ISLAM AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT: A REFORM VISION FROM SUDAN

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Abstract*: This paper reviews the role of religion in the development of society in light of the views of Al-Ustaz Mahmoud M Taha, who was executed by the Sudanese government in 1985. Taha's views were considered modern and reformatory. However, they were also considered controversial and led to his conviction of apostasy and execution. This paper discusses some of the views presented in his book "Religion and Social Development" and examines their potential to provide suggestions for the development of individuals and societies. Religion from the perspectives of intellectuals, such as Al-Ustaz Mahmoud M Taha is of an essential role in the development of individuals and societies alike. These kinds of views place religion in an established position and prevent it from the deviations of thought that lead to extremism and terrorism.*

Keywords*: Mahmoud M. Taha, Sudan, Religion, Social Development, Reform, Science*

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Introduction

In this modern era, religion in general and Islam in particular are facing the most significant challenge. This however is to keep pace with the needs of the current time and provide solutions to its challenges or a tool in the hands of extremists and maniacs that uses it to terrorize individuals and nations (Allen, 2016; Voas & Fleischmann, 2012). Taha presented a notable understanding of Islam that has the potential to keep up with time and meet its needs. His book "The Second Message of Islam" discussed his visions about the development of sharia and distinguished between two levels of discourse in the Quran (An Na'im & Taha, 2015; Kuru, 2019).

According to The Republican Brother s (1975), the Meccan verses are the verses of origin while the Medinan verses are the verses of branches. The verses of the origins were revealed in Mecca; thus, the basic principles of Islam were presented for thirteen years. It was apparent then that people were unable to apply them and rise to their level, which was the level of maturity and responsibility. When people were unable to bear its consequences, it descended to the level of rationality "guardianship" and the Medinan verses were revealed and the verses of the origins were abrogated. The Medinan verses addressed the people according to their minds but this was done while considering their needs and guiding them gradually according to their ability and their energy. Based on this understanding, Taha presented visions related to several issues concerning individuals and societies. One of the main issues discussed by Taha was the role of

religion in social development. His views regarding religion and social development will be presented and discussed in the following sections.

What is Social Development?

According to Taha (1974), development means an increase whilst social development means an increase in human society or the human element. In general terms, an increase in human wealth-it's an increase in quantity and improvement in quality. In addition, Taha perceives social development as an application of science, in all its forms, to facilitate human life and highlight the forces deposited in its structure. More so, through social development, sciences can be utilized to improve human life on this planet; as a result, the purpose of social development is represented in improving society and the individual.

As per Taha (1974), religion and empirical sciences arose at the same time. He stated that the first man faced horrible forces which some of those brought him more benefits while some were sources of destruction. Thus, he was guided to defense and flattery. The drive to facilitate and secure his life led to the invention of machines and to the emergence of experimental science. The flattery was represented in his rapprochement and fawning of those forces that exceeded his ability and that was what led to the emergence of religion.

As for society, it arose with the emergence of the law of religion. According to Taha (1974), the first human beings needed to live in groups to facilitate and secure their lives. This was the reason behind the emergence of religion and science. The first human being was perceived to be inheriting some behaviors from the animal stage including lust and violence, and so laws were needed to force and chastise him to give up a great deal of freedom. Therefore, the laws of religion arose at the same time as society and the laws of sharia equally arose in a way that ensures a wise reconciliation between the needs of the individual and of the group.

The individual and the group in Islam

According to Taha (1967), it is noteworthy to point out that the individual in Islam is the end and everything else is a means to this end, including the means of the Quran and Islam, and as written that the woman is completely equal with the man. This means that the human individual-woman or man, sane or deranged, should not take a means to an end behind it, rather it is the end to which all means lead. Individuality is the essence of the whole matter, as it has the orbit of assignment and the orbit of honor, since the scales in the day of judgment are only set for the individuals-men and women are equal in this.

Taha stated that this point should be well understood for God Almighty says: "Nor can a bearer of burdens bear another's burdens" and he says: "Whoever does an atom's weight of good will see it, and whoever does an atom's weight of evil will see it." He says: "He comes to us individually." And he says, "Everyone in the heavens and the earth is a slave to the most merciful." This equality between men and women is the origin of Islam, but the Shariah distinguished it for factors that were sought in the development of society throughout history (Taha, 1967).

According to Taha (1967), Islam has been able to resolve the apparent contradiction between the individual's need as well as the group's need and coordinate these two needs so that the individual's need for absolute individual freedom is an extension of the group's need for comprehensive social justice. In other words, this coordination was possible because of monotheism, which made Islam laws fall on two levels: the level of the group and the level of

the individual. As for the treatments (of others) legislation at the level of the group, it is known as the legislation of treatments, and as for his legislation at the level of the individual, it is known as Legislation of worship. The dominant feature of the legislation on treatment is that it is legislation that coordinates the relationship between the individuals in the society, while the dominant feature of the legislation on acts of worship is that it is legislation that coordinates the relationship between the individual and the Lord.

This does not mean that each of these two laws are established in isolation from the other, rather it means they are two parts of one Sharia that can only be established by them together. The difference between these two laws is magnitude, and not a difference of kind. The legislation of treatments is the legislation of acts of worship at a low level, and the legislation of acts of worship is the legislation of treatments at an elevated level because the individual characteristic in the acts of worship is more evident than in the treatments.

What is decided is that worship has no value if it is not reflected in your dealings with the group in a way that is in itself an act of worship. Prophet Mohammed peace be upon him made the whole religion in this field, and said: "The religion is in the treatment of others". It is as if worship in seclusion is a school that prepares the individual for theoretical preparation, then he does not find the opportunity for practical application except in his behavior in the group and practicing it by treating its members.

Monotheism states that all existence has one source, one way, and one destiny. God was its source, and to God, it returns, but the return will be individual "And behold! Ye come to us bare and alone as We created you for the first time" (Quran 6:94, Oxford World's Classics edition). It is essential to know that according to Taha, returning to God is not by cutting distances, but rather by bringing the attributes closer to his attributes by approximating the attributes of the finite to the attributes of the absolute. Additionally, the return of the individual to God is through means, including the means of the Quran, Islam, and the group/society. According to Taha's views, the group had freedom, and it is similar to the base of the pyramid when the individuals' freedom is at its top. In other words, the freedom of the group is the tree and the freedom of the individual is the fruit. From this comprehensive view, Islam does not find a contradiction or a paradox between the individual and the group.

Interestingly, when Islam, through monotheism, reached this precise realization between the individual and the group legislated all its legislation in a certain manner that fulfilled one context; the need of the individual and the need of the group. It did not sacrifice the individual for the sake of the group, thus defeating the end by means, and did not also sacrifice the group, for the sake of the individual, so it neglects the most important means of achieving individualism. The legislation of Islam, in all its forms, came in a high arrangement of the ability to reconcile the individual's need for absolute individual freedom, and the group's need for comprehensive social justice.

The Development of Feelings and Thought

Development is the increase in quantity and quality. Since the human being is the goal of every endeavor to develop life, social development means an increase in human resource and improvement in its type. Human development can only be possible by developing two basic talents-the mind and the heart, which means the development of thought and feeling. What hinders this development is ignorance and fear. Thought and feeling cannot develop when the

mind is distorted by ignorance and the heart is divided by fears. The fear that the human was facing in the past had divided the human structure into a conscious and a subconscious mind.

The subconscious mind is nothing but a prison of desires that man has suppressed to be safe from the entanglements of the natural environment. Rather, the repression was due to fear of the penalties resulting from violating the custom of society, and fear of the wrath of the Gods. This division in itself was a stage of ascension towards the desired goal. But it turned out to be the end of the path, an obstacle that hinders the progression of this ascent however the progression is only achieved by getting rid of it. Therefore, there is no way to salvation except by liberating man from fear, because man, with this liberation, concludes with the unification of his structure, and then expands his thought and feeling.

The Purpose of Social Development

As discussed earlier, Taha stated that the individual was there before the emergence of society. The future according to him is for the individual and not for society. Therefore, society is only important at this stage but humans are progressing in a way that highlights the individual who has dispensed society. This point leads to religion for it was from the beginning an attempt for the individual to triumph over his environment. This attempt appeared in the invention of society as a means to seek individuality and identity. The Islamic legislation is the origin of the primary society. The first legislation or custom that contributed to the formation of the society was the custom that regulated sexual instinct and individual property.

This leads us directly to the laws of Islam. The laws of Islam emphasize the sentences of retribution (qasas) and doctrinal punishment (hadd) (Khalil'Athamina, 1992; Meri, 2018; Fox & Yisraeli, 2017). The laws of retribution are very disciplined and the laws of doctrinal punishment are at the end of discipline as they are based on what is beyond religion and belief. They are based on the lives of the living before the emergence of brains that allow them to distinguish between what is forbidden and what is permissible.

The rule was in the issue of accuracy in the legislation of hadd and the legislation of qasas. Taha stated that Almighty's saying: (Whoever does an atom's weight of good will see it, and whoever does an atom's weight of evil will see it). This is the level of the struggle of living with the environment. When the Sharia was presented in texts it stated the eye for an eye and the tooth for a tooth principle. It was obvious that this sharia was the same as what came in Torah (Angle, 2012; Roth, 2014). The commands of an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth is the sharia of religion in the sense that religion means retribution, (as you condemn condemns)- you will be treated the same way you treat others. For society to exist, it requires you to limit your freedom. In other words, your freedom ends where the freedom of your neighbor begins. This is religion. Whoever attacks someone and takes his/her eye out, the same has to be done to him so that he can undergo the amount of pain he inflicts on others with a hurtful word or a heinous act. Subsequently, he can treat others visually, imaginatively, and intelligently.

Social Development a Peace Attempt

From Taha's view, social development is an attempt to be in harmony between man and the environment. Social development is the introduction of science into human activities until we find an equation to live in peace - we live in peace from hostilities, famines, ignorance, and diseases. Therefore, social development takes all these considerations in its allocations. It takes economic planning as a backbone for the whole society because there can be no work in reform without economic development. Furthermore, there is cultural and health planning. This also

includes planning to eradicate crime and planning for the facilities that would highlight the value of the individual, improve his/her status, and elevate him/her to the desired levels of dignity and freedom.

According to Taha, the conflict involved is in the issue of the inability to distinguish between the individual and the group because the history was apparently against the individual. Society was invented, and it is the means of the individual and in Islam; the individual is the addressee.

Islam has a strong emphasis on individualism. It comes clearly in the expressions of the assignment. Allah says: "Every soul is a hostage for what it has earned" (Quran 74:38, Oxford World's Classics edition). Our Lord, the Blessed and Exalted, addresses the individual in this way: "No laden soul shall bear another's load. If one is heavily burdened and calls for his load to be carried, nothing of it will be carried, not even if he is a close relative"(Quran 35:18, Oxford World's Classics edition) and(We inherit from him what he says and he will come to Us alone)(Quran 19:80, Oxford World's Classics edition) or "And every one of them will come to Him on the Day of Resurrection, alone"(Quran 19:95, Oxford World's Classics edition)"Now you have returned to Us, individually, as We created you at first"(Quran 6:94, Oxford World's Classics edition).

Taha stated that humanity is at a crossroad at the moment and there should be a clear vision that the individual is the end and society is his/her means. Social development must be directed to achieve the society from which emerges the complete, knowledgeable, and free individual. This should be the goal of social development and if the individual was not the center of all activities, economic development cannot be achieved. Economic development, without giving attention to the individual as the center stage, is a disappointment and a defeat, because the individual is the real wealth. The individuals who produce the internal conviction which they work in for the sake of economic development make economic development possible.

If the individual is neglected and the focus is on economic development, then the economic development will be a failure and defeated. For instance, in Sudan, the crisis of the Sudanese is a crisis of morality and not a crisis of scientific competence. The Sudanese have scientific competence, and they know how to plan. But when it comes to planning, every good planning of execution dies and fails because individuals who do not have refined consciences rise to be overseers over the refined minds. In the present stage, the Russian experience in Socialism failed for the same reason, which is the neglect of the value of the individual.

The Need for a New Understanding of Religion

According to Taha, if religion is not understood in an image that is consistent with the accuracy of the demand for science, it may impede development. Today, some people think that religion is an obstacle to development but that is not what religion represents. Some persons have rejected socialism in the name of religion and claimed that socialism is blasphemy. These set of people may as well refuse to think about social development, or if they do so, they may think that socialism is not necessary, for example, for social development.

It must be clear that there cannot be social development without socialism. Planning had arisen from the emergence of socialism. There was no planning in capitalism that even the capitalists, when they are planning presently are accused of planning for the benefit of the capitalist. However, the planning that goes to society to improve its quantity and quality comes with socialist thinking, and the fault goes with economic planning from the socialist side. This fault

however is the neglect of the freedom of thinking, and people who are having planning ethics are equally few. It's as if they are the managers and movers of the wheel of the state, and they tend to position people as implementing hands only. This is an apparent flaw and in fact a flaw of Marxist philosophy itself.

Islam needs to be perceived in a way that allows us to go with the development of society into advancement, so that the entire planetary society is symbiotic, cooperative, and at peace with each other. This is how society can be a means to individual freedom. To understand this, it is critical to understand the purpose behind religion. The purpose behind religion is human dignity. All religion came for the sake of human dignity, and its emphasis on individualism in the way mentioned earlier. Individualism is at the root of the origins of Islam. All the Qur'an is consistent and filled with it. This is because you meet God as an individual, and you do not meet God in a herd.

The affirmation of religion for this meaning is what we need to understand at present. According to Taha, by this understanding, the existing contradiction between science and religion will be dismantled. In addition to what was discussed earlier according to Taha also, science and religion originated at the same time, but science proceeded with greater strides than religion. He stated that religion is based on belief and submission more than on knowledge and the latter is based on thought, management, and experience. This contradiction appears in naive images, for instance, some used to believe, or perhaps still believe, and they say that whoever says that the Americans reached the moon is an infidel (Fales et al., 2020; Plait, 2002).

Religious as a Sophisticated Thinker

Taha had indeed called for a reconsideration of religion with a new understanding. Religion needs to be understood in an accurate, precise, and correct manner. The means to achieve this is distant from taking risk with thoughts, but to tame the thought through proper and mindful worship. It is the purpose of religion to liberate and correct thoughts. As stated in Quran "And We revealed to you the message that you may make clear to the people what was sent down to them and that they might give thought" (Quran 16:44, Oxford World's Classics edition). The religious needs to be recognized as a thinker at the top so that he directs all human activities to be in the service of the individual, to be free, to be generous, and to be complete.

Concluding Remarks

Religion from the perspectives of intellectuals, such as Al-Ustaz Mahmoud M Taha is of an essential role in the development of individuals and societies alike. Taha considered religion as the means to produce free and peaceful individuals who are capable of spreading peace around them and in their societies. These views place religion in an established position and prevent it from the deviations of thought that lead to extremism and terrorism.

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