

Wael B. Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurrahman Taha*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019, 376 pp.

A short review cannot do justice to such an august book as it comes at the peak of the intellectual maturity of two of the most phenomenal Islamicists of our age. As such, Hallaq here is not just a translator of Taha (b. 1944), though translating Taha is never an easy job, but also an incredible interlocuter who critiques him on the basis of his own intellectual project that he has been developing throughout his academic career. On the other hand, the book coincides a growing interest in Taha's works in English as well as in Arabic due to the originality of his ideas and the novelty of his epistemological tools (see for instance, Kigar 2017, 5–33; Belhaj 2018, 24–43).¹

Reforming Modernity consists of an introduction, six chapters, an epilogue and an appendix. In the introduction, Hallaq gives a thorough reading of the nineteenth and twentieth century Muslim engagement with modernist discourse, pointing out that Taha's project 'departs from, but leaves behind, the epistemological grounds in which the great majority of modern Muslim intellectuals have anchored their own programs of so-called reform' (xi). The subsequent chapters read and analyze the major questions that occupied Taha's ethical philosophy. Starting with the question of *turāth*, Hallaq elucidates the theoretical and methodological approaches through which Taha critiqued contemporary Islamic thought, particularly emphasizing his critique on 'imported knowledge'. According to Hallaq's reading of Taha, contemporary Arab-Islamic thought has mishandled the question of *turāth* as a result of 'its inability to carve for itself an autonomous epistemological venue' (31). The subjects of Taha's methodological assaults here are the reformists who, due to their imported methods, 'no two of them could agree on the same conclusions with regard to the traditional text' (42). Consequently, 'issues are conflated and distinct forms of thought are carelessly assimilated' (42). Taha then introduces the following principle: every foreign importation is questionable until its benefit is verified through an indigenous avenue (36–37).

Hallaq thence shows that Taha attributes this mishandling to the 'unquestioning dependence on a misconceived Western application of modernity' (32). Hence, he introduces the notion of the 'spirit of modernity', as compared to its phenomenological reality.² That is, Taha's project problematizes the Western

1 As for the Arabic literature, counting the works on Taha's oeuvre extends beyond the narrow scope of this short review.

2 Apart from regarding the 'spirit of modernity' idea as problematic, Hallaq thinks that glimpses of it can also be found in the American constitutional theorists and various critics of the

project of modernity due to its ethical bankruptcy and offers solutions to its major pitfalls by differentiating between the multiple *potentialities* of modernity and its singular Western *actuality*. Hallaq puts it this way:

[Taha] differentiating between two sides or aspects of the phenomenon: the spirit (*rūḥ*) of modernity, on the one hand, and its reality or real manifestations (*wāqīʿ*), on the other (RH, 24). For Taha, the latter has thus far been characteristically Euro-American, while the former is the property of humanity in its entirety, since the sources of this spirit extend back to the history of all civilizations (79).

Taking ethics as the defining feature of the *spirit* of modernity, Hallaq illustrates the centrality of the Quran in the thought of Abdurrahman as a reservoir of ethics that has the potentials to transform existing Western *application* of modernity (31). He dwells upon Taha's critique of the form and content of Enlightenment's central concepts, particularly 'rationalism, positive and negative liberties, the fact/value and Is/Ought distinctions' (41). Further emphasizing that rationality, which is Enlightenment's central pillar, is 'culture-specific' (45).

Hallaq thereafter introduces Taha's central theses that cover a wide range of interests, ranging from political theology and secularist discourse, to the core and essence of his ethical philosophy, represented in his understanding of the Quranic concept of trusteeship (*amāna*), which gives an original guide to the 'new human' (198) that Taha aims to develop. Taken altogether, Taha's project promises to establish a new version of modernity that puts forward '(a) corrections to Western modernity and (b) a healthier *modus vivendi* and *modus operandi* for living in the world, not above it' (32).

In rescuing modernity's *spirit* from its Western *application*, resorting to religion is inevitable. For any solution to the moral predicament of Western modernity must fulfill three conditions: (a) it has to come from outside the hubs of power upon which the modern system is based; otherwise, 'the system will subordinate it to its own imperatives, just as it routinely does in the case of countless institutes, conventions, and organizations that promote ethical content'; (b) it must rely on sources 'superior to, and stronger than, the sources of the current system'; and (c) it 'must rest on universal ethics so that

Enlightenment who claimed that 'the founding principles of such systems (U.S. Constitution or lofty Enlightenment ideas) have been violated in favour of a skewed application' (82).

it corresponds to the massive range of globalization and still meets its requirement of founding a single universal society' (141).

'Revealed religion', argues Taha, is the only solution that meets the above requirements. Revealed Religion calls for 'the unification of groups/peoples/nations (*aqwām, umam*) and has given many of them a single culture' (141). Indeed, the surge of voices that demand the revert to religion as a response to the predicaments of modernity attests to this fact. The question then, should every nation return to its ancestors' religion, 'extracting from it moral principles to fight off the evils of globalization? Or should the learned leaders of all these groups/nations/peoples meet and discuss how they can deduce from their religions some principles they all agree on?' (142). Taha's answer is: if each group figures out their problems separately, the multitude of their moral systems will unquestionably lead to the failure of their dialogue. Furthermore, even if they agreed collectively on a common measure, that common measure will necessarily be minimal, 'since everyone has to agree to it, with the consequence that this weak agreement will not be sufficient to dislodge the forceful presence of the current globalization system' (142). Therefore, a maximal moral content that can supply the means to prevail over the contemporary structure of globalization is a need.

Islam, Taha contends, can provide that maximal moral alternative. The evidence to this is what Taha calls 'the evidence of moral time'. Islam, having 'come at a fairly late period in the human history of revelation, is the best equipped in terms of the moral and ethical arsenal because it gathers within itself the cumulative moral legacy of all that has come before it' (142). Therefore, 'globalization as a cultural act' takes place within Islam's moral time. Hence, Islam, 'is responsible for what is happening during its own time', and that we are then 'permitted to say that globalization is an Islamic reality', although it was not produced by Muslims themselves (143).

Centralizing marginalized spirituality lies at the heart of Taha's call to the Islamic alternative. He shifts the focus from the 'ego', which has been centralized by Western modernity, to the 'spirit', which is the centre of the Islamic ethical theory. The spirit 'connects its owner to the Unseen world once he embarks on acts of purification and preservation of custodial rights' (205). On the contrary, the ego (*anā*) ascribes things in the world to their immediate doer.³

3 Although this transcendental theory is commonly limited to religionists, to Taha, it includes 'all that which the human being cannot see directly or immediately with his own eyes, whether he had seen it before but can no longer see it, or whether he never saw it but will see it in a future time' (206).

Although Western modernity has disconnected the two worlds, it could not get rid of one quality, which is: majesty (*jalāla*). It has appropriated it by renaming it 'sovereignty (*siyāda*) as a way of masking its transcendental origins' (207). It has doggedly adhered to it, going so far as to 'attribute institutions, peoples, and individuals to it', and all this is performed under the delusion that man, replacing God, 'can command the affairs of the world'. This misplaced sovereignty 'has made man master and god, even a self-worshiper'. Due to this 'self-divination' man has become tyrant and despotic without seeing it (207). 'Self-divination' in turn led to a sense of ownership from the part of man (254).

By contrast, God in Islam is the one who truly owns everything. That is, Man owns things in the world only derivatively, metaphorically and tentatively (254). Hence, Islam introduces the concept of Trusteeship, which reflects a relationship between three elements: the thing making up the trust, the subject that entrusts (God), and the entrusted (man). God puts in the hands of man a thing for the purposes of maintenance and care. However, God is still the real owner of that thing, for He also owns the trustee. Therefore, Man cannot own anything in the full sense of the term. This Trusteeship comprises two forms: maintenance and care (*ṣiyāna* and *ri'āya*). Maintenance means the conservation of the trust as it was given, trying Man's hardest to avert any harm afflicting it. As for Care, it implies a set of principles that must be observed. Namely, within the notion of Care there is the presumption of the human use of the trust. Man is given permission to that usage precisely because the rules of Care are in place. Concurrently, these principles are the conditions of possibility for 'ownership' and use of the trust with the understanding that 'whatever use is made of the trust—and man has a wide range of freedoms—the rights of the divine truster must be fully observed' (254–255).

Hallaq's contribution to scholarship is a two birds, one stone achievement. Not only does Hallaq introduce to the English reader an accomplished philosopher who would hardly be known if not translated precisely and meticulously, but also opens a new door for his own philosophical project. Put differently, Hallaq's *Impossible State* (2013), which is his most controversial as well as most influential treatise, left his readers wandering and wondering, offering a compelling deconstruction to the idea of an Islamic state, but lacking and looking for an alternative. The introduction of Taha's project may contribute to the fulfilment of that need.

A couple of questions need to be asked, however. First, why did Hallaq exclude/overlook Taha's latest work, i.e., *Thughūr al-Murābaṭa* (2018)? While

such a book was expected to be of high relevance to Hallaq's study as it can be regarded as an application of Taha's call to shift from *theoretical* reason to *practical* reason,⁴ Hallaq never even mentions the book! Second, if Hallaq does not see eye to eye with Taha about the multiplicity of modernity and hence the possibility of an Islamic modernity, what and how does his project gain of introducing Taha's? Put differently, given the different trajectories the two thinkers have travelled, the question that needs to be further investigated is: how does Taha contribute to Hallaq's project of anti-modernism?

Strange as it may seem, Taha's proposal of an Islamic modernity brings him closer to Muḥammad 'Abduh's (d. 1905) domain and takes him further from the anti-modernistic discourse. That is to say that Hallaq's claim that Taha leaves behind the epistemological grounds upon which 'Abduh anchored his programme of reform can be challenged. The *roots* of Taha's ethical project can be traced back to the reformist seeds planted by 'Abduh. For instance, Taha's theology of progress (217) is largely present in 'Abduh's *Theology of Unity* ('Abduh 1966, 132–142). Furthermore, Taha's idea of the *spirit of modernity* can be found in 'Abduh, which Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) described as leading to: 'virtuous modernity' (Riḍā 2006, ٤). Although 'Abduh has often been labelled as an 'adaptationist', as opposed to Taha who is largely seen as an original philosopher, the author of this review maintains that 'Abduh's thought has only been studied from the view of influence and adaptation rather than convergence and originality.⁵ Namely, the possibility that 'Abduh had reached those ideas independently from Western thought is a plausible argument if 'Abduh is studied irrespective of the dialectics of reactionism and the unproven claims of Westernization.

Be that as it may, *Reforming Modernity* is another great success of Hallaq. Indeed, if Hallaq is indebted to Taha having given new blood to his philosophical project, Taha ought to be indebted to Hallaq having widened his readership by introducing him accurately to the English audience.

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4 One of Taha's central critiques against Western modernity is its emphasis on theory over praxis (39).

5 See Ammeke Kateman's recent thorough study on 'Abduh, *Muḥammad 'Abduh and His Interlocutors: Conceptualizing Religion in a Globalizing World* (Kateman 2019). See also, Haj 2009.

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