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Ethics Unbound: Islam and the Philosophy of Taha Abdurrahman

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Abstract

The paper rigorously analyses the notion of Islamic modernity as defined by the Moroccan philosopher Taha Abdurrahman, highlighting his distinctive synthesis of intellectual liberty, spiritual profundity, and moral rejuvenation. Abdurrahman's framework is articulated as a persuasive counter-narrative to dominant Western-centric and secular paradigms of modernity, establishing its alternative foundation in Islamic metaphysics and moral philosophy (Abdurrahman, 2006). Utilising postcolonial theory, Sufi philosophical traditions, and the debate on various modernities (Eisenstadt, 2000; Appadurai, 1996; Said, 1979), this paper situates Abdurrahman's approach within a wider context of global intellectual difficulties. It contends that his technique offers Muslim communities in the Global South and the diaspora a substantial framework to address matters of cultural authenticity, dignity, and identity in the modern context.

Keywords: Modernity, Spirit, Location, Majority, Universality, Critique

1. Introduction

The common understanding of modernity is that it is a project that is primarily moulded by Western secular rationalism. This is a project that places an emphasis on individual autonomy, technological advancement, and institutional transformation. A story like this, on the other hand, frequently marginalises non-Western epistemologies, particularly those that are rooted in spiritual traditions (Said, 1979; Eisenstadt, 2000). Within this context, Taha Abdurrahman has emerged as a key voice contesting these assumptions by proposing an alternative modernity anchored in Islamic ethical norms, metaphysical principles, and intellectual autonomy (Abdurrahman, 2006). This study critically examines the theoretical underpinnings of Abdurrahman's intellectual contributions, arguing that his framework offers a compelling and urgently needed alternative to prevailing Eurocentric notions of modernity. By delving into his unique synthesis of Islamic ethical norms, metaphysical principles, and intellectual autonomy, this research aims to demonstrate how Abdurrahman's thought not only contests but actively reconfigures the very discourse of modernity, paving the way for a more inclusive and spiritually grounded understanding of progress. The perspective of Abdurrahman is defined by the fact that he makes a conscious effort to steer clear of the unfavourable consequences that are sometimes associated with Western modernity. Instead, he

aims to establish a singular voice for Islamic modernity, one that is strongly related to spirituality and ethics. The intellectual endeavour of Abdurrahman originates from the Moroccan tradition. He conducts critical engagement with regional figures such as Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, Mohammed Arkoun, and Abdelkébir Khatibi, in addition to engaging with global postcolonial intellectuals such as Edward Said (Arkoun, 2009; Khatibi, 1983; Said, 1979). In particular, this Moroccan intellectual legacy has been particularly important in maintaining continuing conversations concerning the contours of modernity.

The works of additional intellectuals, such as Abdallah Laroui and Farah Antun, further expand this discourse. Each of these thinkers brings a unique viewpoint to the discussion regarding the relationship between modernity, tradition, and change in Islamic countries. In contrast to al-Jabri, who emphasised the importance of re-establishing oneness with divine guidance in order to restore moral and spiritual integrity, Antun pushed for intellectual inquiry and reason as fundamental drivers of societal growth rather than traditional religious rites.

These intellectuals saw that the significance of ideas such as democracy, constitutionalism, and personal freedom was essential for the flourishing of society, and they endeavoured to incorporate these institutions into the framework of Islam. Even though these attempts were made, the modernist reformist movement's influence began to decrease in the latter part of the twentieth century. This occurred despite the fact that the movement's interaction with Western intellectual paradigms became more prominent. Different incorporations of Western methodology and theoretical frameworks were brought about as a consequence of the subsequent division between revivalist and reconstructionist approaches. In recent times, however, there has been a convergence among modernists, which has been made possible by the synthesis of many concepts and the scholarly specialisation of various specialists. In light of this, Abdurrahman advocates for a pluralistic definition of modernity, which recognises the contributions of other civilisations rather than presuming that there is a single, all-encompassing way to achieve modernity (Appadurai, 1996). Despite the fact that revivalist perspectives continue to advocate for Islam as a comprehensive framework that is adaptive to contemporary difficulties, secularist currents continue to call for the separation of religion from state and public life. Within the context of this contentious intellectual landscape, Abdurrahman's work stands out due to its dedication to articulating an Islamic modernity in which ethical and spiritual values serve as foundational elements. This work also points towards a future in which multiple modernities can

coexist in dialogue that is both creative and constructive (Eisenstadt, 2000; Appadurai, 1996).

2. Islamic Modernity as Ethical-Spiritual Renewal

The work of Taha Abdurrahman is positioned amid critical debates on the coloniality of knowledge and the multiplicity of modernities which are currently taking place (Eisenstadt, 2000; Said, 1979). Using Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979) as a foundation, Abdurrahman reveals the epistemic violence and marginalisation that are inherent in Western representations of the "Orient" (Said, 1979). Marshall Hodgson's advocacy for a de-centred world history (Hodgson, 1993) and Eisenstadt's notion of various modernities (Eisenstadt, 2000) are two theories that dispute the concept of a single trajectory of modernisation. He is also in agreement with both of these theories. Abdurrahman's analysis places a significant emphasis on the necessity of decolonising knowledge systems through the incorporation of Islamic metaphysics and ethics into contemporary discursive practices (Abdurrahman, 2006). As part of this process, it is necessary to reassess binary oppositions, such as reason vs faith, tradition versus progress, and Western versus non-Western, and to work towards a modernity that is integrated and ethical. The universalist claims of Western rationality are criticised by Abdurrahman, who contends that such frameworks frequently conceal their own cultural particularities while excluding non-Western epistemologies. In his response, he puts up a philosophy known as "trusteeship" (*al-amāna*), which emphasises the importance of ethical responsibility, humility, and dialogical participation as the fundamental elements that underpin both the production of knowledge and the practice of social relationships (Abdurrahman, 2006).

This approach does not only reject the contributions made by Western institutions; rather, it tries to engage in critical discourse that is sensitive to the moral scopes and settings of the local community. By pushing for a diverse modernity that is anchored in Islamic heritage, Abdurrahman challenges the predominance of secular modernism and opens up opportunities for communication across different civilisations. The fact that he places such an emphasis on ethical renewal and the creative reconstruction of tradition places him among modern thinkers who are attempting to find a balance between authenticity and global participation (Hashas & al-Khatib, 2021; Ramadan, 2009). In the end, Abdurrahman's work promotes a reinvention of modernity that is not only inclusive and dialogical but also sensitive to the spiritual and ethical requirements of an assortment of different societies.

3. Comparative Perspectives: Mediterranean Intellectual Trajectories

The central focus of Abdurrahman's critique of Eurocentric modernity is the manner in which Western paradigms have monopolised conceptions of progress, reason, and ethics, frequently disregarding Islamic intellectual traditions as being outdated or archaic (Said, 1979). Abdurrahman, building upon Said's criticism, draws attention to the fact that these universalist arguments have traditionally been positioned within Eurocentric power systems. Furthermore, he emphasises how these claims legitimise dominance by portraying the East as being inferior and consistent (Said, 1979). He contends that the Western emphasis on instrumental reason ignores the spiritual and ethical components that are necessary for human flourishing. As a result of this absence, he believes that Western societies themselves have experienced crises of meaning and morality, which highlights the necessity of alternative modernities that are founded on other epistemologies, particularly those that are present in Islamic thinking (Mazlish, 2005; Stoller, 1995). In his demand for the rehabilitation and revitalisation of Islamic epistemologies, Abdurrahman emphasises that these epistemologies should not be viewed as merely reactions to Western models but rather as proactive, progressive frameworks that are able to handle modern difficulties (Abdurrahman, 2006). He is adamant that the Islamic tradition, with its holistic perspective on knowledge, ethics, and spirituality, provides resources for a modernity that is more holistic and humane. In this manner, he promotes the concept of "epistemic plurality", which is a model of modernity that defies reduction to a single, dominating paradigm and instead encourages a conversation between different civilisations (Eisenstadt, 2000). Furthermore, the method that Abdurrahman takes tries to dismantle the binary antagonism that exists between modernity and tradition. Instead, it proposes a dynamic interaction in which tradition is perpetually reinterpreted and re-enlivened in response to new conditions (Kassab, 2010). Taking this approach is a challenge to both the unthinking absorption of Western patterns and the inflexible preservation of old forms. It also promotes a creative synthesis that is ethically anchored and culturally resonant.

In the process of furthering this critique, Abdurrahman positions Islamic intellectual heritage as an important interlocutor in global debates about the future of modernity. This line of thinking exemplifies how marginalised knowledge traditions can enhance and modify dominant discourses, thus contributing to the development of a global order that is truly pluralistic and just. This section offers a comparative analysis that not only highlights the shared

concerns of Mediterranean and Arab thinkers in reimagining modernity but also critically examines the nuances and divergences in their approaches. By incorporating Mohammed Arkoun, Abdelkébir Khatibi, and Mohammed Aziz Lahbabi, we can discern how their respective critiques of tradition, colonialism, and Western secular modernity both parallel and enrich Abdurrahman's vision (Arkoun, 2009; Khatibi, 1983; Lahbabi, 1976). This comparative lens allows for a deeper interpretive understanding of Abdurrahman's unique contribution, demonstrating how his thought stands in conversation with, and at times in contrast to, other significant intellectual trajectories in the region, thereby expanding the article's scope to encompass a broader intellectual landscape.

4. Islam in Europe: Relevance and Resonance

The purpose of this section is to investigate how Abdurrahman's criticism of Western modernity is directly attributable to the difficulties that European Muslims are encountering. In many cases, the experience of Muslims living in Europe is characterised by a complicated interaction between the processes of integration, the construction of identities, and the negotiation of religious practice within secular societies (Cesari, 2006; Ramadan, 2009). Studies conducted by academics such as Jocelyne Cesari have provided a comprehensive analysis of the varied character of the presence of Muslims in Europe. These studies have brought to light the ways in which concerns of ethics, secularism, and identity are continually being re-articulated (Cesari, 2006). In her argument, Cesari contends that European Muslims frequently face a conflict in their day-to-day lives between the dominant secular frameworks of their host countries and the religious legacy that they have been brought up with. This conflict presents itself in a variety of forms, including debates over the placement of religious symbols in public spaces and discussions about whether or not Islamic law is compatible with the legal systems of European countries.

The focus that Abdurrahman places on a modernity that is both ethical and spiritual offers a valuable prism through which to comprehend and overcome these difficulties (Abdurrahman, 2006). His critique of a merely instrumental rationality, which he considers to be a hallmark of Western modernity, resonates with the experiences of a large number of European Muslims who are looking for a more holistic approach to living that integrates their faith with the realities of the modern world. Another famous scholar, Tariq Ramadan, provides further articulation of the challenges that European Muslims are confronted with, particularly with regard to the formation of a distinct European Muslim identity (Ramadan, 2009). For the purpose of engaging in constructive

dialogue with European societies, Ramadan places an emphasis on the significance of internal reform and intellectual renewal within Muslim communities. He is an advocate for a nuanced understanding of Islamic ideas, which allows for adaptation and innovation while yet maintaining fundamental ethical ideals. An endeavour of this nature would benefit from having a philosophical basis, which is provided by Abdurrahman's appeal for intellectual autonomy and a re-engagement with Islamic intellectual tradition (Abdurrahman, 2006). By recentring Islamic metaphysics and ethics, Abdurrahman provides a framework that enables European Muslims to negotiate the intricacies of their dual identity, as both Muslims and Europeans, without succumbing to either assimilation or isolation. His way of thinking advocates a proactive engagement with modernity, not as a Western construct that is monolithic, but rather as a pluralistic place where different contributions from other civilisations can coexist and enrich one another (Appadurai, 1996; Eisenstadt, 2000). It is essential to adopt this viewpoint in order to cultivate a sense of belonging and agency among European Muslims. This will enable them to make contributions that are relevant to the social, cultural, and intellectual landscape of Europe.

5. Decolonial Translation and the Role of Language

Abdurrahman's deep views on decolonial translation and the essential function of language in influencing knowledge and opposing prevailing narratives are explored in depth in this section of the article (Abdurrahman, 2005; Basalamah, 2018). According to Abdurrahman, translation is not only a linguistic exercise that involves the transfer of meaning from one language to another; rather, it is an act that is philosophical and ethical in nature, and it has the potential to either ensure the continuation of colonial hierarchies or to allow actual intellectual freedom (Abdurrahman, 2005). According to his argument, a significant portion of the translation of Islamic philosophy into Western languages that has been done up until now has been a "colonial translation". This translation has stripped Islamic conceptions of their ethical and spiritual depth, reducing them to categories that are understandable within a framework that is Eurocentric (Benabdelali, 2009). According to his argument, this process is one of the factors that contributes to the marginalisation and misrepresentation of Islamic intellectual traditions. In order to combat this, Abdurrahman proposes a "decolonial translation" that places an emphasis on the moral and spiritual aspects of Islamic principles and resists the reduction of these notions to interpretations that are solely rational or secular (Abdurrahman, 2005; Basalamah, 2018). In order to successfully use this strategy, one must possess a profound comprehension of the language of origin and the worldview

that is entrenched within it. Additionally, one must be dedicated to transmitting the depth and complexity of Islamic philosophy without compromising its integrity. An appeal for intellectual honesty and an acknowledgement of the intrinsic worth of a variety of epistemologies is both included in this statement. This commitment to decolonial translation is exemplified by his own works, such as *Rūḥ al-Ḥadātha* (The Spirit of Modernity) and *The Question of Ethics*, in which he painstakingly unpacks intricate philosophical concepts in a manner that challenges Western assumptions while concurrently remaining rooted in Islamic tradition (Abdurrahman, 2005, 2006). This concept of decolonial translation and the significance of it is further enriched by the perspectives of other researchers within the academic community. In the contemporary Muslim world, Muhammad Hashas and Tarek Sabry have investigated the ways in which language and translation are connected with concerns of identity and power (Hashas and al-Khatib, 2021; Sabry, 2012). Hashas, in his work on Islamic ethics, emphasises the significance of re-appropriating and re-articulating Islamic principles in a manner that is both true to the past and pertinent to the issues that are faced in the current world. Sabry, through his research of Arab cultural studies, highlights the fact that language and cultural expressions are areas of contestation and negotiation. These are the places where prevailing narratives can be questioned, and alternative viewpoints can develop. Elisabeth Kassab and Salah Basalamah offer additional insights into the significant role that translation plays in the process of reaching a mutual understanding across different cultures (Kassab, 2010; Basalamah, 2018). The work that Kassab has done on contemporary Arab philosophy places an emphasis on the necessity of a critical engagement with both Western and Arab intellectual traditions. She advocates for a conversation that goes beyond simplistic binaries. Basalamah, a famous academic in the field of translation studies, advocates for a philosophy of translation that considers the ethical and political aspects of linguistic transfer. He also advocates for a methodology that is more responsible and sensitive to cultural differences. Additionally, Abdessalam Benabdelali contributes to this discussion by investigating the philosophical ramifications of translation, particularly in the context of the deconstruction of preexisting intellectual frameworks (Benabdelali, 2009).

Their collaborative work provides a better contextualisation of Abdurrahman's philosophical method, ethics of translation, and intellectual legacy, revealing how his ideas link with broader academic discussions on language, power, and the decolonisation of knowledge.

6. Core Principles of Abdurrahman's Philosophy

The intellectual body of work that Taha Abdurrahman has produced provides a comprehensive evaluation and critique of modernity from an Islamic point of view. He argues that while modernity is an unavoidable reality, it should not be accepted without critical examination, especially regarding the Western paradigm, which he considers deficient in both morality and spirituality (Abdurrahman, 2006). Building on this critique, Abdurrahman constructs a vision of Islamic modernity founded on three fundamental principles: universality, critique, and intellectual autonomy (*al-amāna*). He asserts that to transcend the passive replication of Western patterns, Muslims must cultivate intellectual originality and autonomy. This autonomy is not about isolation or rejection but about revitalising Islamic thought through critical engagement, harmonising reason with faith and tradition, and contributing to global intellectual discourses from a uniquely Islamic perspective. He urges Muslim intellectuals to draw upon their rich intellectual legacy, fostering agency and creativity while maintaining openness to dialogue and learning from others (Abdurrahman, 2006; Hashas & al-Khatib, 2021). The critique principle, for Abdurrahman, is the establishment of a rigorous and ethically founded culture of questioning. He insists that rational investigation must always be undertaken in conversation with ethical and spiritual considerations, rejecting the reduction of reason to merely an instrument for material advancement (Abdurrahman, 2005).

This approach, fundamental to Islamic intellectual history, is crucial for revitalising thought and practice in contemporary Muslim countries, advocating a reasoning orientated towards the good and rooted in a moral aim. He contrasts this with the unfettered rationalism of Western modernity, which he believes has led to crises of meaning and ethics (Abdurrahman, 2005). Universality, the third pillar, is reinterpreted by Abdurrahman as ethical and spiritual inclusiveness. He condemns secular universalism's tendency to impose particular values globally, instead advocating for a shared moral and spiritual foundation that fosters plurality and mutual respect (Abdurrahman, 2006). True universality, from his viewpoint, is not about eliminating differences but about constructing bridges of understanding across diverse worldviews (Appadurai, 1996; Eisenstadt, 2000). This ambition points towards a truly pluralistic modernity, where various traditions can coexist, collaborate, and enrich one another while retaining their individual identities. Abdurrahman's paradigm thus offers a persuasive alternative to prevalent conceptions of modernity. By grounding modern renewal in the ethical and metaphysical insights of the Islamic tradition, he provides Muslim societies with a means to address contemporary global challenges – such as social

justice, environmental crises, and the search for meaning – without sacrificing intellectual independence or spiritual depth (Abdurrahman, 2005; Hashas & al-Khatib, 2021). In contrast to the negative characteristics of Western modernity, such as aggressive globalisation, moral deterioration from unfettered individual liberty, and the prioritisation of reason over faith (or vice versa), Abdurrahman's approach depicts modernity as a true discourse among diverse traditions. He argues that every tradition has the potential to contribute its own unique contributions to the collective endeavour of humanity, envisioning a future where modernity is enriched by ethical and spiritual depth, formed by an ongoing conversation between the civilisations of the world (Eisenstadt, 2000).

Abdurrahman is different from Mohammed Arkoun because he moves from metaphysical theory to ethical practice. Arkoun's "applied Islamology" project tries to modernise Islamic thought through historicism, secular anthropology, and post-structural critique. Arkoun wants to weaken the authority of religion by promoting critical rationality and epistemic pluralism. Abdurrahman, on the other hand, reinterprets reason in a way that goes against both rigorous orthodoxy and secular simplification. His second main idea, "spirituality as rationality", goes against the Enlightenment's idea that faith and reason are separate. Instead, it suggests a model in which reason is inherently moral, spiritually guided, and linguistically connected. In this way, Abdurrahman agrees with Seyyed Hossein Nasr, especially when it comes to their criticism of the loss of sacredness in knowledge and the spiritual emptiness of modern life. Once again, Abdurrahman and Nasr disagree.

Nasr wants a perennialist return to metaphysical universals, while Abdurrahman stresses the need to develop a dynamic, historically situated rationality based on Islamic language and ethics. This rationality is not based on tradition or limited by secularism. Abdurrahman's idea for reviving culture and civilisation is based on the third principle, ethical rejuvenation (*tajdīd akhlāqī*). Abdolkarim Soroush changes the way we think about Islam by using individual conscience and pluralistic theology. In contrast, Abdurrahman's ethical work is mostly communal and metaphysical. Soroush talks a lot about Western liberal philosophy and the importance of interpretive flexibility and democratic openness, but he doesn't give enough thought to the ontological foundations of ethics. Abdurrahman, on the other hand, sees ethics as the ontological underpinning of mankind, which is built through language, intention, and strict moral behaviour. In this case, his Sufi background is quite important. *Tajdīd* is not just a change in thinking or doing things; it is also a deep change in

the self that is necessary to deal with the dehumanising effects of global capitalism and secular modernity.

These differences show that Abdurrahman has a unique philosophical view, even though he agrees with other Muslim philosophers on important subjects like the crisis of tradition, the interaction with Western civilisation, and the need for reform. He doesn't agree with Arkoun and Soroush's secularist compromises, Nasr's metaphysical conservatism, or Al-Attas's formalised epistemological methods. He suggests a relational model of Islamic modernity based on the moral growth of both individuals and communities. This model is based on a philosophically sound interaction with Islamic traditions of logic, language, and spirituality. Abdurrahman gives a unique and useful point of view to present discussions by rethinking modernity not as a fixed historical achievement to be copied or ignored, but as a moral framework to be reinterpreted. His work challenges common ideas about modernity by showing that Islamic moral and spiritual resources are not only extras but are instead vital tools for civilisational renewal in a variety of modernities. effort, Abdurrahman goes beyond just criticising and becomes not only a commentator on modernity but also one of its most creative re-theorisers in the Islamic intellectual tradition.

7. Sufism, Imagination, and Ethical Renewal

His major contribution to an academically rigorous and ethically based view of Islamic modernity is the source of Abdurrahman's intellectual relevance in the context of modernity. Instead of refocusing Sufism as merely an individual spiritual path, Abdurrahman refocused it as a cognitive and ethical guide for modern Islamic thought (Al-Jabri, 1995). He did this by purposefully distancing himself from the Salafism doctrine, which he considered to be excessively reactive to shifting local and global circumstances. The most important aspect of his project is the emphasis that he places on ethics, which is also the foundation of his critique of Western modernity. The Western civilisation, according to Abdurrahman, is built on the awe-inspiring belief that people are essentially rational beings, capable of discovering the truth and constructing societies entirely by reason. In contrast, he contends that human beings have an inbuilt ethical character and that the search for ethical principles ought to govern both intellectual inquiry and social organisation (Abdurrahman, 2005). Abdurrahman's renewal initiative is centred around the synthesis of Sufi metaphysics with the capacity of *khayāl*, which is a term that refers to imagination. Abdurrahman contends that imagination is much more than a source of artistic or spiritual experience; rather, it is an essential cognitive and ethical instrument for transformation. He draws influence from figures such as Ibn

Arabi in order to make his argument. Individuals are given the ability to transcend strict dogmatism, creatively reinterpret ancestral traditions, and respond constructively to contemporary problems through the practice of *khayal* (Abdurrahman, 2006). For him, imagination is the means by which new possibilities for social justice, spiritual growth, and communal harmony are envisioned. This is the means by which important links between inner transformation and social reform are forged. According to the framework proposed by Abdurrahman, imagination serves as a bridge between the visible and the invisible, as well as between the rational and the spiritual. Believers are able to reinterpret sacred texts, actively engage with modern circumstances, and build an ethos of compassion and solidarity as a result of this aptitude. By emphasising the concept of *khayāl*, Abdurrahman opposes the reductive forms of knowledge that prioritise abstract logic while disregarding ethical vision and spiritual depth (Abdurrahman, 2006). The purpose of his method is to promote the revitalisation of Islamic thought by reintroducing the imaginative capacity for creative and transformative work.

This synthesis of Sufi metaphysics with the imaginative faculty of *khayāl* represents a significant departure from purely descriptive accounts of Islamic thought. It allows for an interpretive analysis that connects Abdurrahman's ethical and decolonial critique to the broader theoretical contributions on multiple modernities by scholars such as Eisenstadt, Arnason, and Appadurai (Eisenstadt, 2000; Appadurai, 1996). By grounding his critique in a rich intellectual and spiritual tradition, Abdurrahman not only challenges the hegemony of Western modernity but also offers a compelling vision for a more pluralistic and ethically orientated future.

8. Conclusion

This paper has explored Taha Abdurrahman's intellectual contributions as a compelling framework for an alternative Islamic modernity, one that critically engages with Western paradigms while remaining deeply rooted in Islamic ethical and spiritual traditions. We have demonstrated how Abdurrahman's emphasis on decolonial translation, ethical renewal, and the imaginative faculty of *khayāl* offers a robust response to the challenges of contemporary modernity. By synthesising his ideas with broader discussions on multiple modernities and engaging with other Muslim intellectuals, this study has moved beyond a descriptive account to provide an interpretive analysis that highlights the transformative potential of Islamic thought in shaping a more pluralistic and ethically grounded global future. Abdurrahman's work ultimately serves as a vital contribution to postcolonial critique and offers new avenues for epistemic reorientation within the discourse of modernity.

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