-Islamic majority domain/context, and (2) the external context, that is, the domain where the Islamic tradition is a minority, an important minority, and more precisely, I propose, the European liberal-secular context. Only with such a differentiation can answers to the above questions make more sense. The applicability of trusteeship paradigm in secular-liberal contexts is examined at length in *The Idea of European Islam* (Hashas 2019a). As to the Arab-Islamic context, two major notes could be made here.

One, the intricately overlapping territories between the religious and the secular make it difficult to convince all stakeholders in society to uphold one major interpretation of the tradition—the religious ethos interpretation—for sociopolitical reforms. As seen earlier, in especially *The Spirit of Religion*, Abderrahmane has made the two ways of governing human affairs talk to each other; he has gone deeper into the internal complexities and premises of what the secular and the religious could mean, and to how far each of them permeates the realm of the other, despite their diverging worldviews. Their convergence takes space in the heart and mind of man, man that seeks ascension (transcendence) and descension (presence), depending on the worldview, but also on various circumstances and contexts. It is these circumstances and contexts that make the two “opposing” worldviews converge, as if to meet in the middle. This middle is not necessarily the center in geometric terms but is a space of interaction, influence, and confluence. Talal Asad has recognized this interaction, as seen in the introduction above. More particularly, in his famous article of 1986, he used the concept of “discursive tradition” when speaking about the anthropology of Islamicity and what it means for an act or ritual to be Islamic, and what it means to speak of a tradition when it replicates itself over time and centuries; the transformations of traditions and the inability to give it one definition is what he meant when he wrote, “[A]ny representation of tradition is contestable” (Asad 1986: p. 17).

What I mean with this reference is that though Abderrahmane is very aware of the convergence of the two realms of the religious and the secular, he, however, fails to see—or ignores—that in the modern context, including in the changing Arab-Islamic majority societies, man cannot, and does not, distinguish sharply between the two realms. Current socio-anthropological data, as well as historical experiences, tell us that not all Muslims represent religion the way Abderrahmane does, nor do they wish to make of it the only source of social transformation, not necessarily because they wish to distance themselves from religion but because their definition of the tradition differs, and their view of reform differs. The same thing applies to the secular

tradition, however old or new it is in the Islamic context; not everyone would agree with the way Abderrahmane examines the idea behind secularism, which turns out to be atheism at the end of his analysis, since in Europe it historically moved from a separation of religion from politics to overcoming not only religion and belief but ultimately ethics as well. Abderrahmane's framework, for instance, apparently does not give space to secular believers, that is, the believers who still hold a religious ethos but who also hold a secular view of the political space. One can understand the reason why, if his examination of the history of secularism in Europe is remembered: secularism does not stop at separating religion (or religious authority and law) from politics; it does that in the first stage only; afterward, it moves on to erase the religious ethos from the public as well as private sphere, to give space to pure reason, pure emotion, pure science, and this-worldly focus and consumption. Abderrahmane does not tell us that pure reason and pure science are evil in themselves, but he tells us that man loses ethics as he gains more dominion over nature, the world, and society; man's ethos dwindles away, and gives space to his ego-centrism, possessiveness, and ultimately full sovereignty over man and the world, and this is the worldview that Abderrahmane does not agree with, since it is not ethical, not caring for the other, and thus not Islamic. Man is here as vicegerent and has to keep the "trust" of this world in good shape. That is why there is a constant need for transcendent guidance. That all society should be highly ethicist to carry out this paradigm of ethos collectively is a far-reaching aim, not to say utopic, unless it turns out to be a civic ethos that is as plural and inclusive as possible, and is not only a religious ethos. We have to remember that the role of leading intellectuals and philosophers is to raise the level of human thought, expectations, and endeavors so as to solve concrete problems and predicaments. Abderrahmane is aware of this fact. In the closing chapter of *The Spirit of Religion*, he says that his project/paradigm is not utopic; it is realistic and rational; it just requires from human beings profound internal change (Abderrahmane 2012: pp. 493–508).

Two, there is no guarantee that a religious ethos can bring about sociopolitical unanimity about the way ahead for reforms; spiritual self-criticism and spiritual disturbance apparatuses of trusteeship paradigm enhance individual liberty, and liberty brings about diversity; this means that the religious ethos will also be interpreted differently. Among the first fruits of spiritual liberation and political liberty is diversity in opinions and ways of governing oneself and society; the first Muslims immediately after the death of the Prophet Muhammad took to disagreement, and some three decades afterward—considered the model period for Islamic liberation, ethics, and justice—they went to civil war for disagreement over the interpretation of the Prophetic and Islamic tradition about governance; this means that religious ethos does not

necessarily bring unanimity and political agreement, unless it is accompanied by supportive apparatuses that can maintain peace, the minimum condition that allows liberty to flourish in society intellectually, spiritually, artistically, and so on. The same critique goes to secularism; it does not necessarily mean that without it society falls into civil war; human societies before the birth of the nation-state were religious or semireligious societies, and they governed themselves accordingly, maybe better than modern secular societies, or at least *sometimes* better than modern secular societies. For instance, there have always been religious, ethnic, and linguistic minorities in the Middle East; they broadly coexisted well for centuries under a dominant religious ethos, or under various religious “ethoses”; this means that what Taha Abderrahmane is proposing is not strange to the history of the region he belongs to.

For the last two centuries, the religious ethos and its power has been shaken by modern secularism and the notion of the nation-state; new doors of diversity and liberation have been opened, and apparently they cannot be closed soon, and the classical religious ethos is finding it difficult to respond to such challenges adequately. Unless the religious ethos of this domain/context is expanded to be more plural, it may fail to talk to secularism, which seems to be winning more grounds; this religious ethos needs to turn into a civic ethos; *secularization* as a process has permeated the changing Arab-Islamic societies, and one cannot be sure if this will end up in *secularism* as a worldview, or merely in *secularism* as a state/institutional apparatus for political adjustments and democratization; the profound philosophical exercise of Taha Abderrahmane shows that the religious ethos still has a role to play, maybe a leading role to play in such dynamics of secularization and confrontation with secularism, especially when looked at also from a critical note in the age of globalized neoliberal capitalism. To close with this note, whether the future is secular, religious, or secular-religious, the coming society in the Arab world is already “post-Islamist”—to borrow the term from Asef Bayat (Bayat 1996)—even if religion remains visible in the public and the private; by “post-Islamicity” here I mean that while religion in the orthodox sense no longer governs all individual and social affairs, it still impacts one’s view of the world; maybe it could be also called a “society of trusteeship” or “trusteeship society,” a society of the bond with the transcendent, but not necessarily in the full sense that Taha Abderrahmane intended (Hashas 2016).¹ A society of trusteeship could be a recipient of the idea of the “immanent frame” of Charles Taylor, but probably only minimally so far, since trusteeship *requires* the idea of transcendence, an idea which is only *optional* in the “immanent frame”; trusteeship society is closer to the political society Muktedar Khan has in mind when he speaks of “good governance” according to the Islamic value of *ihsan* (i.e., beautiful acts or deeds; benevolence to the level of excellence); Khan calls Muslim

majority societies to use *ihsan*—a major value and concept in the Sufi tradition of Islam—to be the apparatus to defend social justice beautifully, kindly, compassionately, and lovingly (Khan 2019). However, how able is Abderrahmane’s trusteeship spiritual self-criticism, or Khan’s *ihsan*, to provoke real change in authoritarian regimes is a real challenge for any project that does not clarify the boundaries between religion and politics and the apparatuses of consultation and reconciliation in times of conflict. Sufism, as well as philosophy and thought inspired by the Sufi tradition in modern times, has not always sided with the oppressed for social justice (Piraino and Sedgwick 2019).

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NOTE

1. In an essay entitled “A Treatise on Trust State for a New Arab World” (Hashas 2016), I have tried to speak of “Trust State” in the Arab world where I navigate between some reformist projects different in their line of thought; I have used the concept of “trust” of Abderrahmane but opened it up to the modern state realm as also defended by Mohammed Abed al-Jabri (d. 2010). A small group of scholars have reacted to this essay (Massimo Campanini, Sonja Hegasy, Michael Bevers, Nicholas Roberts, and Harald Viersen); for more, see: <https://www.resetdoc.org/?s=Trust+State>

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