

Taha Abderrahman's Ethical Dialogue with the West

A Review Article by

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The Arab Right to Philosophical Difference

By Taha Abderrahman

Casablanca, Morocco: The Arab Cultural Center, 2009. 211 pp.
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The Spirit of Modernity: An Entrance to the Establishment of an Islamic Modernity

By Taha Abderrahman

Casablanca, Morocco: The Arab Cultural Center, 2013. 287 pp.
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The Islamic Right to Intellectual Difference

By Taha Abderrahman

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The events of September 11, 2001 in New York let loose a deluge of writing that placed a clash of civilizations between a reified Islam and the West. One important commentator on these events who has been neglected by Western scholarship is the Moroccan philosopher Taha Abderrahman. While his work addresses more than simply the tragic events of 9/11, it directly engages Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" thesis and the current climate of Manichaeism it represents. This prolific Muslim intellectual has created an important body of work that seeks to re-ground Islamic philosophy in its tradition by placing ethics as central to its practice. Not only does his work address an ethical re-awakening within the Islamic community, but it also serves as a global message that engages Western secular dominance in political, social, and philosophical spaces. His works cover a diverse array of topics that include critiques of Western secular modernity, the lack of ethical theory within the modern Islamic corpus, intercultural dialogue, and a critical deconstruction of the Western binary trope of reason versus revelation, among others.

In this short review I will focus on Abderrahman's first three texts published in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001. In his first two books post-9/11, *The Arab Right to Philosophical Difference* (2009) and *The Islamic Right to Intellectual Difference* (2014), Abderrahman argues for the right of the Arab and Islamic world to engage in a particularistic philosophy and worldview that deviates from the global hegemony of a universalizing Western secular modernity. He begins his critique in both works from a methodological position grounded in Shmuel Eisenstadt's theory of multiple modernities. However each text engages in separate issues that both stem from a hegemonic and universalizing Western secular modernity. In the case of *The Arab Right to Philosophical Difference* Abderrahman argues for the right of Arabs to engage in a particular Arab philosophy rather than blindly imitating the Western metaphysical tradition. In *The Islamic Right to Intellectual Difference* he criticizes the strict binarism inherent to Western secular modernity that places the Islamic tradition as its lesser "Other" in relation to the primacy of itself and its own tradition. Building from the critiques in these first two books he reconstructs his vision of an Islamic modernity built upon an Islamic ethical *weltanschauung* in his highly original, *The Spirit of Modernity: An Entrance to the Establishment of an Islamic Modernity* (2013). I will engage with each of these books with a brief summary of the main arguments.

The Arab Right to Philosophical Difference

As the title suggests, this book argues for the right of Arab philosophers to engage in questions that concern them rather than engage in questions imposed on them from the outside. He argues at length that modern Muslim intellectuals have blindly imitated the Western secular philosophical tradition. He aims to chart a new course for Islamic philosophy. He begins his critique asserting that the philosopher must raise the responsible question. This manner of questioning presupposes an ethical commitment incumbent on the philosopher prior to the actual inquiry into the content of the question itself. Moral imperatives bound the work of the philosopher. He argues that ethics as the central trope of Islamic tradition have been lost in the work of modern Muslim intellectuals either because of a mistranslation of Western texts or by simply abandoning tradition for the Western secular paradigm.

Abderrahman insists and advocates for the right of intellectual or philosophical difference as a right to liberation for Muslim scholars from blind imitation of the Western secular intellectual tradition. For him, this consists of liberation from blind imitation of three philosophical projects: Greek philosophy, Western European philosophy, and Jewish philosophy. He argues these three strands of the Western secular tradition have placed two major obstacles in the path of the Arab philosopher. Arab philosophy must overcome these two major obstacles that have emerged out of this Western secular tradition and its framing narrative of strict binary opposition separating revelation and reason, religion and politics—which, according to Abderrahman, have weakened and imprisoned Islamic thought. One is the concept of unitary thought or the universalization of thought. Unitary thought standardizes and imposes one style of thinking over all cultures and their philosophies despite their difference. The other obstacle is the economic-political hegemony that provides the material support for the universalization of Western secular thought that he believes seeks to negate intellectual difference. This right of intellectual difference, he insists, is a natural right that characterizes the universe.

His central point is that only when this natural right to express intellectual freedom is granted that true dialogue can take place. Liberty allows for difference, and difference leads to

dialogue, and an expanded dialogue is indispensable to the process of seeking a global ethic. He wants Muslim intellectuals to exercise this right by engaging in the question of how the Islamic world can best face the problems of a modernizing society amidst rapid globalization. He aims at concentrating its energies on questions that concern the Muslim philosopher not questions posed by philosophers of the West. The latter has no right to impose its own philosophical issues and questions on the Muslim philosopher. The right to express difference requires a proper public space for dialogue, which is part of Abderrahman's over-arching aim in this trilogy.

He argues that this consensus-seeking approach to dialogue that finds success in the negation of particularity and difference implicitly forms a violent space. He distinguishes two levels of violence, a "Greater Violence" based in suppression and a "Lesser Violence" based on settlement. He subdivides greater violence into two types: either a physical violence or an epistemic violence. The first type of intense violence, which is physical violence, is where a weaker side is forced to accept the position of the stronger side through the exercise of material power and/or influence. The second type of intense violence, which is epistemic violence, exists when one party delegitimizes the other party's position, rendering it impermissible in public discourse. Both of these types of violence seek to suppress difference through the use of power that only intensifies the differences with those involved in critical dialogue. Furthermore, it invites the suppressed party to return in kind the same violence towards the party who originally employed the suppressive measures.

The "Lesser Violence" is of one type, which is settlement. In this case, consensus or agreement is either achieved through a legitimate and accepted third party mediator, or through compromise between two divergent parties who have reached consensus through mutual negotiation. According to Abderrahman, violence is also present when a settlement is reached through compromise or mediation. The reason being is that consensus through settlement can only be achieved when one or both parties negate partially or in full their original particular position. The point he is trying to make is not that compromise or mutual agreement is not positive, rather he argues that difference itself in this model of dialogue becomes an ill or a fault that needs to be overcome. Abderrahman on the other hand asserts that a model of discourse rooted in a true creative, open dialectic is impossible without difference. It is difference itself that precedes dialogue. For a true dialogue to exist there can be no "complete" agreement. In his model of dialogue lack of consensus is the norm and should be accepted rather than seeking a position of universalization of thought, culture, or societal organization that negates particular subjectivities.

The Islamic Right to Intellectual Difference

Abderrahmane continues this line of inquiry in this follow-up work by expanding his approach to discourse ethics. In this work he begins with the events of 9/11 and the United States' reactions to those events as the starting point of his inquiry. He highlights the narrative couplets of "good versus evil" and "you are with us or you are with them" used by President George W. Bush in the days following 9/11. He argues these rhetorical devices create a central trope for the West that he describes as the Principle of Binary Opposition.

Abderrahman believes that the new binarism represented in Huntington's clash of civilizations thesis and the negation seeking nature of consensus have weakened the status of mutual recognition, cooperation, and inter-subjective communication between peoples and nations. He seeks to reverse this new binarism with the empathetic principle of integration of self

and other. For him, the best way to achieve this is through *jihad*. He describes his *jihad* as an ethical jihad. Ethical jihad seeks to establish a space of communicative action based upon two principles of inter-subjective communication. First, in an ethical jihad faith should remain a part of the dialogic process. Rather than begin from a space of reason, the self strives to begin from a space of ethics prior to employing reason, rather beginning from a place of reason to arrive at an ethical outcome. Second, is that one must treat the other in the communicative process as if the other was in fact oneself.

Abderrahman argues that neither of these principles of inter-subjective communication are achievable without continuous jihad with the self. The ethical striver is the one who works on their soul, their spirit, and their self for the sole purpose of integrating the spirit of the other into oneself. It is necessary to seek, apprehend, and attain the feelings of the other to the degree that one experiences the other as if the other was oneself. The purpose is to abide in the other by incorporating the other's feelings to the self when engaged in any type of dialogue or interaction. This continuous attempt at integration will remain imperfect. However, this imperfect integration will negate the strict binary opposition between self and other. It is not until an inter-association of identity is achieved that a true inter-subjective dialogic space can be manifested. He argues that this is a process that never ceases.

The Spirit of Modernity: An Entrance to the Establishment of an Islamic Modernity

In this third and final book, *The Spirit of Modernity: An Introduction to Founding an Islamic Modernity*, Abderrahman culminates his dialogue with the West by developing his conception of an Islamic modernity that counters the Western secular narrative built upon abstract reason and a public discursive space devoid of religion. He expands his critique of the Western secular tradition by including a critique of the effects of globalization on human society. He identifies two major problems created by Western secular modernity. First, Western secular modernity shapes economic life by valuing free-market capitalism over the principle of charity. Second, globalizing Western secular modernity prefers technical knowledge to a broader human conception of knowledge. These two value systems preferred by the Western secular tradition place one in a sovereign position over nature. Abderrahman inverts the Western conception of modernity with one based upon trusteeship, where people must care for the planet and its inhabitants. Abderrahman's inversion of Western narratives can be seen throughout his work beyond these three books as a methodological approach. His approach is a deconstructive/reconstructive method that first identifies a problematic within the Western secular tradition. He then deconstructs the problematic seeking its core concept and then reconstructs the central concept interpreted through an Islamic lens centred on ethics and an ethical practice.

Abderrahman's conception of an Islamic modernity begins with identifying what he believes to be the three core elements of Western secular modernity: maturity, criticism, and universality. The first principle, maturity, urges independence in thought for the self without blind acceptance of what is truth as defined by another. He argues that it is this very lack of independence of thought that has kept the Arab-Islamic world from developing a unique Islamic approach to modern problems. His Islamic modernity would be built upon two cornerstones of maturity of thought: autonomy and creativity. The first cornerstone, autonomy, urges independence from the Western monopoly of the interpretation of modernity, which he argues has turned it into a neo-colonial tutelage in the Arab-Islamic world. The second cornerstone,

creativity of philosophical thought, would allow for a creative renewal and reinterpretation of traditional Islamic ethics that could then be applied to combating the ills of global capitalism and materialism he identified in the beginning of this text.

The second principle in the Western secular tradition, criticism, seeks to trigger a shift of one's perspective from unreflective belief to a stance of critical doubt. Through this value, the Western tradition places the natural sciences as the final arbiter for decision-making, societal development, and moral reasoning. Instrumental reason becomes the foundational value for society and its institutions. He identifies two pillars that flesh out criticism in the Western value system. The first pillar, differentiation, compartmentalizes knowledge, person, and society into separate fields such as law, morality, science, and the arts. It also results in secularization of institutions that aid in solidifying the Western binary narrative of pitting reason versus revelation and politics versus religion. The second pillar, rationalization, places religious tradition outside the public sphere. Countering this Western approach, Abderrahmane argues for an expanded idea of rationality. A fuller understanding of his concept of an expanded reason can be found in his book titled *The Question of Ethics: A Contribution to Ethical Criticism of Western Modernity* (2000). This is reason that adheres to revealed law in its higher objectives together with its use of the instrumental means of abstract reasoning. In his conception, an Islamic modernity would be served by this expanded reason where ethical imperatives guide reason, where ethics as the prime directive precedes the use of reason.

The final principle of modernity, universality, argues that progress is based upon a necessary and natural shift from the particular to the universal. Universality within Western secular modernity then is a process that transcends and negates particularity both contextually and socially. As with the preceding two pillars, Abderrahman identifies two pillars supporting universality. The first pillar, extensibility, describes the process of modernity where rationality, as central discursive value, extends beyond the field of philosophy into all areas of thought, science, religion, the arts, law, and the economy. This extensibility of Western secular modernity then negates non-secular approaches in all fields of intellectual pursuit and in public policy. The second pillar, generality, operates in a similar manner to extensibility; where rationality extends beyond its origin of philosophy into other disciplines, Western secular modernity likewise spills beyond its own Western borders into non-Western cultures and traditions. Western secular modernity becomes the universalizing paradigm towards which all cultures and traditions must resolve themselves. Universalizability, which is at the core of Western secular modernity, is the very attribute that much of his project across these three texts seeks to combat. His argument for the basic right to differ against a universalizing, hegemonic modernity constitutes the central basic human right of freedom of thought. His Islamic modernity would seek to universalize the idea of ethics and solidarity with the other. This allows for the respect of others to autonomously and creatively interpret modernity according to their particular cultures and philosophies rooted in ethical practice.

Final Remarks

The summaries I provided in this brief review only touch on the core of these texts. Likewise, the ideas that are discussed in these three books can be found in other texts from Abderrahman's rich corpus. A fourth text, *The Question of Ethics: A Contribution to Ethical Criticism of Western Modernity* (2000) could easily be added to the trilogy discussed in this review. Many of the ideas found in these works are answers to questions he first posed in this text—the central question

being: What is the place of ethics in 21st century global society? The success in the answer to that question lies within the question itself. The importance of these works for the field of Islamic thought are both his unique and individual approach to the question of what it means to be Muslim in the face of a hegemonic Western secular modernity. This question has been central to modern Islamic thought. Abderrahman provides a fresh voice and a line of inquiry that will prove fruitful for future generations of Muslim scholars. Likewise, his works would be of interest to Western scholars such as Alasdair McIntyre, Charles Taylor, and Michael Sandel, and all scholars working on cross-cultural dialogue and discourse ethics. Unfortunately, he has been neglected in the West and the majority of his works remain un-translated into Western languages. For those that wish to seek concord among cultures as opposed to fomenting a clash of civilizations, Taha Abderrahman provides a promising starting point.

About the Reviewer

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