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Mahmoud Mohamad Taha, an Eccentric Vision of Islam

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE EDUCATION AND SOCIAL  
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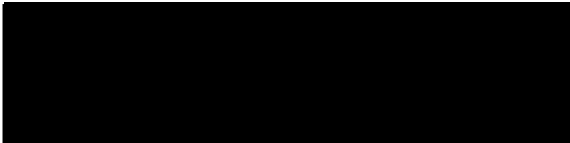
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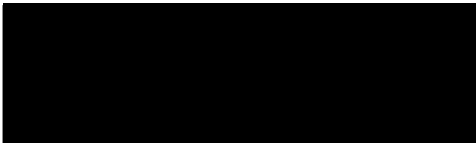
# Mahmoud Mohamad Taha, an Eccentric Vision of Islam

A thesis submitted to the Education and Social Sciences Division in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of the Master of Arts in International Affairs.

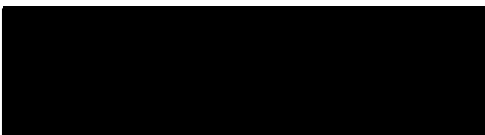
JURY



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*To the man who gave me the wing of reason, my dad.*

*To the woman who gave me the wing of freedom, my mom.*

*Thank you*

## **Jury**

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## **Abstract**

In a period characterized by Islamic revivalism, the thought of reformist Islamic thinkers like Mahmoud Mohamed Taha enriches Islam and allows it to answer fundamentalism and meet modern world challenges.

What differentiates Taha from other contemporary thinkers with a modernist approach to Islam lies in the division he makes in the Qur'an: the First Message of Islam (verses preached in Medina) being the primitive approach and negative if implemented in the present, and the Second Message of Islam (verses preached in Mecca) being the ultimate and positive stage that ought to be reached. For Taha, Islam is the equilibrium between capitalism and communism on the one hand, and between Judaism and Christianity on the other hand.

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## Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to shed light on a Sudanese Muslim thinker and founder of the Sudanese Republican Party, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, whose concept of Islam is not only original but revolutionary in the sense of proposing a paradigm shift in the theoretical and practical aspects of Islam. Taha's main political and intellectual activities were very much prosecuted under the Numeiry regime that not only banned the publications of his books but also arrested him and his followers until he was unlawfully executed in January 1985 at the age of seventy six, few weeks before the military coup that ended the Numeiry era.

Mahmoud Mohamed Taha started his career as a political activist and thinker at the end of the Second World War and during the Cold War that not only divided the world into two camps (Communism and Capitalism) but also witnessed a great technological advancement mainly in armament. This environment had a crucial impact on Taha's thought, so did the political and social environment of Sudan. On the political level, Sudan was divided between the north and the south fighting in a civil war that lasted over a period of seventeen years (1955-1972) along with a series of coup d'état and a high political turmoil.

It is in the early 1940s that the main political parties in Sudan were formed. The Umma Party, an Islamic party with a political agenda, was formed in 1945 and was one of the largest in Sudan. It experienced since 1956 alternating periods of prominence and persecution especially under the Numeiry regime; their leader Sadiq al Mahdi who happens to be the brother in law of al Turabi, served as prime minister in all coalition governments between 1986 and 1989. He was helped by al Turabi to draft the Islamic legal codes for Sudan.

Hassan al Turabi, born in 1932 Sudan, is a graduate of Khartoum University School of Law and of the Sorbonne He became a leader of the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1960s. When Gen. Jaafar Numeiry took power in a coup in 1969, Turabi's Islamist

party was dissolved and its members arrested, only to return to political life in 1977 in reconciliation with Numeiry, whose attorney general Turabi became.

The Muslim Brotherhood movement which originated in Egypt has been active in Sudan under the name of the National Islamic Front (NIF) formed in 1949. Its secretary general since 1964 was Hassan al Turabi who was collaborating with Numeiry and in the mid 1970s played a key role in the controversial introduction of the Shari'a.

In the 1986 elections, Turabi led the National Islamic Front (NIF), to third place in the national assembly. The NIF sought to create an Islamic state in Sudan. In 1989, from behind the scenes, this party participated in a military coup overthrowing the elected government. From that time until 2001, Turabi was the power behind the throne, whether as leader of the NIF or later as speaker of the assembly. He led the creation of the NIF police state and associated NIF militias to consolidate Islamist power and prevent a popular uprising. The NIF police state and militias committed many human rights abuses, including executions, torture, ill treatment, arbitrary detentions, denial of freedoms of speech, assembly, and religion, and violations of the rules of war, particularly in the south, where a civil war was being waged from 1983 to the present.

The Sudanese Communist Party (SCP) was formed in 1944 and was considered in 1956 as one of the best organized parties in Sudan. It was subject to criticism and opposition from the various religious parties. When Numeiry accused the SCP of complicity in the abortive military coup, hundreds of SCP members and leaders were arrested, convicted of treason and executed.

The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) with al Mirghani as their leader was persuaded that the implementation of the Islamic law was the main obstacle to a peaceful resolution of the civil war and advocated dropping the Numeiry September Law of institutionalizing the Shari'a.

Taha fought against the implementation of the Shari'a in Sudan, for it would discriminate against non-Muslims and the women to the detriment of the Muslims in general.

On the social level, the Muslim population in Sudan is constituted by various ethnicities that are not cohesive (the Arabs constituting only forty percent of the population of Sudan and fifty five percent of the Northern Sudan).

Ustaz Taha, while being a strong believer and a Sufi, tried to find a rational explanation to the negative aspects of the Qur'an.

In a period characterized by Islamic revivalism with the emergence of people like Sayid Qutb and al Turabi, Taha had an opposite approach. Even though he shared with Qutb some similar conclusions, nevertheless the logic behind his thought was different. Placing Mahmoud Mohamed Taha in a specific school of thought is not evident. He was an Islamist in the sense that he had a political, economic and social agenda based on Islam. Nevertheless, he is not an Islamist for he does not advocate force and jihad and has a completely different approach to, and definition of, Islam and of the Shari'a that goes beyond the traditional dogmatic Islam endorsed by many of the Islamist thinkers. He is a reformist in the sense of providing a different explanation of Islam. Taha also is an idealist for he believes in changing the nature of human beings and a better and peaceful world.

While contemporary thinkers like Mohamed Shahrour reinterpret the Qur'an in a reformist manner, Taha divides it into theoretical and practical. The former being the Second Message, preaching democracy, socialism and social equality while the latter or the First Message, preaching the opposite. He does not try to re explain the meaning of the Qur'an by showing its perfection but tries to explain the meaning of Islam. Mohamed Shahrour is a Syrian engineer who writes extensively on Islam and who interprets the Qur'an in a very pragmatic manner appropriate to our time. He is famous for his best selling book *The Book and the Qur'an: A Contemporary Reading* published in 1990.

Mahmoud Mohamed Taha uses dialectic along all the subjects he tackles within the same concept of an immediate stage necessary for the achievement of a higher stage. In this sense, Taha uses a Marxist approach that of two stages one being a necessary transition for the accomplishment of the second.

After careful examination, one can note the dichotomy in Taha's thought. According to him, there are two messages of Islam, two levels of selfishness, two levels of freedom, two types of laws, two types of forces, two types of fear, two meanings of the Qur'an, two methods for a superior state, two principles of scientific socialism, two wings to

society and two factors for social equality. These issues that have according to him a pyramidal form with a base and a peak will be explained in detail throughout the thesis.

The first chapter of this thesis consists of portraying the life of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, his early life, the beginning of his political career, the establishment of the Republican Party and a brief outlook of the Party's ideas that culminated to reach the execution of its leader.

The second chapter will study the main theory of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha namely the dichotomy of his thought and the two messages of Islam. As per the third and fourth chapters, they will respectively examine Mahmoud Mohamed Taha's views on Jesus Christ and women.

Taha's books are not available for they were never published except *The Second Message of Islam* translated in English and is a rare commodity. The rest of his writings can be found in Arabic on the website of the Republican Brothers.

In order to place Taha's thought in context, he will be compared with Mohamed Shahrour's thought on the main issues on the one hand, and with Sayid Qutb on the other hand.

## Chapter One: Biography of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha

### **Early Life and the beginning of Taha's political career**

Mahmoud Mohamed Taha was born between 1909 and 1911 in Rufa'h, a small town in Sudan. Both of his parents died when he was still a child and he with his siblings were brought up by their extended family. He studied engineering in Gordon Memorial College, lately known as the University of Khartoum and graduated in 1936. He then worked for a short period with Sudan railways before resigning and going into a private practice in early 1940s. Since the late 1930s, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha participated actively in the nationalist struggle for independence movement for two main reasons. First, he was discontented with the educated elite who were submitting their expertise to the religious leaders. Second, he was dissatisfied with the Sudanese political parties that seemed to accept colonial domination therefore conceding their dedication to the establishment of an independent Sudanese republic. This has led him, with other intellectuals who agreed with his views, to form the Republican Party in October 1945. The Party's pamphlets reflected a modernist Islamic orientation and a direct confrontation with the colonial authorities which led to the arrest and imprisonment of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha and several of his colleagues in 1946. After refusing to abstain from political activities against the colonial powers, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha was sentenced for one year in prison. But after 50 days, he was "pardoned" by the British Governor General due to the strong protests of the Republican Party. The same year, the colonial government of Sudan added a new section 284A to the Sudan Penal Code forbidding the practice of female circumcision. Even though Mahmoud Mohamed Taha was opposed to this practice, he nevertheless was against the introduction of penal measures for he saw them as ineffective and unproductive. He believed that to prevent these unhealthy and harmful acts of circumcision, women must be educated and they will voluntarily and intelligently abandon these practices. When the republicans set out to

resist the prosecution of a woman in Rufa'h who subjected her daughter to circumcision, and were able to free her, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha and his followers were arrested, tried and sentenced to prison. Mahmoud Mohamed Taha being the leader of the revolt received the harshest sentence of two years imprisonment.

It was during his imprisonment that he started to pray, fast and meditate and had insights into the meanings of the Qur'an and the role of the Islamic Law, giving birth to his theory about the Second Message of Islam. According to him, it was by rigourously and intelligently pursuing worship and practices of the Prophet Mohamad that human beings could sharpen their senses and develop their faculties and be ready to understand God's teachings revealed in the Qur'an.

The year 1951 marked the end of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha's seclusion and the emergence of a new conception of Islam that he developed and preached until the time of his death in January 1985. He summed up his ideas in a book published in 1952 under the name *Qul Hazihi Sabili* or *This is my Path*.

In the early 1950s, the Republican Party was transformed from a political party seeking power into an organization for the proliferation of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha's Second Message. In the mid 1950s, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha resumed his private practice as engineer and devoted his efforts to writing, lecturing and debating his views until 1973 when President Numeiry banned his public lectures.

In 1955, on the eve of Sudan's independence, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha published a book titled *Usus Dastour Al-Soudan*, which is a proposal for a Sudanese constitution. He called for a presidential, federal, democratic and socialist Republic and was opposed to any attempt to apply the Islamic Shari'a as it would discriminate against non-Muslims and non-arabized Sudanese citizens. Noting that during the same year, armed rebellion in the south of Sudan emerged demanding a federal rule to the south.

In 1956, shortly after Sudan gained its independence, a committee was formed to write the constitution that would be adopted by the parliament. Taha represented the Republican Party in that committee but he resigned shortly after objecting to the interference of the executive authorities in its work.

The draft of the constitution drew heavily on the Shari'a as desired by the traditionalist religious parties. Before the approval of the draft by the parliament, a military coup

seized power in November 1958. As a result, all political parties, including the Republican Party were dissolved. Taha wrote a letter to the head of the new regime, General Abboud, advising him to apply his views of a federal, democratic and socialist Republic, but his advice was ignored.

For two years, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha kept lecturing publicly his ideas under the military regime until the religious authorities could not tolerate and his public lectures were prohibited and he was denied access to the media. In 1960, he published his book entitled *Islam*.

When Sudan returned to its multiparty parliamentary rule, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha revived the Republican Party to propagate the ideas of social, religious, economic and political reforms through public lectures and newspapers. During the years 1966-1967, he wrote and published his most important books, namely *Tariq Muhammad*, *Risalat al-Salat*, and *the Second Message of Islam*.

Mahmoud Mohamed Taha had also important political opinions, he was the first man to propose a dialogue between Israel and the Arabs after the 1967 Six Day War, reflected in his books *Mushkilat al-Sharq al Awsat (the Middle East Problem)* and *Al-Tahaddi allazi Youwajihou al-Arab (The challenge facing the Arabs)*.

He was also opposed to Jamal Abdul Nasser and to his Arab nationalism on the one hand, and to the primitive application of Islam in Saudi Arabia on the other hand. He also opposed the Muslim Brotherhood movements in different parts of Arab countries and especially in Sudan when they amended the constitution to expel the members of the Communist Party from Parliament. Despite his being against the communists, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha objected the dissolution of the Communist Party and considered it as a blow to Sudanese democracy.

In 1968, Taha was accused of apostasy, a crime punishable by death. Taha refused to appear before the court and the Shari'a High Court declared the dissolution of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha's Party and movement and charged him of apostasy. The verdict remained without formal consequences.

### **The Republican Party under the Numeiry Regime, 1969-1983**

“Between 1966 and 1969, Sudan had a series of governments that proved unable either to agree on a permanent constitution or to cope with problems of factions, economic stagnation and ethnic dissidence<sup>1</sup>”. The early post-independence governments were dominated by Arab Muslims who viewed Sudan as an Arab Muslim state.

The sectarian religious parties were ready to include the Shari’a in the permanent constitution and were willing to go for a referendum in case it wasn’t approved by the parliament by the end of 1969.

This led to the discontent of army officers who succeeded in seizing power by a military coup on May 25<sup>th</sup> 1969. Jaafar Numeiry, leader of the coup, became prime minister and banned all political parties, including the Republican Party. This new regime was influenced and supported by the Arab nationalists and mainly Egypt on the one hand, and by the Communists and former Soviet Union on the other hand.

Taha did not oppose the regime, for he saw in it a chance of protecting the Sudanese people from Islamic rule. He continued his public lectures until they were banned by President Numeiry in 1973. Nonetheless, this has not stopped him from guiding the activities of the organization by the Republican Brothers which included an increasing number of female activists and continued to propagate the ideas of the Second Message despite the harassment by the authorities and the security forces. The organization succeeded in implementing within its members, the teachings of the Second Message of Islam. Members of the Republican Brothers Party applied the principles of equality between men and women without discrimination; women members participated fully in all the activities and were often leaders of activist groups. They also made further applications on marriage in both the legal and social level, and which will be discussed in further detail in chapter four.

During the same year of 1973, even though Mahmoud Mohamed Taha’s disciples’ activities were within the law, they nevertheless aroused opposition from traditional and fundamentalist religious and political circles. The Republican Brothers were denied access to the media that was all state-owned, and the Republicans had to prepare their own publications. And since their public lectures were banned, they had to use street

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5424.htm>



corners and public parks to address whoever was willing to listen, and often the police intervened to break up these meetings under the charge of “breach of peace” and “disturbance of public tranquility”<sup>2</sup>.

It is worth noting that despite these continuous harassments, the Republican Brothers supported the Numeiry regime in the 1970s and early 1980s as long as it maintained policies of national unity and refrained from applying the Shari'a on the detriment of women and non-Muslims. The Republicans preferred the Numeiry's regime on the other alternative that of a fundamentalist dictatorship.

### **Opposition with President Numeiry**

It is only when the Shari'a was imposed by a presidential decree in 1983, that the Republicans declared their opposition to Numeiry's regime. They believed that imposing the Shari'a would lead to further discrimination and would undermine national unity between Muslims in the north and non-Muslims in the south.

In mid 1983, the Republicans issued a pamphlet criticizing the chief of state security and the vice president of the republic. They accused them of not failing to restrain the incitement of Islamic fundamentalist to religious hatred. This pamphlet was the apparent reason for the arrest and detention of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha and some of the Republican Brothers leaders. After the detention, President Numeiry announced his intention to apply the Shari'a Law which led the Republicans to start an opposition campaign while their leaders were still in prison. In 1984, after nineteen months in prison, the Republican Brothers were all released with no charges. The reason for their release was either due to the mounting international pressure or as a trap to involve them in acts that will make them liable to prosecution under the new laws that would be based on the Shari'a.

“One week after their release, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha and the Republicans issued their first leaflet *Either This or the Flood* demanding the repeal of the new laws and a

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<sup>2</sup> The Republican Brothers, *Maalim Ala Tariq Tatawwur Alfikra Algumhuriyya Khilal Thalatheen Aaman*, 1976

guarantee of democratic civil liberties”<sup>3</sup>. The leaflet created ambivalent reactions among the police due to the mild language of the leaflet which gave no serious charges under the existing laws. Some Republicans were arrested while distributing the leaflet under the usual charge of “breach of peace”. Nevertheless, the State Minister for Criminal Affairs instructed the public prosecutors to press charges of “sedition, undermining the constitution, inciting unlawful opposition to the government, disturbing public tranquility and membership of an unlawful organization”<sup>4</sup>. These charges were considered capital offenses and permitted no release on bail.

### **Trial and Execution of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha**

On January 2<sup>nd</sup> 1985, the four Republicans who were arrested were brought to trial before a special criminal court, but the trial was adjourned because the serious charges required special sanctions by the President of the Republic. The President’s sanctions included the directive to add a section to the penal code allowing the court to impose any *hadd* penalty “regardless of the lack of statutory penal provision”<sup>5</sup>. The *hadd* is a penalty for the particular offenses named in the Qur’an (e.g. amputation of the hand of one who steals public property).

On January 5<sup>th</sup> 1985, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha was arrested at his house in Omdurman and charged with the same combination of offenses. Two days later, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha and the four Republicans were brought before the special criminal court. The five accused decided to boycott the trial because first they objected the laws under which the court was constituted and purported to act; second because they objected the competence of the judges presiding the court and finally because of the unconstitutionality of the charges. In announcing his decision to boycott the trial, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha stated the following:

*“I have repeatedly declared my view that the so-called September 1983 Islamic laws violate Islamic Shari'a law and Islam itself. Moreover, these laws have distorted Islamic Shari'a law and Islam and made them repugnant. Furthermore, these laws were enacted*

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<sup>3</sup> www.alfikra.org

<sup>4</sup> Taha, Mahmoud Mohamed, *The Second Message of Islam* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987) p. 10

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p.13

*and utilized to terrorize the people and humiliate them into submission. These laws also jeopardize the national unity of the country (by discriminating against non-Muslim citizens-about one third of the population). These are my objections from the theoretical point of view.*

*At the practical level, the judges enforcing these laws lack the necessary technical qualifications. They have also morally failed to resist placing themselves under the control of the executive authorities which exploited them in violating the rights of the citizens, humiliating the people, distorting Islam, insulting intellect and intellectuals, and humiliating political opponents.*

*For all these reasons, I am not prepared to cooperate with any court that has betrayed the independence of the judiciary and allowed itself to be a tool for humiliating the people, insulting free thought, and persecuting political opponents”<sup>6</sup>.*

The trial lasted only two hours, the first hour was spent on hearing the testimony of the only witness for the prosecution, namely the police officer who arrested them and whose only exhibit was the published leaflet. The second hour was given to the judge to pronounce his judgment given that the accused boycotted the trial. The judge stated that “the accused held curious and unorthodox views of Islam which may or may not be valid but anyways should not be discussed in public for they create a *fitnah*”.

The Judge declared all five accused of sedition, undermining the constitution, inciting unlawful opposition to the government, disturbing public tranquility and membership of an unlawful organization. There was no attempt by the court to show how the accused are guilty of these offenses. This shows that they were accused of apostasy even though it was not mentioned by name.

The judge passed the death sentence on the five accused adding that they could be reprieved in case they repented and recanted their views. This shows that they were in reality accused of apostasy, an offense clearly stated by the special court as opposed to the trial court which did not mention the offense of apostasy.

Furthermore, given that Mahmoud Mohamed Taha was considered to have persisted on his apostasy, he was denied the opportunity to recant his views and had to endure the death sentence that had to be executed immediately while the remaining four accused had

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p.14

a period of one month chance to repent. This decision of the special court was declared on January 15<sup>th</sup> 1985, two days later, President Numeiry confirmed this decision and on January 18<sup>th</sup> Mahmoud Mohamed Taha was executed. The one month grace period given to the four accused was reduced to three days by President Numeiry and on January 19<sup>th</sup>, they all repented and were pardoned and freed on the same day<sup>7</sup>.

### **Consequences and nullification of Taha's verdict**

By agreeing to dismantle their organization and refrain from propagating their views, all four hundred men and women Republicans were released.

Seventy six days after the execution of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, on April 6<sup>th</sup> 1985, President Numeiry was overthrown by a popular upheaval followed by a coup d'état.

Mahmoud Mohamed Taha's daughter, Asma, along with one of the Republicans who were convicted with him in the trial, instituted a constitutional suit and submitted it to the attorney general of the transitional government who made an oral declaration before the supreme court that the trial, the confirmation of the proceedings and the execution of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha were illegal and are null and void.

Whether Mahmoud Mohamed Taha was executed for the crime of apostasy or for being a political opponent to President Numeiry's regime reflects the fear this pacifist thinker generated among the ruling class. It is said that on the day of his execution, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha was remarkably peaceful and at ease with his fate. "To the last minute, he acted along one of the main tenets of his religious thinking, that of total submission to the Will of God which, according to him, is the essence of Islam"<sup>8</sup>.

The Republican Party was doomed to perish since its formation. On the internal level, the Republicans were opposed to the Islamists, to the Numeiry regime and to the communists. On the external level, the Republicans were opposed to Arab nationalism, to Russian communism and Western capitalism. Thus, this party could not enjoy the support of any power be it from outside Sudan or inside and was thus doomed to fail as a political organization.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. pp 15-19

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.p.21

## Chapter Two: Mahmoud Mohamed Taha's Main Theory

### **Islam**

Mahmoud Mohamed Taha seeks to find in Islam the questions unanswered in other philosophies. Taha believes that communism and capitalism are both materialist and sacrificing the individual for the sake of the community. Both were unable to understand the relationship between the individual and his community and between the individual and the universe. According to Taha, Islam provides the ultimate answers and tools for individuals to achieve absolute freedom and for the society to achieve total social justice.

### *What is Islam?*

Mohammad was born in Mecca around 570 AD. At the age of forty he began to receive the revelation of the Qur'an. For thirteen years he preached in Mecca before migrating to Medina where he preached for ten years until his death in 632 AD. During this period in Medina, the Prophet explained and applied the Qur'an to the concrete daily needs of the people.

According to Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, Islam which means in essence submission and surrender came in the form of the Qur'an (divine words of God) and the Sunnah which is believed to be what the Prophet Mohammad had said and done during his lifetime.

The Qur'an was recorded during the reign of Osman, the third Caliph, while the Sunnah or Hadith were not recorded until the second and third centuries of Islam. In other words it is after two to three hundred years after the Prophet's death that his sayings and deeds

were recorded and which are considered as the second source in Islam. The Shari'a or Islamic law which is the result of the Qur'an and the Hadith was founded during the second and third centuries of Islam. It was developed through the interpretation by jurists of the Qur'an and the Hadith during the eighth and ninth centuries AD and mainly serving the ruling class' interests. From the tenth century to the present time, Muslim jurists have confined themselves to the study and elaboration of the work of those early masters and no reforms took place since.

It is interesting to note that Mahmoud Mohamed Taha's definition of Islam differs from what is usually understood from the term Islam. His definition consists of dividing Islam into two levels: the level of the dogma or religion and the level of science. The first level which is the dogma is proper to the religion of Islam and makes of it one of the monotheistic religions. Whereas the scientific level of Islam encompasses all religions and thus is above the dogma. Monotheistic religions do not differ in essence but differ in the laws that were best suited to their community and for their worship.

The concept of religion which has according to Taha a pyramidal form first appeared in pagan beliefs followed by the monotheistic religions (Judaism and Christianity) and finally crowned with the coming of the Prophet Mohammad and the revelation of the Qur'an. The base of the pyramid is polytheistic paganism while the peak is God and absolute unity and both differ only in degree and not in essence.

### ***The Islamic Trinity***

Scriptural religions which are a new phase of Islamic concept started with the coming of Moses and the descent of the Torah. Islamic trinity consists of Judaism with the Torah for Jews, Christianity with the Gospel for Christians and Islam with the Qur'an for Muslims. Religious legislations aimed at regulating the life of society in every large or small detail yet in a comprehensive manner and in the way appropriate to the level of development of the community it descended upon. Thus, Moses was sent in XIII BC whereby society was primitive and crude, individuals were quarrelsome and bad tempered and where the law of jungle was predominant. Therefore the Torah laws called upon Jews to be fair in reciprocity "an eye for an eye..." and were somewhat primitive given the primitive

nature of society. The pagan influence on the Jews from the time of the Egyptians made the Torah laws even more primitive.

Then came Jesus with the law that pulled people to the other extreme as a reaction to what previously prevailed, thus shifting from “an eye for an eye” to “[...] whoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matthew 5:38-39). Thus as Moses came with excessive materialism, Jesus came with the opposite, with excessive spiritualism. According to Taha, Islam came as a balance or as equilibrium between the two extremes of the lack and of excess, containing the qualities of both Judaism and Christianity. Islam becomes of two ends, one end closer to Judaism and one end closer to Christianity. The first end was elaborated in the Shari'a and the First Message of Islam while the second end was unelaborated in the Second Message of Islam.

### **The First Message of Islam**

Mahmoud Mohamed Taha has thus clearly divided the Qur'an into two messages. The First Message of Islam is based on the Medina texts preached during a period of ten years (622-632 AD) in the town of Medina in western Arabia. The Second Message of Islam is based on the earlier Mecca texts preached during a period of thirteen years (609-622 AD) in the town of Mecca. While the Mecca texts preached equality and individual responsibility between men and women without distinction on grounds of gender, race or social origin the Medina texts were different and changed in response to the socioeconomic and political realities of the time. The Medina texts made a shift in the content of the message itself. The Shari'a law is based on the texts of the Medina stage where God was responding through the Prophet to the actual needs of the community at its stage of development.

## *Defining the First Message of Islam*

The First Message of Islam was elaborated through specific legislation and was addressed to the nation of al Mu'minin and not to the nation al Muslimin. The difference between the two is in degree and not in essence. For Taha, not every Mu'min is necessarily a Muslim but every Muslim is necessarily a Mu'min. On this issue, Mohamed Shahrour is opposed to Taha. According to Shahrour<sup>7</sup>, every Mu'min is necessarily a Muslim but not every Muslim is a Mu'min. What Taha means by Muslim is what Shahrour means by Mu'min.

Thus if this concept is explained in Taha's pyramidal form, the base would have been the Mu'min while the peak is the Muslim. In order to move from al iman to al Islam the individual goes through an intellectual process by which he proceeds on a ladder of seven steps in a cyclical form which starts with al-islam and ends with al-Islam the latter being a higher level of Islam.

- al-islam which is the first level of Islam referring to the external or apparent submission and concerns the speech and action of the individuals and is below al-iman.
- al-iman
- al-ihsan
- 'ilm al yaqin
- 'ilm 'ayn al yaqin
- 'ilm haqq al yaqin
- al-Islam which is both the external and internal submission. It is the intelligent surrender and submission and acceptance of God both in the private and public level and is therefore above al-iman.

It is this second level of Islam that Mahmoud Mohamed Taha refers to when he speaks about Islam. The first three steps belong to the stage of the dogma and which is the stage of the nation of Mu'minin or the nation of the First Message of Islam. The last three steps

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Dr. Mohamed Shahrour (2005, December 28). Dr. Shahrour's Engineering Office. Damascus, Syria.



belong to the level of knowledge or truth of Islam and which is the stage of the nation of Muslimin or the nation of the Second Message of Islam. The Prophet Mohammad was the messenger of both messages; he explained the first in detail while only outlined the second. Mohamed Shahrour on the other hand, believes that the prophet was a messenger when he dealt with the daily life of the people from a legal aspect and was a prophet when he preached values. In Taha's term, Mohammad was a prophet in Mecca and a messenger in Medina.

According to Taha, when Islam in its second message in Mecca failed to gain acceptance among the people who were below the standard of understanding it, it was repealed in Medina giving ground to the first message of Islam. The Mecca and Medina texts differ essentially because of the audience to whom they were addressed (the mu'minin and the Muslimin). The Mecca texts used peaceful persuasion in persuading people to believe in Islam whereas the Medina texts forced people to Islam by the sword and made reference to Jihad and the elaboration of its rules that is to cite an example of the difference between the two messages.

### ***On the non-original precepts in Islam***

As mentioned earlier, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha tries to find a rational and logical interpretation for the negative and discriminating factors of Islam by first dividing the Qur'an or Islam into two messages and second by explaining the factors that were responsible for the result of the first message. According to him, the first message is not the real true Islam but rather its opposite; it was a transitional stage needed for the society of that time who was not ready to accept and understand the true message of Islam, that of the second message.

Some of the main tenants of the First Message of Islam and which are the non-original precepts in Islam (the second message) according to Taha are jihad, slavery, capitalism, inequality between men and women, polygamy, divorce, the veil and the segregation of men from women.

### *The Jihad*

The propagation of Islam began with verses of persuasion in Mecca for a period of thirteen years and those who believed and converted were sincere and sacrificed their comforts for the cause of spreading their new religion. They spent their lives in sincere worship, kindness and peaceful coexistence with the rest of the people. Nevertheless, some people persisted in their pagan beliefs and in their way of life in destroying life and burying little girls alive; they abused their freedom and made it liable to be withdrawn. It was a time where there was no law except the sword to limit the abuse of freedom thus the verses of persuasion were repealed by verses of compulsion (jihad). Those who converted to Islam by the sword due to their abuse of their freedom were then penalized according to new laws, the Shari'a laws and the sword was suspended.

The wrong doers are of two levels: those who worship other than God and persist in doing so and those who appear to submit to God but transgress the rights of other people. The former are disbelievers while the latter are transgressors. The withdrawal of freedom is proportionate to the degree of abuse thus the law of war applies for disbelievers while the law of peace to transgressors.

According to Taha, jihad was necessitated by the circumstances of the time and by the inability of the people to use their freedom properly “[...] many aspects of the present Islamic Shari'a are not the original principles or objectives of Islam. They merely reflect a descent in accordance with the circumstances of the time and the limitations of human ability<sup>8</sup>”.

### *Slavery*

The same applies for the concept of slavery which Islam did not abolish. According to Taha, Islam could not have abolished slavery brutally for it was imbedded in the socioeconomic order of that time and was inherited from the primitive pre-Islamic era. Islam thus tried to abolish slavery progressively by first enacting regulations for slavery in giving them rights and duties and second by proscribing a proper treatment for all

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<sup>8</sup> Taha, Mahmoud Mohamed, *The Second Message of Islam* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987) p. 137

slaves. Furthermore jihad helped Muslims increase the number of their slaves by taking those of the defeated group. If a free person refuses to become a slave of God he shall then become a slave to a slave of God thus by reciprocity and jihad, slavery was justified.

### ***Capitalism***

The original principle in Islam is the common or joint possession of property amongst the slaves of God so that each takes according to his needs. In that society this principle of sharing could not be understood nor applied for even paying *zakat* was difficult for them to do. The actual Islamic legislation regarding property does not reflect according to Taha the real objective of Islam but it gradually introduces Muslim to the true concept of property by the *zakat*.

### ***Inequality between men and women***

The original principle in Islam (true Islam) calls for a complete equality between men and women unlike the first message and its Shari'a whereby women are submitted to the male members of the family and get half of what men do in inheritance and testimony. What Islam did with women is similar to what it did with slavery. It limited the prevailing injustice by giving them rights and duties without brutally abolishing the existing social order. It was a necessary transitional stage to prepare society to develop and move to the second, higher and truer level of Islam. The same logic applies to polygamy, divorce, the veil and the segregation between men and women and which will be developed in chapter four.

In conclusion, Islam as a dogma in its first message repealed the original precepts of Islam and introduced the opposite as a transitional stage due to the primitive level of society. Islamic legislation or Shari'a is based on verses from the first message and therefore ought to be reviewed and based on verses from the second message. Muslims say that the Shari'a is perfect therefore there is no need for it to evolve and develop. On

the other hand, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha believes that the perfection of the Shari'a lies in its ability to evolve by moving from one text in the Qur'an suited for the seventh century to another text suited for the twentieth century "If a subsidiary verse, which used to overrule the primary verse in the seventh century, has served its purpose completely and become irrelevant for the new era, the twentieth century, then the time has come for it to be abrogated and for the primary verse to be enacted. In this way, the primary verse has its turn as the operative text in the twentieth century and become the basis of the new legislation. This is what the evolution of Shari'a means. It is shifting from one text that served its purpose and was exhausted to another text that was postponed until its time came. Evolution is therefore neither unrealistic or premature, nor expressing a naïve and immature opinion. It is merely shifting from one text to the other<sup>9</sup>".

### **The Second Message of Islam**

While the First Message of Islam was extensively elaborated by the Prophet in Medina and through the Islamic legislation the Shari'a, the Second Message of Islam remained unelaborated. According to Taha, the time has come to implement the second message because society has developed since the seventh century and is capable of understanding the true meaning of the Qur'an. He also believes that it is through the Meccan texts and the Sunnah that the second message of Islam can see the light.

Mohamed Shahrour shares the same idea that people in the twentieth century are more capable of understanding the Qur'an and the limits of God for they are far more developed and cultured than their predecessors.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. pp. 40-41

### ***Defining the Second Message of Islam***

The explanation of the Qur'an has been done only in terms of legislation or through the Shari'a. It was interpreted in the way appropriate for the time and in accordance with the capacity of the audience and the abilities of the people. According to Taha, such an explanation can not be conclusively done because the progress is eternal. The nation of the Muslimin has not yet come but is bound to in the future of humanity. The Prophet Mohammad was the only Muslim in the nation of mu'minin even the closest people to him were considered mu'minin.

### ***The Muslims***

The prophet prophesized the coming of the Muslims as a nation when the circumstances are suitable. The actual muslim nation will develop to become the Muslim nation whereby the level of individualities is achieved when the subconscious is no longer in conflict with the conscious thus unity is attained. This unity is characterized by the wholesomeness of the heart, the clarity of thought and the beauty of the body therefore realizing a full and comprehensive intellectual and emotional life. The objective of Islam is to restore this unity when the individual thinks as he wishes, speaks what he thinks and acts according to his speech.

Mahmoud Mohamed Taha believes that Islam appears to be the only ideology capable of resolving the conflict between the individual and the community and between the individual and the universe.

### ***The Good Society***

It is by reviving the second message of Islam, elaborating it and basing the legislations on it that a good society is possible to arise. The original principles of Islam are tolerance as opposed to jihad, socialism as opposed to capitalism, democracy as opposed to dictatorship and social equality between all people regardless of faith sex or color.

A superior state can be reached through two complementary methods according to Taha. This first method is a good society characterized by three main qualities: the economic equality, the political equality and the social equality. The latter is the result of democracy and socialism and characterized by the abolition of social classes, absence of discrimination based on color, faith race or sex; whereby marriage can be performed between any man and any woman regardless of social class, color, faith and race. The second method is the scientific educational method used to liberate the individual from his inherited fear.

### ***Economic Equality: Scientific Socialism of Islam***

Socialism is the product of an economic struggle between the 'have nots' and the 'haves' that struggle will continue until absolute equality between individuals in sharing the wealth of the earth is achieved.

Capitalism or individual ownership and socialism or collective ownership were both for a long period the basis of society but the difference is in the speed by which they evolved, capitalism evolved at a much higher pace to reach its present level. Taha compares capitalism to the law of the jungle with the dominance of the stronger while he compares socialism to the law of justice and compassion. The first being a precept of the first message of Islam while the second a precept of the second message of Islam; the former being in the realm of the dogma while the latter in the realm of science. Thus true Islam calls for a scientific socialism different from Marx' and which Taha believes is even more scientific.

Taha's scientific socialism is founded on two principles:

First, by increasing the production of resources (such as minerals, agriculture and animal wealth) and on the other hand, developing industries by means of science, technology and administration, the gap between the minimum and maximum level of income would diminish leading to absolute equality and achieving communism.

Second, providing an equitable distribution of wealth and which consists of three levels. The first, requires setting a maximum and a minimum limit to personal income whereby the minimum is guaranteed to every citizen and is sufficient to sustain a dignified human

existence. Therefore the gap between the minimum and the maximum should not be wide to create high and low social classes.

The second, consists of prohibiting individuals the ownership of the means of production in order to be able to increase production. Finally, the third level, would limit individual ownership to a house, a garden, furniture and a car. All property would remain the ownership of God.

### ***Political Equality: Democracy***

Like socialism, democracy is the product of struggle between the 'have nots' and the 'haves' in the political sphere. Its purpose is sharing power in the same way socialism's purpose is to share wealth. According to Taha, democracy and socialism are the two wings of society or the two wings of a bird that can not fly with only one wing. Democracy is the stage required for the achievement of socialism, thus preceding it. The latter requires a greater social awareness than democracy which at the beginning could be exercised by the few enlightened ones. It also needs as its base the riches of developed capitalism and the advances of modern technology.

Socialism reached its scientific stage in the nineteenth century with Robert Owen in 1820 followed by the French secret revolutionary committee who, in 1935, wanted to overthrow the middle class by force and establish a new economic order with common ownership and a government led by the proletariat; it was crowned with Karl Marx who preferred the term communism. On the other hand, democracy was born in Athens. Athenians believed the participation in public affairs was the right and duty of every citizen except women and slaves who were excluded from being considered as citizens. Athenian democracy as prescribed by Pericles grew and developed in various parts of the world manifesting some basic principles and approach to life: safeguarding the dignity of the individual and managing human affairs in accordance with justice, truth and popular acceptance. The most important principles of democracy are:

- Recognition of basic equality between all individuals
- The value of the individual is above that of the state
- Government as the servant of the people

- The rule of law
- Appeal to reason, experiment and experience
- The rule of the majority, with utmost respect for rights of the minority
- Democratic method and procedures used to achieve objectives

These methods are tools and means for the service of the end which is the individual and his dignity. This concept of democracy is proper to the second message of Islam whereby the individual is the end and not the means. “Democracy is not merely a way of government; it is also a way of life. The individual human being is the end, and everything else is a means to that end<sup>10</sup>”. Democracy is more than a way of government, it is a way of life whereby the individual is given the right to realize his honor and dignity, and has the right of making mistakes unlike dictatorship. This view complies with Taha’s explanation of Islam where individuals make mistakes, learn from them and ask for forgiveness.

Democracy is the type of government that is based on the right to make mistake and it implies learning how to choose. It also implies a freedom of thought, of speech and of action consistent with the law; it is the right for human dignity.

According to Taha, the prophet was appointed guardian over the nation of mu’minin who were incapable of exercising individual freedom in choice and action. He was preparing them for democracy for which they had to be sufficiently mature and intelligent.

Some Muslim thinkers like Sayid Qutb believe that the concept of the *Shura* implies democracy<sup>11</sup>. Taha on the contrary believes that it does not refer to democracy but is a necessary transitional stage for democracy. *Shura* is not an original principle in Islam because the definition of *Shura* is the rule of a mature individual whose duty is to prepare the nation for democracy.

The second message of Islam calls for a return from the subsidiary verses to the original verses that were temporarily abrogated because of the circumstances and due to the human and material limitations. The Shari’a must be based on the original verses of the Qur’an that preach socialism and democracy thus absolute individual freedom. This is the Shari’a law of the Muslim nation that is yet to come.

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.* p. 159

<sup>11</sup> Qutb, Sayid, translated by John B. Hardie, *Social Justice* (New York: Octagon books, 1970) p. 83, p. 107



### ***Social Equality: Abolition of Classes and Social Discrimination***

Social equality which is the offspring of socialism and democracy is nevertheless the most difficult to attain. When a nation reaches social equality it would have reached the peak of civilization whereby the individual will move from his animal drives to a superior moral character. The true signs of civilization consist of the following according to Taha: The absence of social discrimination, the safeguard of the rights of the weak and respecting their dignity, securing the freedom and honor of women and protecting the children.

Thus replacing the law of the jungle by the law of justice, force by consensus, exploitation by justice, oppression by freedom and the selfish individual drives will be replaced by an intelligent community awareness.

In the same way socialism and democracy are tools for the realization of the end which is the individual absolute freedom and dignity, the objective of social equality is also the individual. There are two types of means, the first being Islam and the Qur'an while the second is society.

### **Civilization and Material Progress**

As it will be further noticed, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha often uses a pyramidal form to explain certain concepts, with a base and a peak.

Material progress is the base of a pyramid while civilization is its peak with neither one being a prerequisite for the existence of the other. According to Taha, one can be materially advanced without being civilized or can be civilized without being materially advanced.

If this can be true on the personal level, I think it is hard to apply on society, for without material progress, there can be no intellectual development. History has not shown a materially underdeveloped country that has witnessed a cultural surge.

The definition given by Taha to material progress is the enjoyment of certain comforts and benefits of an advanced standard of living. If an individual obtains these means at the expense of his freedom, he is therefore not civilized even though he is materially advanced. Civilization as defined by Taha is the ability to distinguish values and to observe them in daily conduct. A civilized person is someone who has achieved a complete intellectual and emotional life<sup>12</sup>.

The objective for Mahmoud Mohamed Taha is to achieve both material progress and civilization at the same time.

According to Taha, Western civilization is not a civilization at all despite its material progress because the means are advanced while the ends are retarded. Western civilization has failed to intelligently pursue peace on the one hand and to reconcile the needs of the individuals of absolute individual freedom with the needs of the community for total justice on the other hand. This failure in achieving peace forced it to prepare for war and spend more on the means of destruction than on the means for the achievement of peace and development. The failure in reconciling the needs of the individual with the needs of the community is a proof of the inadequacy of existing Western philosophies and ideologies (e.g. Russian Communism and Western Capitalism).

Sayid Qutb meets with Taha on this issue, that of the failure of Western ideologies and the fact that Islam is the only answer and the only alternative for communism and capitalism as he states *“even the Western world realizes that Western civilization is unable to present any healthy values for the guidance of mankind. It knows that it does not possess anything which will satisfy its own conscience and justify its existence. It is necessary for the new leadership to [...] provide mankind with such high ideals and values as have so far remained undiscovered by mankind [...]. Islam is the only system which possesses these values and this way of life<sup>13</sup>”*.

Qutb also meets with Taha on the idea that Islam provides individuals with peace with themselves, with their community and with the universe.

According to Taha, the reason behind the failure in achieving peace and pursuing war lies in the fact that Western civilization has reached the end of its purely material

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<sup>12</sup> Taha, Mahmoud Mohamed, *The Second Message of Islam* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987) pp. 51-52

<sup>13</sup> Qutb, Sayid, *Milestones* (Beirut: The Holy Koran Publishing House, 1980) pp. 7-15

development. The latter was not supplemented by proper moral growth and by spiritual progress.

According to Taha, bread was more valued than liberty in both communism and capitalism which are the same but only differ in degree. Both were unable to answer two basic questions, first on the nature of the relationship between the individual and the community and second the nature of the relationship between the individual and the universe<sup>14</sup>.

Furthermore, Taha criticizes social philosophies including communism in their failure to appreciate the relationship between the individual and the community. These ideologies tend to assume that individual's freedom is constrained by the community and that the safeguard of the community is more important than the needs of the individual for absolute freedom. Taha thinks that the relationship between man and the universe which is the realm of theory is more misunderstood than the relationship between man and the community which falls under the realm of practice, politics, legislations and social life. Taha also adds that available philosophies explain religious beliefs in a perspective of individual's weakness and fear and when weaknesses are overcome, religious belief would cease to exist. According to Taha, the role of religion must not be weakened and whether it is Christianity or Islam, religion must answer the needs of the individual and the community in an intelligent and rational manner or it would become irrelevant, its influence diminished and it will be replaced by another philosophy that will give answers for daily problems on the one hand and serve people's material interests on the other hand<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Taha, Mahmoud Mohamed, *The Second Message of Islam* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987) pp. 52-53

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. pp. 56-61

## The Individual and Community in Islam

According to Taha, Islam provides the answer to the needs of the individual for absolute freedom and the needs of the community for total social justice, making the community a vehicle for freedom. What differentiates Islam from other Western ideologies lies in the fact that in Islam, the individual (male, female and insane are equal as human beings knowledgeable of God) is the end, while the Qur'an and the religion of Islam are the means to that end. Whereas in other ideologies the community is considered as more important and as the end, and the individual a means to that end. Islam created an equilibrium derived from the concept of monotheism that divided Islamic Shari'a into two levels, the community level which is the law of social transactions and the level of the individual which is the law of worship practices. The former level is also referred to as *Mu'amalat* which regulates the relationship between individuals in the community whereas the latter level is referred to as *'Ibadat* and which regulates the relationship between individuals and God. According to Taha, *'Ibadat* has no value if it is not reflected in the relationship of the individual with the community and he cites a Hadith "religion is how you deal with others" as being the Prophet's description of religion. Taha's Sufism is reflected in his view that the individual should develop qualities resembling God's qualities in order to return to him as a human being<sup>16</sup>.

Within the duality of Taha's thought one can note that he divided the Shari'a into two levels, the theoretical and the practical. As he divided freedom into two levels, that of the individual and that of the community. According to him, the latter is the base of the pyramid while the former is its peak, the latter is the tree while the former is the fruit. In order to reach the peak, a transitional stage is required. Taha sees no conflict between the individual and the community in Islam for it achieved the needed balance by neither sacrificing the individual for the sake of the community nor sacrificing the community for the sake of the individual. In other words, it neither sacrificed the end for the sake of the means, nor sacrificed the most important means to achieve the end or individuality.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. pp. 62-64

### *Absolute individual freedom*

Within the same framework of criticizing Western philosophies and showing that Islam is the answer, Ustaz Taha illustrates the philosophers' views that individual freedom must be limited or it will lead to anarchy. According to him, Islam on the contrary regards freedom as absolute in essence and its limitation is a transitional necessary stage related to the development of the individual to reach infinite absolute individual freedom. He shows that the concept of 'absolute' is proper to Islam and is its fundamental quality presupposing that the individual is capable of limitless development. That development, like everything else in Taha's theories, proceeds in two levels with a transitional stage. The individual develops from the imperfect to the perfect and from the limited to the absolute. It is the individual's duty in Islam to achieve total freedom that becomes limited when the individual is unable to achieve it. This achievement lies in the Shari'a laws that reconcile the needs of the individual for absolute freedom with the needs of the community for total social justice without sacrificing any of them. According to Taha, what prevents the individual from achieving absolute freedom is ignorance. Human beings adore their ignorance and hate any change that might occur unless it falls within their own accepted boundaries and is consistent with their whim. It is in that perspective that Taha explains the two messages of Islam that will be further explained in this chapter. In order to achieve the balance between the need for absolute individual freedom and total social justice, individual freedom must be at first limited until the individual develops and becomes ready for the absolute.

According to Taha, selfishness is the nature of human beings and it is also their perfection. There are two levels of selfishness, the lower ignorant selfishness and the higher intelligent selfishness. The former is reflected in the individual's needs to achieve his interests which are inconsistent with the interests of the community; this type of freedom ought to be limited and curtailed for the benefit of society by laws that are consistent with the constitution. Whereas the higher intelligent selfishness is one whereby the individual sees his interests as being consistent with the interests of others. It is in this type of selfishness that lies the absolute individual freedom whereby its consequences are

positive to all people. Islam supports this type of selfishness and absolute freedom and is astray from the ignorant selfishness and limited freedom. Thus the first level of freedom is necessary and considered as a preparatory stage for the achievement of the second level of freedom. Absolute individual freedom must be earned through discretion in the exercise of the freedom of the conscience, freedom of speech and freedom of action<sup>17</sup>.

### *Shari'a in the service of absolute individual freedom*

As stated above, in order to reach absolute individual freedom, a transitional stage is required with specific means needed to achieve the desired end. In Islam, according to Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, limitation on freedom is the stage in which the individual tries to satisfy his interest at the expense of those of the community until he develops and reaches the stage whereby the fulfillment of his interests are consistent with those of society. Therefore, prohibition comes with transgression. The cruder and less sensitive the people, the harsher will the law be and the more limited and constrained will the individual's freedom be and vice versa. According to Taha, the individual starts by controlling his body and tongue then starts to quiet his mind and master his thoughts therefore reaching a purified state.

When harmony between the conscience and the conduct is achieved, the purity of conscience is reflected in the righteousness of behavior. Therefore the purer the conscience, the more righteous the behavior, the lesser the prohibitions and the greater the permissions<sup>18</sup>. As the individual attains total purity of conscious and complete righteousness of behavior, the material prohibitions would disappear. Taha supports this view by citing a verse from the Qur'an (5:93) "Believers who do good deeds commit no offense whatever they eat provided they are pious and believe and do good deeds, become more pious and believe further, and again become more pious, and perfect their conduct. God loves the perfectionists". Shari'a with its prohibitions and retributions is conceived to attain the stage of absolute individual freedom. Mahmoud Mohamed Taha shows the importance of retribution. He believes that if a person commits an evil

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. pp. 64-68

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. pp. 72

behavior without noticing the pain he inflicted he shall be punished by the same act he has committed. This punishment will therefore preserve the interests of the community, the aggressor will serve as an example for others and his sensitivity will be deepened thus he will become more humane and abstain from hurting people. Also this punishment will serve the aggressor to regain the control of his mind that he abandoned in a moment of weakness.

Thus, as Taha concludes, there are two types of laws, the law of reciprocity and the law of retribution, both of which are very important. The former consists of two levels that differ only in degree and not in essence, the level of truth and the level of law. The latter consists of reinforcing the power of sensitivity on the individual to experience what he inflicted to others.

Like Shari'a law that is a transitional stage to elevate the individual from the law of the community to the law of the individual, Islam also according to Taha, is in its essence a science and not a religion with its dogma as a transitional stage to its scientific level<sup>19</sup>.

### ***The individual and the universe in Islam***

Throughout history, human beings were trying to discover their relationship with the universe. As their scientific knowledge was limited, they tended to believe in religions for they provided answers to their scientifically unanswered questions. With time and as scientific knowledge developed, religious beliefs diminished. According to Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, even though science and religion are two separate concepts, nevertheless they are linked. In a world that is material in manifestations and spiritual in essence, science explains the manifestation of things and not their essence, thus the more one knows about science the more will he believe in a supernatural force or world. Religion will therefore become more important in a universal and scientific approach to life, it shall approach the mind and convince it of the utility of adopting it in every day life for

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. pp. 72-76

the sake of this life and the next one<sup>20</sup>. While reformist thinkers value the capacity of the mind, fundamentalists like Sayid Qutb are opposed to this idea. Qutb believes that the mind is incapable of finding existentialist answers and that individuals need a sixth sense to receive God's intuition and therefore believe.

It is worth noting that one of the main differences between reformists and fundamentalists lies in the importance they give to the mind. While reformists think that the mind is a tool for knowledge thus for believing and is the best thing in humans, fundamentalists think that individuals do not need the mind and knowledge to believe but need the senses to reach the truth.

### *The Qur'an, Determinism and Free Will*

According to Taha, the will is an intermediate attribute that comes beneath knowledge and above ability. Since human beings are modeled after God who created the universe through knowledge, will and ability, individuals also act accordingly. Human beings are endowed with two levels of will, the will to live and the will to be free. These two forces within human beings came into conflict with the establishment of primitive human society. According to Taha, these forces started with the story of Adam and Eve and their descent to earth when they disobeyed God. Adam was divided between the will to be free and the will to live, the former being the good coming from above and referring to the spirit and to the angels while the latter being the evil coming from below and referring to the self and to the devils. The will to live seeks pleasure by all means and avoids pain by all means. Adam was forgiven when he became a rational human being thus being permitted to err. He used his freedom by vacillating between right and wrong and rewarded or punished accordingly<sup>21</sup> until he learned how to use it.

The will to live is an ancient animal instinct with the preoccupation of pursuing pleasure while the will to be free is the more refined and subtle side of the will to live for even though it is directed to the pursuit of pleasure, it sought to do so without displeasing the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. pp. 77-80

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. pp. 99-103



community or god or the customs. Mahmoud Mohamed Taha associates the will to live to the self, to the male and to memory while the will to be free is associated to the spirit, the female and imagination. The offspring of these two is the mind who had an unhappy childhood with his two parents quarrelling, a lustful rebellious mother (will to be free) and a weak cowardly father (will to live). "The mind had an unhappy childhood because it was born in a divided home, with two quarrelsome parents – a lustful rebellious mother and a weak and cowardly father who tended to be harsh and violent to the extent of being unnecessarily repressive. In fact, the mind had a delinquent, truant, and bitter childhood, reflecting the characteristics of its parents and the effects of the home in which it was born. Hence, the mind, too, became divided and labored under inner conflict. As the saying goes: 'A divided home shall not stand'"<sup>22</sup>.

Taha sees the mind as being the guide of the heart and the pioneer in the pursuit of knowledge. The relationship between the mind and the heart is between the mind and the five senses and as the mind develops and sharpens it becomes a sixth sense that also develops to become a seventh sense. Thus, Taha thinks that the mind's place is behind the heart and not before it<sup>23</sup>.

According to Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, human beings should seek perfection that can be achieved through the process of liberating themselves from fear. Fear which is embedded in human beings and is the cause for all moral deviations and behavioral distortions comes into two types according to Taha.

The first type of fear is one that is acquired since primitive life and that is still latent waiting its liberation. The second type of fear is one that is acquired during the individual's lifetime.

Taha believes that in order for human beings to achieve absolute individual freedom they should liberate themselves from fear therefore from the causes of fear or of ignorance. It is by knowledge of the environment the individual lives in that he can overcome the cause of fear, therefore create a full picture of his relationship with society and the universe<sup>24</sup>. The essence of this relationship (between the individual and the universe) lies in the question of determinism and free will. If the individual is manipulated to

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 83

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. pp. 92-95

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. pp. 84

predetermined destiny he is said to be *musayar* while if he enjoys genuine choice he is said to be *mukhayar*. According to Sufi and to the rationalists' explanation, if the individual is *musayar*, how will God punish him for the wrong acts he does or it would not be fair. Taha thinks that this explanation is neither complete nor sufficient and does not find the Qur'an to be contradictory on this matter as Orientalists studied but he saw that the Qur'an has two meanings: the apparent meaning (*zahir*) and the hidden meaning (*batin*). The former is based on the appearance of things and on signs of the material world while the latter is based on truths beyond appearances and on signs within the human self. The former is a bridge to cross to the inside while the latter is the inside. It is through the mind that one can reach the ultimate truth for the senses can be misleading. According to Taha, the Qur'an is a book of dogma (faith) and a book of Shari'a (law) the two combined create the book of truth (*haqiqah*). Taha believes that human beings though they think they have free and have an independent will, they are actually guided by God and he supports his belief by quoting verses from the Qur'an. According to him, God does not manipulate people to sin and then punish them, he guides them to be and do right. God intervenes in people's lives in a subtle way to put them on the straight path that they think they are in control. Taha believes that if people obey God intelligently they will be saved.

When Mahmoud Mohamed Taha tackles this subject within the framework of belief and disbelief he tries to explain it by using his dual pyramidal concept of will and approval. The will being the base of the pyramid while the approval being the peak and the whole pyramid as the creational decree. According to him, the difference between belief and disbelief is in degree and not in essence. God may will for someone disbelief but does not approve of it. The will is a stage of duality accommodating belief and unbelief while approval is a stage of singularity or unity accommodating belief only.

On the other hand, the legislative decree which comes in a pyramidal form has two levels. The general law of the community being the base of the pyramid, while the individual law being the peak of the pyramid. The peak is the realm of knowledge, the essence, the unity and individuality. On the other hand, the base of the pyramid is the

general law of the community which is the physical world, the appearance, plurality and community<sup>25</sup>.

Determinism viewed by Taha is freedom based on 'intelligent' free action. The one who uses his freedom properly will have more freedom and the one who uses it improperly will bear the consequences. The concept of Adam's forgiveness mentioned above reflects according to Taha the idea of determinism therefore is bound to repeat itself given unchanged factors. "This forgiveness of Adam at its various levels is actually determinism. People are subjected to determinism from the level of the elements to the level of life, and from the level of primitive life to the level of advanced, refined and complex life, and then from this level to the level of collective freedom with the emergence of the mind; and [finally] from the level of collective freedom to the level of absolute individual freedom. Determinism proceeds to this last level indefinitely, because it is proceeding to God in infinity<sup>26</sup>". The proper exercise of free will consists of choosing God with certainty in thought, speech and action therefore being granted more free will. Taha sees the emergence of the Shari'a as the consequence of the emergence of the mind which is itself the result of the level of collective freedom. As the mind develops and becomes more straightened, the Shari'a becomes more precise and refined.

### ***Predestination and Fate***

According to Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, every creature has two precedents: predestination and fate. Similarly to the will and the approval discussed above where the will consists of a duality (belief and unbelief) and consent consists of unity (only belief) predestination and fate follow the same logic. The latter being either good or evil and knowledge or ignorance (duality) while the former is absolute good for all creatures (unity). For an individual to be free, his conscious and unconscious should be united and his fears should be overcome. This unity is attained by understanding the dissensions that exist between the individual and the community and between the individual and the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. pp. 93

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 104

universe. As for the abolishment of fear which is the source of all defects in human behavior, Islam is capable of liberating human beings from their fear.

Islam according to Taha enjoys superiority over other ideologies in understanding and resolving these dissensions.

## **Mohamed Shahrour and Mahmoud Mohamed Taha: A Comparison**

Mohamed Shahrour was born in Damascus in 1938. He graduated with a BS in civil engineering from the former USSR and obtained his PhD in soil mechanics from Dublin. Shahrour started his career as a professor at the University of Damascus (1972-present) before going into private practice (1973-present) owning an engineering consulting bureau in Damascus. Shahrour is famous for his best selling book *The Book and the Qur'an: a Contemporary Reading* published in 1990.

According to him, Islam is to believe in God and in the Day of Judgment. He draws a distinction between what he calls the Qur'an and the Book. This distinction emanates from a distinction he draws between the function of the Prophet Mohamad as a messenger (legal) and his function as a prophet (religious). As a prophet, Mohamad received a corpus of information having to do with prophecy and religion. As a messenger, he received a body of legal instructions.

The scriptures are revelations and are divided into two: a prophecy and a message. Mohamed Shahrour believes that the prophet was a messenger when he dealt with the daily life of the people from a legal aspect and was a prophet when he preached values. In Taha's term, Mohammad was a prophet in Mecca and a messenger in Medina.

According to Shahrour, the prophecy is the history of all prophets while the message is divided into three parts. First is the ethics (the Ten Commandments) which are human and are the tenant of Islam. Second is the legislation which is subject to accumulation and development, each prophet adding new things according to the level of development of society. Third is the rituals and which are subject to variation, for example, fasting praying are common to Christianity, Islam and Judaism but each in a different manner.

Rituals are what differentiate between religions and show the commitment to a prophet. While ethics are in the realm of Islam, rituals are in the realm of Iman. According to Shahrour, all those who believe in God and in the Day of Judgment are Muslims. Therefore followers of Moses are Muslimoun Jews, the followers of Jesus Christ are Muslimoun Christians and the followers of Mohamed are Muslimoun M'uminun. Thus one can be a Muslim without believing in the Prophet Mohamad. Therefore Islam is ethics or the Ten Commandments along with the belief in one God and in resurrection.

Shahrour is opposed to Taha when it comes to the differentiation between Muslimin and Mu'minin and between Islam and Iman. While Taha believes that people are Mu'minin and will become Muslimin when they apply the Second Message of Islam, Shahrour believes that people are Muslimin and only the followers of the Prophet Mohamad are Mu'minin. While Taha believes that the prophet was the only Muslim in a nation of Mu'minin Shahrour believes that the prophet was a Mu'min.

Taha believes that people ought to imitate the Prophet Mohamad for he was the only Muslim. On the other hand, everything that has to do with the life of the prophet is in the realm of stories and should not by any way be applied today. Thus, the government and the state established by the prophet in the seventh century Bedouin Jahiliya is dead while his message is still alive. Therefore it is not appropriate to revive the prophet's state in the twentieth century.

Unlike Taha who divided the Qur'an into two messages, Shahrour believes in the Qur'an from the first page to its last page. Nevertheless, his interpretation of the Qur'an is reformist and pragmatic and lies mainly in his theory of limits which is a Divine Decree which sets a lower and an upper limit for all human actions. The lower limit represents the minimum required by the law in a particular case and the upper limit representing the maximum. Anything above the maximum and below the minimum is not Islamic but anything between the limits is Islamic. According to Shahrour, it is the role of parliament to legislate laws appropriate to the needs of society and these laws are in a permanent change as long as they fall between the upper and the lower limits.

Shahrour criticizes Islamic jurists' interpretation of the Qur'an as being authoritative and subject to the rulers' interests. He rejects the traditional sources of the law and considers them as oppressive and obsolete. He also believes that the interpretation of the Qur'an must be done in a way that reflects the conditions of the period we live in. He also adds on that Muslims should not be bounded to the traditional explanation of the Qur'an. Furthermore, Shahrour like Taha thinks that modern Muslims are more capable of understanding the revelation than their predecessors for they are far more 'cultured'.

Both Taha and Shahrour agree that Islam encompasses all religions in the sense that Islam is according to them ethics and non-mutable values. What Taha calls the First Message of Islam or the dogmatic Islam is mutable, the same applies for Shahrour with

the 'stories' of the Prophet Mohamad and the verses that describe his deeds and the state he organized.

Shahrour, Taha and Qutb believe that the *Mu'amalat* (relationship of the individuals with society) are subject to change according to the needs of society while the *Ibadat* are not for they are fixed values relating to the relationship of the individual with God.

## Sayid Qutb and Mahmoud Mohamed Taha: A Comparison

While Taha is against the implementation of the Shari'a, Sayid Qutb on the contrary, considers the application of the Shari'a as the first principle that should be implemented. While Taha called for social equality, Qutb called for social justice and while Taha calls for peace, Qutb calls for a revolution. These three principles (Shari'a, social justice and revolution) are the tenants of Qutb's political thought. According to Qutb, legislation is a divine matter that should not be done by individuals or governments for they will lack objectivity and are under the influence of their interests thus affecting the laws they legislate. Thus the Shari'a is perfect because it is God's law specifying the rights and duties of individuals and governments. The duty of the government is according to Qutb, to spread values and serve the Shari'a first before serving the community. Thus, even though Qutb believes that the government should be chosen according to the *shura*, he nevertheless believes that individuals should obey the rulers as long as they are serving the Shari'a and if they are not properly serving and applying the Shari'a, individuals have the right not only to disobey but to undertake a revolution. The government's legitimacy is based on its obedience to the Shari'a. In his book *Social Justice in Islam*, Qutb states that the legitimate authority of the ruler is based on his being chosen or elected by the people and on his serving the Shari'a<sup>27</sup>. Qutb thinks that any type of government is plausible as long as it applies the Shari'a but again, that type of government is surely non-democratic if it is based on the Shari'a and if the individuals are bound to obey the rulers. Qutb calls for the establishment of an Islamic state and considers societies that call themselves Islamic as being in a stage of ignorance or Jahiliya if they do not apply the Shari'a.

Qutb, like Taha, sees that there are two main ideologies competing with Islam and which are communism and capitalism which differ in degree and not in essence among themselves. Qutb sees both as materialist and unfair. In capitalism, individuals are controlling society and in communism the government is controlling the individuals. On

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<sup>27</sup> Al Mouselli, Ahmad Salaheddine, *Al Fikr Al Islami al Mou'aser : Dirasat wa Shakhsiat Sayid Qutb* (Beirut : Dar Khodr, 1990) pp. 105-124



the other hand, Islam is spiritualism and advocates social justice by being neither capitalist nor communist and is therefore the alternative ideology. Nevertheless, Qutb would oppose Taha's two wings of society and which are socialism and democracy.

There are two ways to accomplish social justice, by establishing first an absolute unity between the individual and society and second an absolute unity between individuals and society; these are the basic Islamic principles according to Qutb. The ruler should first obey the Shari'a and second provide social, political and economic equality<sup>28</sup>. Taha also believes in social, political and economical equality but the tools and the meaning of these concepts used by Qutb and Taha are different. While for Taha the individual is the end and the role of the community is to serve the individual, for Qutb the Umma is the end and society is more important and purer than the individual. While Taha believes that the actual Shari'a discriminates against non-Muslims and women and should therefore not be implemented, Qutb on the contrary, sees it as the most important principle for a government to be legitimate. Thus in order to create an Islamic society based on Islamic values such as Shari'a and Islamic justice, Qutb requires a revolution. The Muslims' duty is to overthrow the non Islamic and non-legitimate governments by a revolution, the only means to reach social justice. By revolution, the individuals will become the slaves of God and not the slaves of other individuals or of material things. For revolution's aim is to destroy the old society and build a better society on new grounds. Qutb's revolution should start with education and it should be a strong, non-violent and non-gradual revolution. The Islamic government is established when it applies the Shari'a whether the people are Muslims in majority or in minority. All territories that do not apply the Shari'a are Dar al Harb and *jihad* must be conducted<sup>29</sup>.

While Islam is for Taha a submission to God and peace, for Shahrour it is the belief in one God and in the Day of Judgment, for Qutb it is a call for a revolution.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. pp. 124-143

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. pp. 143-151

## Chapter Three: The Mohamedian Messiah

### **The Time and Reasons for the Coming of the Final Messiah**

Mahmoud Mohamed Taha and the Republicans expressed their views on the return of Christ in a pamphlet they issued in 1981. Ustaz Taha was preoccupied with the Cold War and the consequences of the deadly Second World War. This period was that of increasing technological advancements be them on the armament level or communication and transportation level. The world was becoming more and more unified geographically and was in need of a spiritual or emotional unification.

Also, the advent of the atomic bomb and its utilization in Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the Second World War reflected the danger of the extinction of mankind.

In their pamphlet, *The Return of Christ*, the Republican Brothers prophesized the coming of the Final Messiah. According to them, their prophecy is neither a fantasy nor a dream resulting from the failure to face realities. They also negate that it is a religious or philosophical prophecy. They actually believe that the coming of the Final Messiah is a necessity dictated by the present situation as a natural result of historical development and that his coming is imperatively needed.

The Republican Brothers state that the United Nations, in the field of international relations, is an excellent example of unifying the nations under a single international government and in accordance to the rule of law, even with the limitations it faces and the dependence it has on the superpowers. The United Nations Organization is therefore the expression of the human needs for unification, whether they are aware of that need or not.

The problem facing the world is the absence of peace. The causes of this problem are due to the failure of available ideologies and of the international regimes to reconcile between the individual needs for absolute freedom with the community's need for total social justice. Moreover, the lack of peace on the international arena is the external

manifestation of the lack of peace within the individual human beings. To achieve external peace, internal peace is required. According to the Republicans, the individual inner conflict is due to the inability of present ideologies to fulfill his needs and reduce his anxieties by answering the mystery of the unknown fate of existence<sup>30</sup>.

### **Description of the Final Messiah**

In this context, religion faces an unprecedented challenge. It must assimilate all these changes and provide answers for the individual and society in this new environment or it will pave the way for secularism and atheism.

Thus, humanity needs all elements of change, it needs a savior. Mahmoud Mohamed Taha describes the savior as a man who:

- Can intellectually unify nations under a single ideology
- Can unify all of humanity into a single international government and therefore install peace on earth
- Presents himself as the example of human perfection sought by human evolution
- Is able to reconcile himself with his environment
- Speaks the language of the age, that of Peace
- Holds the key of the scientific solution to all international problems
- Can establish the New Civilization, that is uniting the spiritual values with the material phenomenon
- Demonstrates by his intellectual and emotional perfection the utility of religious techniques of worship on the one hand, and the ability of religion to assimilate the evolution of life on the second hand.
- Unifies religions by unifying humans under a single religion and a single ideology
- Implements the laws of total social justice provided in the Second Message of Islam.

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<sup>30</sup> The Republican Brothers, *The Return of Christ*, 1981 pp.2-3

This man is the perfect man, the savior, the Messiah<sup>31</sup> and who is urgently needed in the Middle East to solve the conflict that threatens the peace of the whole world. According to Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, the main reason for conflict and mainly in Jerusalem is between the three monotheistic religions and in the land where these three religions grew. What is needed to solve that problem is a higher level of religion that unifies them all. By scientifically understanding the three religions, the Republican Brothers based their conception of the unification.

### **Prophesizing the Coming of the Final Messiah in Judaism, Christianity and Islam**

First, Moses was sent on earth to a society that was primitive and close to the law of the jungle. Therefore the message of the Old Testament was closer to their needs and more acceptable to their primitive human nature as “a life for a life and an eye for an eye”. Thus, the law of the Torah came at one extreme, that of excessive materialism<sup>32</sup>.

Then, came Jesus Christ with a message that went to the other extreme, that of excessive spiritualism “You have heard that it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” in response to the previous revelation of the Torah. Jesus extreme spiritualism was also beyond the capabilities of the society of that time but tried to elevate the people as much as possible from the previous excessive materialism.

Then came Islam with the Prophet Mohamad, in the middle between the two extremes, combining features from both Judaism and Christianity; as stated in the Qur’an, “Penalty for a wrong is an equal wrong but he who forgives and reforms shall be rewarded by Allah; He does not love the unfair ones” (sura 42,verse 40).

The first part of the verse “penalty for a wrong is an equal wrong” corresponds to the phrase in the Old Testament “an eye for an eye...” whereas the second part of the verse corresponds to Jesus Christ’s saying “[...] if any one strike you on the right cheek, turn to

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<sup>31</sup> *ibid.* pp.3-4

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.* p. 5

him the other one also” or also “love you enemies and pray for those who persecute you and drive you out of your homes”.

Thus, Islam is in the middle, gradually developing the human self from its primitive nature by establishing the rule of justice to its better and mature nature by educating the individual through worship practices. After being well trained to the daily practices, the individual will be able to act in accordance with ultimate forgiveness and reforms<sup>33</sup>.

Therefore Islam rises above the primitive level at which Judaism came to humanity, and provides the techniques that will make the moral commandments of Jesus Christ practically applicable. That is, according to the Republican Brothers, the basis for unifying the three monotheistic religions and it is for that reason that Islam came into two messages.

The First Message of Islam corresponds to Judaism while the Second Message of Islam corresponds to Christianity. The former is based on seventh century laws designed for immediate popular implementation while the latter is based on the personal example of the Prophet Mohamad and on the principles of freedom, as opposed to Shari'a. The former is based on the Medina texts and is detailed in the Qur'an and the Hadith while the latter on the Mecca texts and is expressed in general terms with no details<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> *ibid.* p.6

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.* pp. 6-7

## **Duties of the Final Messiah**

### ***Unification of all Monotheistic Religions***

The Final Messiah shall now come to apply and detail the Second Message of Islam for which the ground was prepared in Judaism, Christianity and the First Message. His coming depends first upon the revival of the Meccan texts that were repealed in the seventh century, and second upon the repeal of those Medina texts that were found appropriate and applicable at that time.

Mahmoud Mohamed Taha recommends the replacement of the Shari'a of the First Message by a Shari'a based on the Second Message. By doing so, Islam would be elevated from its faith stage to its scientific stage where people will be distinguished according to their intellect and moral values and not according to their faith or sex. No one will be asked about his religion but about the clarity of his thought and perfection of their acts. "This is the Religion where all religions meet<sup>35</sup>".

Therefore, by applying the Shari'a of the Second Message of Islam, along the lines with the humanist Constitution, all forms of discrimination will cease.

Worthy of note is that Mahmoud Mohamed Taha believes that the Constitution shall be based on the Qur'an but shall not be described as Islamic.

What the Republican Brothers mean by 'unification of religions' is the Second Message of Islam is the culmination of all religions from the faith stage to the scientific stage.

The three monotheistic religions prophesized the coming of the Final Messiah in almost the same way; according to Taha, this unity in waiting demonstrates that they will be united in the future.

According to the Old Testament, the Final Messiah shall come to unify all religions; therefore the belief in the first and second Messiah (Jesus Christ and Mohamad) is necessary to complete this trinity. Thus, the Kingdom of Heaven on earth will be achieved with the Final Messiah as the expected King.

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid.* p. 7

In the New Testament, there are many prophecies on the coming of the Final Messiah whereby he is a man and his perfection lies in his humanity. “[...] men fainting for fear and for expectations of the things that are coming on the world, for the power of the heavens shall be shaken. And then shall they see the son of man coming in a cloud with the powers and great glory” (Luke 21, verse 21).

In the Koran, like in the New Testament, the coming of the Final Messiah is also in a cloud “Are they not only expecting when Allah comes to them in shadows of clouds [...]”. According to Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, the Final Messiah comes with the Second Message of Islam with its laws and not with the First Message. The Final Messiah shall fill the earth with fairness which presupposes the achievement of total social justice i.e. socialism, democracy and social equality as stated by the Prophet Mohamad in a Hadith: “I swear by him who holds my soul that the son of Miriam is about to descend upon you as a fair ruler, and shall break the cross, kill the pig, abolish the jiziya, and money shall be in such abundance that no one will accept it, and a single act of worship shall be better than all of his life, and what it can offer” and “[...] he shall fill the earth with peace and justice”.

Mahmoud Mohamed Taha seems to ignore the fact that the Qur’an prophesized the coming of another Jesus presupposed in his statement of “the son of Miriam” and insists that the Final Messiah is another Mohamad or a Mohammedan Messiah, a man who will implement the Second Message of Islam.

Taha believes that since the Final Messiah is to implement what is described in the above mentioned quote- total social equality- which is the main tenant of the Second Message, he is therefore a Mohammedan Messiah. “Mohamad is coming back in the sense that humanity shall live up to his own personal example, which is the Second Message of Islam, the meeting point of all religions<sup>36</sup>”.

Nevertheless, to understand Mahmoud Mohamed Taha’s theory about the Mohammedan Messiah, one ought to analyze it in the context of his thought and not take it in its literal sense. What is meant in the Second Message of Islam is not the religion of Islam but the scientific religion, the result of all religions united. It is the set of high morals and values and deeds and not faith. Also, what is meant by the Mohammedan Messiah that is the

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<sup>36</sup> *ibid.* p. 11

Muslim Messiah, is the meaning Mahmoud Mohamed Taha gave to the word 'Muslim', who is a person with high moral values, acts according to them and loves God, regardless of the faith of Islam.

According to the Republican Brothers, in a world dominated by material sciences, human beings need a spiritual science, which is the scientific stage of Islam. According to the Qur'an, individuals are born with the common true essence, that of a wholesome heart and a clear mind, before learning from their parents to convert to Judaism, Christianity or Islam. As they grow up and live in society, their hearts become filled with fear and anxiety and their minds lose their clarity. It is this state of internal lack of peace that is the reason for the lack of peace on the international scene.

The role of Islam as the religion of the essence of man is to restore the wholesomeness of the heart and the clarity of the mind to all the people. The objective is to reconcile the individual with his environment which is only achievable when the individual is in peace with himself.

Taha describes the scientific level of Islam as being the science of psychology, in the sense of liberating the human self from its fears and ignorance which have distorted its essence. He also describes the practices of worship, especially the way conducted by the Prophet Mohamad, from the stage of ablation to the daily five prayers as creating a certain routine and unifying the conscious with the unconscious in each individual, therefore creating peace within the person and between the person and his environment<sup>37</sup>. Taha wonders why individuals do not cease this opportunity of worship practices as a psychological tool to free themselves.

In this sense, Islam is the essence of the human being, regardless of distinction based on faith, sex, race, color, language or natural origins. Thus, it becomes the only ideology capable of uniting all religions and philosophies and giving answers to both the individual and the social problems of humanity.

Taha's dialectic applies to all his analysis when tackling different issues that share a common ground, that of duality and cyclicity whereby the end of each cycle is the

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<sup>37</sup> Taha, Mahmoud Mohamed, *The Second Message of Islam* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987) p. 120



beginning of a higher cycle. Here, it is worth noting that this concept of cycles shifting upwards till reaching the ultimate absolute individual freedom reflects Taha's Sufism.

The same applies for his theory on the coming of the Final Messiah. The Prophet Mohamad applied the Second Message of Islam to himself and repealed it in Medina to install the First Message, which is a transitional stage given the primitive level of society of that time, that was incapable of accepting it. Taha uses the word Ahmad and Mohamad interchangeably. Ahmad is one of the terms Sufis use for the Prophet Mohamad to indicate his superior spiritual achievements.

In this context, the Prophet Mohamad first came with his Ahmadia prophecy and Ahmadia message to the people in Mecca. As his message was not accepted, he migrated to Medina, repealed the Ahmadia message and implemented the Mohammedan message<sup>38</sup>.

### ***The Ahmadia Prophecy and Message***

He therefore became the Prophet of Ahmadia prophecy (which he implemented on himself, and which is the scientific level of Islam) with a Mohammedan message, preaching Islam as a faith and implemented by the nation at large.

The Final Messiah shall come with the Ahmadia Prophecy and the Ahmadia Message; he shall preach Islam at its scientific level the same way the Prophet preached in Mecca. But this time it shall be accepted and implemented because society has developed and reached the required level of maturity.

Taha supports his theory by quoting sura 61, verse 6 of the Qur'an in which Jesus Christ is said to have prophesized the coming of the Mohammedan Messiah "Oh sons of Israel, I am the messenger of Allah to you, confirming the Torah, which precede me, and prophesying the coming of a Messenger following me called Ahmed.[...]"

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<sup>38</sup> The Republican Brothers, *The Return of Christ*, 1981 p.13

The Republican Brothers conclude that the perfect man or Superman, the Final Messiah is bound to come because of his imperative necessity. They end their pamphlet by informing the Muslims about their duty to accept and tolerate the scientific stage of Islam for it is the answer to humankind's problems and the promise of their salvation. By quoting Sura 43, verse 38 of the Qur'an, "If you fail, you will be replaced by another people who shall not be like you", one can easily notice the worry Taha had concerning the extinction of humanity.

## Chapter Four: Women in Mahmoud Mohamed Taha's Work

This chapter focuses on the status of women as viewed by Mahmoud Mohamed Taha and the Republican Brothers by first examining its present condition under the First Message of Islam and what it ought to be according to the Second Message. This chapter will also shed light on Taha's views on the social and legal aspects of marriage that he explicitly developed in his book *Khotwah nahwa al-Zawaj fi al-Islam* published in 1971.

Since it was crucial for Mahmoud Mohamed Taha to practice what he preached, in a highly patriarchal society, he established a community of men and women who applied his vision of Islam or the Second Message of Islam.

The community succeeded in applying the principles of equality between men and women without discrimination. Women participated fully in the group's activities and were often leaders of activist groups on university campuses, public parks and street corners, preaching the ideas of Taha. The group also succeeded in applying their concept of marriage on the social and legal aspect<sup>39</sup>.

Taha believes that there is a misconception about the understanding of equality between men and women. People think that equality is based on equal perseverance and on women's financial independence and this is very wrong. Capitalism and Marxism share the same materialistic views on male female equality. Taha believes that financial independence failed to be achieved by materialistic Marxism and could only be achieved through social organization. These two ideologies measure equality in terms of productivity mainly in the industrial and agricultural sectors, disregarding women's work at home and their raising children, which is, according to Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, more important.

Women are equal to men in the sense of their individual human value and citizenship and the only solution for women to be equal to men and restore their dignity is through

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<sup>39</sup> <http://www.alfikra.org/biography/english.htm>

democracy and socialism<sup>40</sup>. True socialism, according to Taha, will introduce new values in assessing equality whereby the man will be the master of the machine instead of its slave and women will be the productive element in society by their raising children, thus deserving to regain their dignity and respect from society<sup>41</sup>.

Woman's condition under Islam is strange according to Taha. She is neither a slave nor free but rather a mixture of the two. She is not a slave in the pure sense of slavery as being bought at a certain price but she is owned; she is not free for not matter how old she is, she is under the custody of the male members of her family but at the same time she is loved. With these contradictory feelings, the Hijab was imposed on women<sup>42</sup>. The imposition of the Hijab is, according to Taha, the reflection of men's mistrust, jealousy and need or love for authority over the weak which is opposed to Islam.

Islam was not able to get rid of all pre-Islamic customs and elevate the status of women to the level it intended because legislation is a gradual process that follows the development of society. Shari'a was appropriate for that time given the circumstances for it was a transitional stage; it sacrificed total justice for the sake of the needs of the community and if Islam came at a different time, it would have called for absolute total justice.

Taha oppose the idea of keeping women at home for the sake of keeping them as prisoners at home with the *Hijab*. He favors women working outside their homes on condition that they manage not to sacrifice their maternal obligations. He also believes that for a woman to be at home, she must be the master of her home, and be mentally, emotionally and physically educated for it is a big responsibility to assume. In addition, women must be equal to men before the law and their rights of dignity and freedom should be respected<sup>43</sup>.

According to Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, women's situation, like everything else, greatly differs between the First Message of Islam and the Second Message due to the prevailing values and primitive way of life of the seventh century society of the Arabian Peninsula. Since that society could not understand the Second Message of Islam revealed and

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<sup>40</sup> Taha, Mahmoud Mohamed, *Tatweer Shariat al-Ahwal Al-Shakhssiah* 1973 pp.8-9

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.* pp.1-4

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.* pp.7-8

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.* pp.4-7

preached by the Prophet Mohamad in Mecca, the First Message repealed it in Medina and took its place momentarily until people become educated and ready for the Second Message.

### **Women's Situation under the First Message of Islam**

Under the First Message of Islam which was highly influenced by the pre-Islamic customs, inequality between men and women prevailed, polygamy was allowed, the veil was imposed on women and segregation of men from women was practiced. Women in another sense were oppressed. Nevertheless, Taha believes that these concepts of female oppression are not the original precepts in Islam but are considered as a first transitional stage.

Concerning inequality, Taha states that Islam was revealed at a time when people went as far as to bury girls alive in fear of disgrace if they were taken as spoils of war or to avoid the burden of feeding them in times of draught or famine. Since neither women nor society were ready for the ultimate good Islam had for women, the First Message was a necessary transitional period needed for people to develop. Hence, the law gave women half of what men had in inheritance and testimony and made women submitted to men as fathers, brothers and husbands. Therefore, the early Islamic legislation concerning women was superior to the previous state but way below to Islam's ultimate objective<sup>44</sup>.

Concerning polygamy which is also present in the First Message of Islam though it should not be in the Second Message was installed by the Shari'a according to Taha, due to the society of that time.

On the social level, women were taken in one of three ways: either as spoils of war, or by kidnapping or by being purchased. They were granted no dignity or respect and marital relationships were not based on human kindness. Men used to marry up to ten or twenty women for the sake of bearing the children and working for him. What Islam did in the

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<sup>44</sup> Taha, Mahmoud Mohamed, *The Second Message of Islam* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987) pp. 139-140

First Message was to limit the number to four instead of the unlimited number of wives a man could have.

On the demographical level, the number of women was superior to the number of men who perished in wars. Therefore, for women not to be left unprotected, Islam did not impose monogamy but limited polygamy<sup>45</sup>, “Marry of women as many as may be agreeable to you, two or three or four; and if you fear you will not be able to do justice [among your wives] then [marry only] one” (Qur’an 4:3)

As for the veil, it is, according to Taha, a rational penalty for the abuse of freedom of *al-sufur* which is a modest decent dress. In order to attain inner chastity, a transitional stage is required where chastity is encouraged through the veil, hence the rule of imposing it. As men and women become educated and disciplined, the veil shall be abolished giving ground to *al-sufur* and inner chastity<sup>46</sup>. The same applies for the segregation of men from women.

### **Male-Female Equality under the Second Message of Islam**

According to Taha’s Second Message, Islam preached complete equality between men and women as indicated by their equal responsibilities before God in the Day of Judgment. As for the veil of women, Islam’s original precept is *al-sufur* which permits more exposure than the veil provided a modest and decent dress is maintained. Islam also encourages and aims at a desegregated community of men and women as opposed to the First Message of Islam<sup>47</sup>.

Also, true Islam is opposed to polygamy for as stated in the Qur’an (4:129) “And you cannot maintain [perfect] balance between wives, however much you desire it. But incline not wholly [to one] so that you leave [the others] like [a thing] suspended [...]”. Taha emphasizes the subtlety of this verse as being opposed to polygamy for one can not do justice and thus should not marry more than one. He believes that marriage is the most noble and perfect relation between one man and one woman without dowry or divorce. It

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<sup>45</sup> *ibid.* pp. 140-143

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.* pp. 143-145

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.* pp. 145

should be based on a right mature choice of the two parties and on pure noble feelings based on reason and on an open heart<sup>48</sup>.

Dowry is rejected by Islam because it represents the price of a woman therefore it must be discontinued when women's dignity and respect are realized through the implementation of Islam's original precept.

Divorce shall not be executed without good reasons; it is only permitted to give a second chance for the individual to find his or her second half. When that occurs, Shari'a law allowing divorce will cease to exist when there is no longer need for it.

In the community established by Taha, these precepts were fully applied.

According to Taha, there are six steps needed for a successful marriage:

- Both parties shall choose each other
- The engagement period must be of a short time
- Dowry should be kept at its minimum almost zero until it is abolished
- The two parties shall live together from the day the marriage contract is signed
- Even with minimal financial means, the couple should be able marry
- The man spends on the house while the woman manages it

Happiness is not based on law but on a mutual understanding which is acquired through two levels: the level of educational rearing (*tarbia*) which is the base for making the right choice and the level of law which is the tool needed to correct a wrong choice<sup>49</sup>.

The former level provides the couple with the necessary patience required during the first years of marriage where quarrels can occur. Patience will help the continuation of marriage. The Islamic Shari'a prepared the foundation for choosing a partner, as said by the Prophet Mohamad, for a man to choose the right partner he must take into consideration the following by order of importance. Money comes at the first stage, followed by beauty, family and lastly, religion. Nevertheless, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha believes that the couple needs time to know each other and that they should meet "intellectually" in a healthy environment. As for law, women must ask for their rights or they will not be given to her<sup>50</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup> Taha, Mahmoud Mohamed, *Khotwah Nahwa al-Zawaj fi al-Islam* 1971 pp.1-3

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.* p.3

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.* p.4

For Taha, women must first refuse dowry for by doing so, she would regain her dignity. Afterwards, in order to protect her marriage, she must have the right to divorce so that she would not be subject to oppression; the divorce will not occur unless two wise men approved by both parties approve the divorce and, in case of disagreement, a third judge will decide. Finally, polygamy should not be allowed except in very special and dramatic situation and only if the two wise men agree and the woman will have the right to divorce if she does not accept<sup>51</sup>.

Taha concludes that women must prove that they deserve these rights by applying them wisely and intelligently. By choosing the right partner, managing well the house and knowing how to spend the money brought by the husband, by not using the right to divorce except when necessary, women will have proven that they deserve these rights<sup>52</sup>.

According to Taha, society is evolving in parallel with the technological advancement, therefore becoming more united and in need for peace and unity which is achieved by Islam through its two stages: the dogmatic level that separates people instead of uniting them and the stage of al Mu'minin. The scientific level which unites the individuals with each other and with the Universe, is the original Qur'an of the Muslimin or the Second Message of Islam.

In his book *Tatweer Shariat al-Ahwal Al-Shakhssiah* published in 1973, Taha advises men to consider four main issues. First, men should know that the representation of the relationship between men and women as merely conflictual is wrong. Perfection is that of men and women together and that each individual is the offspring of women who are perfect. Even if the father is good but the mother is not, the child will not be good for he or she is his/her mother biologically, spiritually and intellectually. All men are surrounded by women (mother, wife, sister, daughter) and in every man lies a woman and in every woman lies a man, each is looking for his/her missing part, thus complementing each other rather than being in conflict. Second, men should help women regain their rights and responsibilities by not treating them as minors but as human beings. Third, men's jealousy should not be the reason of their need to own women but to safeguard

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<sup>51</sup> ibid. pp.5-6

<sup>52</sup> ibid. pp.6-7



their purity. Fourth, Taha asks men to be authoritarian with women by means of love and not by means of guardianship, strength or superiority<sup>53</sup>.

On the other hand, Taha advises women to consider five main issues: First, women should be patient and keep in mind that the main cause for men's authoritative attitude is sexual jealousy which will not fade away for it is the source of purity, thus women must remain pure. Second, Taha asks women to be moderate and decent in their dress code, as he advises them not be veiled and cover their faces but also not to go to the other extreme to attract attention for it is a proof of ignorance in values and religion. If women try to get attention by wearing indecent clothes and exaggerate their make up, they would not deserve to uncover their faces. On the other hand, if women behave and dress decently, they deserve to uncover their faces. Thus, according to Taha, women need to show that they deserve certain rights if they behave well or they will be punished.

In his third point, Taha asks women to take the right of being the Queens at home and not servants for as their most important characteristic is purity, one of their most important and elevated actions is making love and its perfection goes to infinity. Fourth, women should keep in mind that real beauty is not physical but is in the perfection of the mind, values and religion. Finally, women must remember that their dignity is within their reach and if they let it go, no one will ever bring it back<sup>54</sup>.

It is interesting to note that Taha requires from women to prove that they deserve these rights and if they do not they can be punished in the sense of having their rights taken away from them. Therefore his perception on women's equality is not based on real equality as he states but on an artificial one, given by men to women if they deserve and taken away again by men if they do not deserve. It is thus men who decide whether to grant these rights or not and when to grant or take them back.

This attitude does not seem to correspond with Taha's modernist views and his sayings that women ought to be treated as human beings and not females.

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<sup>53</sup> Taha, Mahmoud Mohamed, *Tatweer Shariat al-Ahwal Al-Shakhssiah* 1973 pp 15-17

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p.17

## **Mohamed Shahrour: “Islam did not liberate women”**

When asked about his views on the status of women in Islam, Shahrour said: “I will not defend those who say that Islam has liberated women. Islam has cut the red ribbon for the liberation of women and slavery and stopped there. It was the duty of the legislators to continue in the path of liberation and which they did not do”.

Shahrour believes that the Islamic approach is based on the principles of Islamic legal theory formed at the end of the third and fourth century Hijri which assumes that women have obtained their rights during the lifetime of the prophet. Therefore, this Islamic approach does not accept any new ideas pertaining to the abolition of polygamy, the right of women to travel alone, the problem of the veil and dressing code, the right to vote and to be elected.

Shahrour explains polygamy, inheritance, gender segregation and women’s dress code along his theory of limits. According to him, the Qur’an is against the segregation of women from men for the verse concerning segregation is one that moves between the Lower and Upper limits without touching either. It is exemplified in the sexual relations between men and women starting right above the lower limit where the two sexes do not touch each other to right below the upper limit where they come close to committing adultery but do not. Therefore Islam has nothing to say about segregation which is a social and cultural phenomenon and not religious or Islamic.

Concerning the verses on polygamy, they are endowed with two types of limits, the quantitative and the qualitative. Within the quantitative type, the lower limit is having one wife while the upper limit is four wives. The quantitative type is the widely prevailing understanding among Muslims. Nevertheless, the qualitative type questions the type of women men are allowed to marry at the same time. According to Shahrour, the verse of polygamy refers to widowed mothers for the verse starts with mentioning the orphans verse 4:3 “[...] and if you fear that you will not deal fairly with the orphans, marry of the women, with complete good will, two three or four, and if you fear that you cannot do justice then one only...it is more likely that you will not do justice”. Thus, Shahrour says that ‘doing justice’ must be seen as the fair and equal treatment of the husband’s children with the widow’s children economically and otherwise.

There are two verses in the Qur'an dealing with the issue on women's dress code (verse 31 sura 24 and verse 59 sura 33). The lower limits states that women's body can be exposed in two ways: the first which is the part of the body which is exposed by nature like the head, hands, legs, shoulders and belly. The second is the part of the body which is not exposed by nature like underarms, breasts and sexual organs. Sexual organs can be exposed only to husbands while the underarms and breasts can be exposed only to people who can not marry her (father, brother, son, etc). Thus the lower limit of the dress is to cover these parts and which can be covered by the underwear. The outer limit on the other hand is to only expose the face and the hands. Any type of dress between those limits is acceptable, thus nudity is outside God's limits and covering all the body including the face is also outside the Prophet's upper limit. Verse 59 sura 33 of the Qur'an states that women should dress in a manner that is socially acceptable without challenging social decency and habits and while remaining between God's limits.

On the other hand, the limits on women's profession in the Qur'an are stated in verse 31 verse 24 whereby two professions are forbidden to women, prostitution and indecent exposure; other professions are up to women to decide depending on society. Shahrour believes that the veil or the Chador are Arab or Persian dress and have nothing to do with Islam and are a matter of confusion between God's limits on the one hand and the social and national habits on the other hand.

Mahmoud Mohamed Taha meets with Shahrour for he too is against polygamy, the veil and gender segregation.

As for inheritance, Shahrour stresses the point that will is a must whereby the father divides his wealth the way he wants and it is only in case of its absence that Islam proposed a type of inheritance. According to him, females should receive equal share of as males.

## Sayid Qutb and Mahmoud Mohamed Taha: Views on Women

Sayid Qutb and Mahmoud Mohamed Taha differ and at the same time have similarities on the issue of women. Both Qutb and Taha emphasize the role of women as being responsible for the family. Nevertheless, while Qutb sees women as equal to men in religion only, Taha sees them as equal in all fields. What differentiates Taha from Qutb is that the former sees women's rights under the Second Message of Islam while the latter sees that Islam has given women their rights as he states "as for the relation between the sexes, Islam has guaranteed to women a complete equality with men with regard to their sex; it has permitted no discrimination except in some incidental matters connected with physical nature, with customary procedure, or with responsibility [...]. But the strongest point in Islam is the equality which it guarantees to women in religion, as well as in their possessions and their gains. Also it gives them the assurance of marriage only with their consent and at their own pleasure; they need not marry either through compulsion or through negligence; and they must get a dowry<sup>55</sup>". Qutb does not mention how equality between men and women is achieved in Islam with polygamy, inheritance, segregation and having a male tutor. He also sees dowry as being one of the important rights of women while Taha sees dowry as degrading to women's dignity. Qutb goes further to criticize the West and the way it treats women in a degrading and humiliating manner, taking advantage of women in professions and employing their sex instinct to generate income. On the other hand, both Qutb and Taha value the family as being the base of society and both believe in the division of labor whereby women's role is inside the house while men's role is outside. Both focus on the upbringing of children as being the base for society, thus Qutb justifies this important responsibility given by Islam to women to show that they are not considered inferior. According to Qutb, in a society where this type of division of labor is not respected, society is uncivilized and is considered as 'jahili' as he states " the family system and the relationship between the

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<sup>55</sup> Qutb, Sayid, *Social Justice in Islam* trans. By John B. Hardie (New York: Octagon Books, 1970) pp. 49-53

sexes determine the whole character of a society and whether it is backward or civilized, jahili or Islamic<sup>56</sup>.

It is clear, like Shahrour said, that fundamentalists read and interpret the Qur'an in a backward manner and try to justify that Islam has, during the lifetime of the prophet liberated women.

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<sup>56</sup> Qutb, Sayid, *Milestones* (Beirut: the Holy Koran Publishing House, 1980) p. 182

## Conclusion

Mahmoud Mohamed Taha's main theory consists of dividing Islam into two messages. The first message consists of the verses preached in Medina by the Prophet Mohammad over a period of ten years. The Medina verses were direct answers to the needs of the primitive society of the seventh century who was neither able nor ready to understand the true and ultimate meaning of Islam provided in the second message or the Mecca verses. Thus the principles preached in the first message such as jihad, slavery, capitalism, inequality between men and women, polygamy, divorce, the veil and gender segregation are all against the true precept of Islam.

Nevertheless, given the circumstances and the time period in which these verses descended, Islam could not have brutally banished all pre-Islamic concepts but had to gradually introduce them to the community of mu'minin in a way they will accept and understand. Thus, the first message of Islam is the base of the pyramid and is a transitional stage required to attain the Second Message of Islam.

The Second Message of Islam consists of the verses preached by the Prophet Mohammad over a period of thirteen years in Mecca. What differentiates the Mecca texts from the Medina texts is their content. While the latter deals with daily issues of a specific community, the former is rather global and applicable at all times for it only deals with values and encompasses all religions. The Mecca texts unlike the Medina ones, call for democracy as opposed to dictatorship, for tolerance as opposed to jihad, socialism as opposed to capitalism, social equality between all people regardless of faith sex or color, monogamy as opposed to polygamy, decency as opposed to veil and gender desegregation as opposed to gender segregation.

Taha believed that only the prophet lived by the second message of Islam and was the only Muslim among mu'minin. One can criticize Taha on this issue for according to history, the prophet did not observe monogamy and even married more than four women at a time. Also one may question why Taha did not question the credibility of the Hadith

that were recorded centuries after the death of the prophet and based on hear-say. The same applies on the Qur'an that was recorded during the reign of the third Caliph Osman.

Thus, it is clear that Taha not only divided Islam into two messages but also opposed them to each other as one being the non-original transitional stage to Islam while the other being the true Islam. The first targeted a nation of mu'minin while the second the nation of Muslimin. The first message was highly elaborated in the Islamic legislation or the Shari'a while the second message remained unelaborated in the Sunnah.

Also, Taha's definition of Islam is one that encompasses all religions by being scientific and beyond the dogma. The first message of Islam is closer to Judaism with its materialism while the second message is closer to Christianity with its spiritualism. Islam is therefore the equilibrium of the two with the qualities of both. Taha and the Republican Brothers expect the coming of the Final Messiah whose duty is elaborate the second message of Islam and therefore be a Mohammedan Messiah, uniting all religions.

While Islamic thinkers like Sayid Qutb believe that the Shari'a is perfect and therefore there is no need to have it modified, Taha thinks that the perfection of the Shari'a lies in its ability to evolve. Under the Numeiry regime, Taha opposed the implementation of the actual Shari'a in Sudan because it discriminated against non-Muslims and women.

Furthermore, Taha called for developing the Shari'a from its current stage that targeted seventh century society and which is based on the first message of Islam (on the Medina texts) to a contemporary stage based on the second message of Islam and that fits with the needs of the individuals and present day societies. Shifting the Shari'a from one set of texts in the Qur'an to another set of texts is called the evolution of legislation or *tatwir al tashri'*. Nevertheless the worship practices or *'ibadat*, except the *zakat*, are not subject to evolution while the *mu'amalat* consisting of the fundamental individual rights and the political and economic structures, as well as all matters associated with social change must evolve with society. Sayid Qutb and Mohamed Shahrour agree with Taha on this issue of evolving what pertains to *mu'amalat* and not to *'ibadat*.

The more the individual evolves the more will society develop and the more refined the Shari'a will become. The more primitive individuals are, the more underdeveloped society will be and the harsher the Shari'a.

Thus, the degrading status of women in Islamic legislation based on texts intended for a primitive society ought to be changed to comply with the actual level of development of society. Women must no longer be considered as females but as citizens, enjoying the same rights as men. Women must not be veiled but observe decency, should not have half of their rights in testimony or inheritance but their full rights. He also believes that marriage procedures should be modified whereby the dowry should be abolished in order to restore women's dignity. Women should have the right to divorce, polygamy rejected and unjustified divorce should be forbidden.

While being concerned about women's rights and dignity, Taha believes that women should prove that they deserve these rights by behaving well and if they abuse their freedom, they shall be punished and their freedom be taken away from them. Taha seems to contradict himself, on the one hand he calls for women's equal rights with men and on the other hand he asks women to prove they deserve this freedom. Thus, freedom does not seem to be a right but rather a luxury or a reward to women from men.

Nevertheless, Taha seems to view women as being first and most importantly mothers which according to him is a big responsibility to handle requiring maturity and education. He favors women to stay at home, as the queens of home, without keeping them prisoners at home because women's priority must be the family and children. Yet, Taha favors women to work outside if they are capable of doing so without sacrificing their matrimonial duty.

It is interesting to note that the environment within Mahmoud Mohamed Taha's thought developed are characterized by duality. The external environment on the international scene was that of the Cold War, the Eastern and the Western block, capitalism versus communism, secularism versus religious fundamentalism. The external environment in Sudan was also characterized by a civil war between an Arab Muslim North and an African non-Muslim South.

The internal environment is also characterized by this duality: two messages of Islam (which is his main theory) in which falls another duality: two meanings of the Qur'an (the apparent and the hidden), two levels of the Shari'a (community and individual), two types of nations (mu'minin and Muslimin), two types of forces (the will to live and the will to be free), two types of laws (reciprocity and retribution), two types of fears (latent



or innate and acquired), two levels of freedom (limited and absolute), two levels of selfishness (lower ignorant and higher intelligent), two precedents to every creature (predestination and fate), two wings to society (socialism and democracy), two principles of scientific socialism (increased production and equitable distribution), two factors for social equality (ta'lim and tarbiah or learning and education), two methods for a superior state (good society and the scientific educational method) and two ends of Islam (Judaism and Christianity).

The two ends represent two levels and two extremes with the shape of a pyramid whereby the base would be the primitive aspect of a concept while the peak is the refined and ultimate aspect. The pyramid can not exist without a base and a peak, their existence is correlated and goes in parallel with the level of development of society moving thus from the rigid to the dynamic and cyclical form. The base is a necessary transitional stage needed for attaining the peak.

Also the concept of development and evolution is highly present in Taha's thought and it is through this process that he explains Islam as a moderate and dynamic ideology capable of replacing western philosophies and ideologies like capitalism and communism by being propagated in terms of socialism and democracy. By drawing a distinction between civilization and material progress, Taha believes that Western civilization is not a civilization at all because it failed to complement its material progress with moral and spiritual growth. He is thus belittling the cultural development of the West that started in the eighteenth century by neglecting the accomplishments Western philosophers made, and he seems to ignore that the charter of Human Rights was conceptualized, drafted and written in France and not in an Arab Muslim country.

Mohamed Shahrour's interpretation of the Qur'an emanates from his theory of limits. He distinguishes six types of limits with an upper and a lower limit. These limits are divine and anything in between these limits is lawful and acceptable by God, whereas any deed above the upper limit and below the lower limit is unlawful. All 'stories' of the Prophet Mohamad should be disregarded for they can not constitute any base for today's life, be them social, political, economical or cultural. Laws pertaining to every day life should be legislated in the parliament whose members have the freedom to legislate and vote as

long as they respect the limits. Thus Shahrour explains all concepts (on punishment, polygamy, inheritance, gender segregation, etc) within this framework of limits.

Mahmoud Mohamed Taha is the second message of Islam that has been kept in the dark and unelaborated. His fate has been that of the second message which was repealed and abrogated by the first message of Islam; similarly, Taha has been repealed and abrogated by the fundamentalist thinkers. While he silently and peacefully submitted himself to God's will and was executed, others like Hassan al Turabi were brought to life. While Taha called for tolerance and for a look to the future, fundamentalists like Qutb and Turabi called for jihad and for a look to the past. While Taha called for a scientific Islam, fundamentalists called for the dogmatic Islam, while Taha called for total social equality between all people regardless of faith, gender and color, fundamentalists tried to justify and negate the inequality between men and women.

The voice of reformist thinkers has never been as loud as the voice of the fundamentalists. Their ideas and their approach has always been sacrificed, neglected and limited to the cultured elite. It unfortunately remained within the realm of theory while fundamentalist movements have always been successful in propagating their backward ideas and gaining political power in many countries.

Mohamed Shahrour's interpretation of the Qur'an is very pragmatic and reformist and has also been kept limited to the educated elite in the Arab world.

While Taha is a reformist, he nevertheless shares some common ideas with Qutb the fundamentalist, even though the essence and the logic behind their conclusions are opposed. Both of them believe that Marxism and capitalism have failed and that Islam is the alternative. Both agree that material progress and civilization are independent and both believe that the present societies are non-Islamic. On the other hand, Taha believes that the societies are non-Islamic because they do not apply and live by the Second Message of Islam. Qutb believes societies are non-Islamic because they do not apply the Shari'a law, a law that Taha is completely opposed to its implementation.

Taha has been highly marginalized by contemporary Islamic thinkers, his books banished during Numeiry's regime and unavailable in the market even today, his trial and execution were void and his ideas non-propagated. Mahmoud Mohamed Taha's theory of the Second Message of Islam, if implemented, can offer a middle ground or a viable alternative for the Muslim nation that refuses both secularism and fundamentalism.

In this struggle between the first message and the second message of Islam with all that they presuppose, the first has until now been the winner.

The problem in Taha's theory is that it is an imaginary theory aiming at changing the nature of human beings and thus of society through the second message of Islam. Its fate is therefore bound to remain in the realm of theory. Nevertheless, Taha's clear division of the Qur'an between a practical and a theoretical message can become a step towards the reform of Islam by enriching it and helping it meet challenges of modern world. Taha's thought can constitute the base of Islam's pyramid of reform as an answer to fundamentalism.

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