

**Moral foundation and critique of Western modernity
In the Taha Abdel Rahman project**

التأسيس الأخلاقي ونقد الحداثة الغربية في مشروع طه عبد الرحمان

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Abstract:

Taha Abdel Rahman is one of the most prominent symbols of contemporary Arab thought, as he presented a reformist intellectual project in evaluating the Arab Islamic heritage, and developed an ethical theory with a future civilizational vision that guides and directs ideas and behavior, in contrast to the criticism of the rationality of modern Western civilization that claims superiority and centrality, where it has absent ethics from its intellectual and scientific system, and has been satisfied with relying on abstract rationality, in light of the spiritual vacuum it suffers from, which revealed its falsehood, and called for confronting the challenges of its authoritarian globalization, rejecting any projection of the Western modern experience on our reality.

Keywords: Modernity, rationality, moral dimension, civilization, heritage.

ملخص: يعد طه عبد الرحمان من أبرز رموز الفكر العربي المعاصر، قدم مشروعا فكريا تجديديا في تقويم التراث الإسلامي العربي حيث وضع نظرية أخلاقية برؤية حضارية مستقبلية، ترشد وتوجه الأفكار والسلوك، مقابل نقد عقلانية الحضارة الغربية الحديثة التي تدعي التفوق والمركزية فغيّبت من منظومتها الفكرية والعلمية الأخلاق، واستندت إلى عقلانية مجردة، في ظل الفراغ الروحي الذي تعانيه، فكشف عن زيفها، ودعا إلى مواجهة تحديات عولمتها المتسلطة، رافضا بذلك كل إسقاط للتجربة الحداثية الغربية على واقعنا. الكلمات المفتاحية: الحداثة، العقلانية، البعد الأخلاقي، الحضارة، التراث.

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1. Introduction

Modern European thought has witnessed intellectual, social and political transformations that have opened horizons for research and thinking, enriching Western modernist thought, which has exported its intellectual product to other intellectual and cultural environments, including the Arab-Islamic environment, where it was welcomed by advocates of modernization and Westernization, in contrast to those calling for caution and wariness of Western intellectual discourse.

Taha Abdel Rahman is one of the most prominent symbols of contemporary Arab thought, which preoccupied with a critical reading of Western modernist discourse, by presenting a

renewal intellectual project in evaluating Islamic heritage, relying on methodological tools derived from within the heritage itself, where he developed an ethical theory with a future civilizational vision that guides and directs ideas and behavior, in contrast to criticizing the rationality of modern Western civilization that claims superiority and centrality, ignoring ethics from its intellectual and scientific system, and relying on abstract rationality, in light of the spiritual vacuum it suffers from, where he exposed its falsehood, and called for confronting the challenges of its authoritarian globalization.

Taha Abdel Rahman considers globalization as a product of the Western mind, aiming to achieve the continuous rational action to transform the world into a unified social, economic, political and cultural scope, linked between the individuals of all societies, as globalization works to make these societies form in one image, within the framework of the global society, where its relations are characterized by continuous intertwining without interruption or end.

His reading of Western modernity was a turning point towards establishing an integrated view according to a method that is consistent with the moral nature of man, and moving from dependence and imitation to independence and creativity, as well as developing Arab-Islamic culture, through expressing the true intellectual concerns of our Arab reality, far from any projection of the Western modernist experience onto this reality. Thus, Taha Abdel Rahman confronted all forms of Westernization, and stood on the shortcomings and limitations of the mechanisms adopted by the Western modernist mind, which tempted some and made them cling to this Western intruder.

On this basis, the features of the problematic of our study are revealed, represented in the following pivotal question: How did Taha Abdel Rahman confront Western modernity, and did the question of ethics establish an authentic Islamic modernity?

2. Modernity: The Concept and Historical Context

It may seem easy to define concepts, but the association of the term modernity with diverse fields in philosophy, politics, economics, culture, etc., prompts us to accept Will Durant's statement: "Nothing is more difficult than definition, and nothing is more difficult in examining mental clarity than trying to define things and determine what is meant by them" (philosophy, 1988, p. 23), especially with the multiplicity of conceptual approaches to modernity, where "the subject occupies a prominent intellectual position in our contemporary world, and the term modernity is generally applied to the course of Western societies from the Renaissance to the present day, and includes economic rationalization, political democracy, and rationality in the social organization" (Turin, 1997, p. 19), which means that it includes diverse levels of existence.

About the previous idea, "the idea of modernity in its most ambitious form is to assert that man is what he does. There is therefore a connection that is becoming more and more strong between production, made more effective by science, technology, and management,

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on the one hand, and the organization of society governed by law and personal life, animated by interest and the desire to be free from all pressures, on the other hand. On what is this connection based, between a scientific culture, an organized society, and free individuals, if not on the victory of mind?" (Turin, 1997, p. 19). Modernity worked to present a new image of consciousness, mind, and man, and even to promote mind and freedom that the Church had obscured for centuries.

In contrast, some have presented another image of modernity as "anti-heritage, the fall of customs, traditions and beliefs, as a departure from particularities and entry into the universal, and even a departure from the state of nature and entry into adulthood.

Liberals and Marxists shared confidence in the exercise of mind, and intensified, in the same way, their attacks on what they called the obstacles to modernization" (Turin, 1997, p. 270), and even broader than this, "modernity is not a sociological concept, or a historical concept that limits meaning, but a distinctive formula of civilization, opposed to the formula of tradition, as it opposes all other previous or traditional cultures.

In the face of the geographical and symbolic diversity of these cultures, modernity imposes itself, as if it were one homogeneous entity, whose global influence spread, starting from the West. However, modernity remains an ambiguous subject that generally includes a reference to an entire historical development and a change in mentality (Barada, 1984, p. 12), aiming to overcome obstacles and difficulties.

Taha Abdel Rahman differentiates between the "spirit of modernity" and the "reality of modernity," as the "spirit of modernity" is: "the set of values and principles capable of advancing the civilized existence of man at any time and in any place; While the "reality of modernity" is: the realization of these values and principles in a specific time and place, and of course, these realizations differ according to the temporal and spatial circumstances, and the most famous realization of the spirit of modernity is represented in the Western modern reality" (Abdel Rahman, 2006, p. 175), there was an overlap between the concept of modernity and modernization, which refers to "a set of cumulative processes that reinforce each other, as it is the construction of modernizing resources and converting them into capital, the growth of productive forces and increasing labor productivity, as it refers to the establishment of central political authorities and the formation of national identities, and it also refers to the dissemination of rights to political participation, forms of civil life and public education, and finally it refers to the secularization of values and standards" (Habermas, 1995, p. 9), so modernization is an effective renewal movement within societies.

1.2 Foundations of Western Modernity

Modern Western civilization has always been described as a civilization of "Logos", as the authority of mind replaced the power of the Church, which lost its intellectual and political

control, and the concept of modernity was associated with rationality, “Philosophical thought founded its modernity by attempting to restore consideration to mind and prove it on the one hand, and to exclude manifestations of irrationality on the other hand. Classical philosophy excluded irrationality in all its manifestations – because according to its understanding – it is the source of corruption, ruin and confusion” (Triki & Triki, 1992, p. 17) . Mind is the essence of man, and a criterion for his effectiveness and directing his actions towards the best, which prompted the philosophy of the Enlightenment to restore consideration to the sovereignty of mind.

This rationalization included scientific thought, as scientists and philosophers such as Copernicus, Galileo and Descartes worked to combat the traditions of the Church, which led to the establishment of the mathematical model as the only measure of the scientific nature of thought and the methodology of thinking, which means that science has almost completely separated from religious, ideological and political concepts, and has adopted demonstrative mind and experimentation, and has left aside everything that is not acceptable by proof, in addition to rationalizing religious speech “which means intervening at all its levels precisely to reform it, and to stay away from injustice, arrogance and tyranny” (Triki & Triki, 1992, p. 31). After centuries of Church control, here is modernity restoring the authority of mind, and making it an expression of the dimensions of modern man, where “the idea of modernity is closely linked to rationality, and abandoning one means rejecting the other.. what distinguishes Western thought in its strongest moments of identification with modernity is the will to move from the limited role of the rationalization process to the idea of a more comprehensive rational society” (Turin, 1997, p. 30), and thus the mind (mind) became a reference for various types of knowledge.

The spirit of modernity is based on three principles: “The first is (the principle of maturity), which requires independence from guardians and trustees, and the existence of creativity in words and actions. The second is (the principle of criticism), which requires the practice of mind in every aspect of life and the practice of preference in every matter that requires further control. The third is (the principle of comprehensiveness), which requires expansion in all fields and the attainment of generalization in all societies, accordingly, the characteristics of the modern spirit are that it is a mature, critical, and comprehensive spirit” (Abdel Rahman, *The Spirit of Modernity: An Introduction to the Establishment of Islamic Modernity*, 2006, p. 29)

3. Western Modern Rationality - A Project for Criticism

Taha Abdel Rahman criticized the abstract rationality on which Western modernity was founded, and stated that “abstract rationality in particular is a characteristic of human action that is based on striving to achieve goals whose benefit is uncertain by means whose effectiveness is uncertain; We have seen that it violates the condition of benefit in the objectives because it falls into relativity, chaos and slavery, and violates the condition of

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effectiveness in the means because it excludes spiritual meanings and is satisfied with the external appearances of material means alone” (Abdel Rahman, *The Question of Ethics: A Contribution to the Moral Critique of Western Modernity*, 2000, p. 75)

As for guided rationality, it falls into the two plagues of pretense and imitation, while supported rationality “is an expression of the characteristic of human action that is based on seeking to achieve beneficial objectives through effective means, and this combination between the benefit of the objectives in their constancy and comprehensiveness, and the effectiveness of the means in their change and specificity is not achieved except by constantly engaging in God and penetrating Him” (Abdel Rahman, 2000, p. 75), and this elevation is achieved by the act of deep religious experience, and avoiding the plagues on this basis opposes the objectification of the mind and the tendency to fragment it, as he says: “The mind is nothing more than an act or behavior through which a person becomes aware of things in himself and his horizon is like that of sight to visible things. Sight is not an independent substance in itself, but rather it is an effect of the eye. Likewise, the mind is an effect of a real self, and this self is what distinguishes man within the scope of Arab Islamic intellectual practice, namely the heart because the mind for the heart is as the sight for the eye” (Abdel Rahman, 1997, p. 18)

The mind in this perspective, is the guide for the action of man, because the believer's mind, from the point of view of Abdel Rahman Taha, is the mind worthy of confidence-; "The mind that does not oppose the religion is not the mind that was raised in the context of the abstract rational curricula of the Greek Western origin, and is formed in purely material forms, describing all the effect of metaphysical meanings and moral values, nor is it the dominated mind, because the mind does not escape imbalance on the level of means, and if It was affected at the level of purposes, but rather the pro-mind is restricted by the conditions: "meeting of words and deeds", "meeting of scientific knowledge and metaphysical knowledge", and "the safety of the increase in work" (Abdel Rahman, 2000, p. 74), because the mind that does not carry The values of approval for Sharia, according to this aforementioned direction, will violate the desired purposes. If the Western person depends on the mind only as a reference principle to issue its rulings, then the Muslim in his rule is based on the divine mind and revelation. The characteristic of this rationality lies in being a human being without the need for revelation, which makes it contradict the religious message, therefore, this rationality is called "abstract rationality", as its abstraction is to rely on the human mind only, without interacting with divine revelation.

Taha Abdel -Rahman emphasizes that Western modernity lacks the moral dimension, as he sees that it depends on the abstract theoretical mind, in which the animal may participate with the human being, and confirms that the mind that gives man his humanity is the mind based on morals, hence, it considers that Western modernity lacks this moral aspect, which is

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considered a basis for humanity, thus, “civilization produced three damages afflicted humanity in his moral entity: the damage of narrowing, which made the moral work limited; the damage of freezing, which it cut; and the damage of the decrease, which made the moral action hated.

Based on this, the “limit”, “cutting” and “ostracism” is the share of the moral action from the civilization of the saying, which is considered unjust to man because the human truth is only determined by morals ” (Abdel Rahman, 2000, p. 80), and the only solution to this civilization is only by returning to morals".

Only morals makes the human horizon independent of the horizon of the beast, because the beast does not seek to be good in its behavior as it seeks to live in it, using its mind; the morals are the origin on which all the characteristics of a person branch from where it is, and the rationality that deserves to be attributed to him It should be affiliated with this moral origin (Abdel Rahman, 2000, p. 14).

Taha Abdel -Rahman says, “We have worked in our book "The question of morals", by criticizing Western modernity and we are interested in this criticism in particular with its communal, mental and cognitive practices, so we have to reveal the moral pests that entered it” (Abdel Rahman, 2006, p. 15). Noting that “the Arab countries got to know modernity- first of the matter- in their material manifestations, militarily, technically and scientifically, meaning through the things that can be exported easily, and according to what serves the interests and purposes of the West” (Barada, 1984, p. 16). Taha Abdel Rahman 's goal was to reveal the secrets of Western modernity and its pests, and to reveal the falsehood of its material aspects and its shortcomings (Abdel Rahman, 2000, p. 80).

When Taha Abdel Rahman was asked about Arab modernity, he said, "As for the story of Arab modernity, I see that there is no Arab modernity, the Arab modernists are already imitated explicitly; for example, if the deconstruction appears, they became dismantling, and if structuralism appears, they will follow the structuralism, and so on; and modernity has identified creativity, and considered it a fundamental condition, so the person is not modern, until he can creativity, as he does not deserve to be modernist unless he is creative" (Abdel Rahman, 2012, p. 105). Since modernity is based on creativity as a basic principle, and not imitation, Taha Abdel Rahman rejected the blind tradition of Western civilization, considering that seeing it is not prohibited, and confirms that we do not need merely transfer and repeat it as it is, but rather it must be re-creative in our way, in a manner that suits With our cultural and intellectual contexts.

Taha Abdel Rahman began his intellectual project by criticizing the phenomenon of “imitative consciousness” in Arab thought, as he sees that this thought is far from true creativity and is not connected to the world of renewal and innovation. “One is extremely surprised by some of our intellectuals who do not find humiliation, shame, or even embarrassment in imitating others in the intellectual patterns they have created, whether they are right or wrong... making their imitation their effort and their rigidity their creativity. According to them, it is modernity

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to transfer from others idea after idea, phrase after phrase” (Abdel Rahman, 2016, p. 131). Taha Abdel Rahman asserts that we are not allowed to transfer others’ applications of this spirit, because what must be transferred is the original itself, not just its applications, since this spirit is the original, while the application is nothing more than a transfer, and he also points out that each field of circulation has its application requirements that must be taken into consideration.

4. The relationship between religion and ethics:

He also presented in his book "The Question of Ethics" a critical position on the relationship between religion and ethics, as defined by Western philosophers, and explained it in three forms; the first is the subordination of ethics to religion, the second is the subordination of religion to ethics, and the third is the independence of ethics from religion.

4.1 The subordination of ethics to religion: Saint Augustine and Thomas Aquinas are among the most prominent early philosophers who followed this path based on the ideas of belief in God and His will, but if they were fair in their judgments, they would have acknowledged that heavenly religion is not at all of the same kind as Greek mythology, and they would not have insisted on remaining on their ancient philosophical tradition (Abdel Rahman, 2000, pp. 31-33), as medieval philosophers were unable to get rid of the dominance of Greek thought and the confusion between myth and theology.

4.2 The subordination of religion to morality: From the Kantian conception of morality, which he based on the goodwill in itself without regard to the results of actions, Kant establishes the moral or duty law on mind, in his saying: “Pure mind alone is practical in itself and gives (man) a general law, which we call the moral law” (Kant, 2008, p. 84).

Ethics in this sense has a universal character, as behavior is not moral unless it is issued from duty, because the absolute command decides that the action is necessary in itself regardless of the results and goals. “Since the will is rational with pure mind, it is only concerned with actions that come following duty, as dictated by this mind, and it must be a duty in which no consideration is given to an incidental matter, nor is it directed towards a limited purpose, nor is there room for subordination to anything else, whether out of greed for reward or fear of punishment, meaning that the goodwill is the will that acts according to duty for the sake of duty itself” (Abdel Rahman, 2000, p. 36).

Taha Abdel Rahman rejects the Kantian position, saying: “Ethics seem not to need the idea of a being different and higher than man, for this man to know his duty, nor a mind other than the law itself for him to follow it, so as for ethics, it does not need religion at all, but is sufficient in itself thanks to pure practical mind”. (Abdel Rahman, 2000, p. 37), and this rejection of the Kantian concept is due to its separation between ethics and religion, and the

sufficiency of the act for its own sake without the need for a transcendent power to evaluate the actions.

4.3 The independence of morality from religion: The independence of morality from religion is determined by the principle of “no necessity of existence,” which was associated with Hume and was called “Hume’s Law,” as Hume opposes the establishment of morality and calls for the independence of morality, by separating between informative issues: one is “issues that tell about God,” and the second is “issues that tell about man”, and it is clear that in this detail there is a warning that the first type includes religious issues, while the second type does not include such issues (Abdel Rahman, 2000, p. 42), which means that Hume excludes religious rulings from moral rulings, and considers religious rulings not suitable for establishing moral rulings.

Taha Abdel Rahman did not accept this view of considering religion as a theory of the unseen (Abdel Rahman, 2000, pp. 52-53), and that the exclusion of religious judgment from moral judgment is based on a very narrow concept of "religion", because the origin of religion is the preservation of apparent rituals, and the origin of morality is the preservation of perfect actions.

Taha Abdel Rahman confirms in his second axiom that the religious nature of morality is an inherent matter, as he sees that there is no true morality without religion, and he stresses that the relationship between religion and morality must be based on the fact that morality is subordinate to religion, and not the other way around.

Taha Abdel Rahman relied on the vision of Imam Al-Ghazali, who considers religion a basic and essential component of human life, he believes that morality and laws lose their ability to influence the conscience if they do not derive their roots from religion, and he also confirms that mind alone is incapable of confronting lustful and materialistic tendencies in which emotion often prevails over mind. Hence, Taha Abdel Rahman considers religion to be the organizing force that dominates the mind and emotions together, ensuring control over desires and inclinations, therefore, he linked the concept of moral creation to practical commitment to religiosity, which he expressed with the term “practical Tassalof”.

Taha Abdel Rahman bases his critical project on a central idea that he expressed in the introduction to his book “Religious Work and the Renewal of the Mind”, this idea is represented in contributing to building theoretical foundations for religious awakening, by formulating an intellectual and philosophical basis based on scientific thought guided by the principles of contemporary rationalism. He also seeks to liberate this awakening from the scourge of extremism in disagreement, while preparing it to integrate into a living faith experience, to transcend narrow sectarian disputes and conflicts.

In contrast to the critical confrontation with which Taha Abdel Rahman confronts Western modernity, he establishes an ethical theory with a new vision, based on the Islamic religion,

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stating that: “The ethics that deserve to be comparable to the scientific-technical system, and can erase the negative effects of the successive and accelerating transformations of this system, are not in theories that rely on rationality and denial, such as the theory of responsibility, the theory of communication, and the theory of weakness... Rather, it is a theory that replaces the quality of rationality with the principle of “morality” that brings about supportive wisdom, and replaces the quality of denial with the principle of “recognition” that brings about guided insight” (Abdel Rahman, 2000, p. 133), and t These principles of “morality” and “recognition” work to moralize technical science, especially since technology has dominated all dimensions of human life.

5. Conclusion

The topic of modernity in Arab thought is of great cognitive importance, as it allows for understanding the transformations that have occurred in the Arab mind's awareness of this concept, and also contributes to shedding light on the social and economic factors that contributed to shaping this awareness, in addition to exploring the intellectual approaches and methods that Arabs used to learn about the West and its intellectual and scientific achievements.

In this regard, Taha Abdel Rahman sought to establish an authentic and creative Arab modernity, far from imitation, with its unique spirit that stems from its reality, represented in being an independent spirit that seeks to advance, and he sought to achieve this by renewing Arab thought, and establishing an Islamic philosophy that rivals modern Western philosophy in its starting points, perceptions, concepts, and terminology.

To implement his vision, he innovated by formulating his terminological system, based on which he called for creativity and difference, to liberate Arab thought from dependency, where his reading of Western modernity was a turning point towards establishing an integrative view according to an approach that is consistent with the moral nature of man, moving from dependency and imitation to independence and creativity, and developing Arab-Islamic culture, by transcending imported Western rationalities with supporting rationality linked to religion, free from regressive ideologies, through expressing the true intellectual concerns of our Arab reality, far from any projection of the Western modernist experience onto this reality, thus, Taha Abdel Rahman confronted all forms of Westernization, by standing on the shortcomings and limitations of the mechanisms adopted by the Western modernist mind by throwing itself into the arms of globalization, which corrupted the spiritual side of human.

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