

## **The Sufi tendencies of Islamic Modernity in the thought of Abd al-Rahman Taha**

**Dr. Abdelkader Soltani**<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Saida, Algeria. Email: [bark76@gmail.com](mailto:bark76@gmail.com)

**Abstract**---Abd al-Rahman Taha is regarded as one of the prominent figures of contemporary Arab and Islamic thought. He devoted significant attention to the critical reading of heritage. He also examined and challenged the various approaches that dominated the interpretation of this heritage, regardless of their methods or sources. Within this intellectual project, he called for the establishment of an Arab-Islamic philosophy. This philosophy draws selectively from Western civilization to address internal reform, while preserving the intellectual and scientific foundations of Arab-Islamic heritage. These foundations had once contributed to shaping the course of history in earlier periods. A key feature of Taha's project is his emphasis on the practical and ethical dimensions of the Islamic alternative to Western modernity. He argued that Western modernity largely neglected this ethical dimension. Many Arab and Islamic readings followed Western methodologies without critical revision or adaptation. This uncritical adoption resulted in a form of intellectual production detached from its cultural roots. It mirrored Western approaches to heritage and led to calls for a complete rupture with Arab-Islamic tradition. In practice, this approach failed to produce tangible progress and remained limited to unproductive discourse. In his intellectual project, Abd al-Rahman Taha paid particular attention to Sufi heritage. He derived from it many of his methodological perspectives. He sought to imbue life with an ethical vision, which he considered the only viable path for overcoming the deteriorating condition of the Muslim community. At the same time, he did not ignore the need to engage with contemporary scientific and technological developments. He believed that modern civilization, in its rapid pursuit of efficiency, had marginalized the spiritual dimension in its service to humanity. This perspective reflects a lived intellectual experience in the thought of Abd al-Rahman Taha. His work expresses the outcomes of deep reflection on thought, life, and Islamic law. As a practitioner affiliated with Sufi orders, his project aims at refining Sufism and investing in its foundational principles. He draws upon its texts and sources while rearticulating them through modern tools and concepts. This approach seeks to contribute to the construction of a genuine Islamic modernity.

---

### **How to Cite:**

Soltani, A. (2026). The Sufi tendencies of Islamic Modernity in the thought of Abd al-Rahman Taha. *The International Tax Journal*, 53(1), 525–539. Retrieved from <https://internationaltaxjournal.online/index.php/itj/article/view/547>

The International tax journal ISSN: 0097-7314 E-ISSN: 3066-2370 © 2026

ITJ is open access and licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Submitted: 12 March 2025 | Revised: 20 May 2025 | Accepted: 22 September 2025

**Keywords---**Abd al-Rahman Taha, Sufism, Ethics, Islamic Modernity, Reference Framework.

## **Introduction**

The Sufi thinker Abd al-Rahman Taha proposed a reformative project for Arab-Islamic philosophy and for Islamic modernity. This project is grounded in an original form of creativity rooted in tradition. It draws from heritage what remains suitable for renewal and employs selected tools from contemporary global methodologies when they prove relevant. Through this approach, Taha sought to support the thinker who aspires to reform and to revive the condition of the Muslim community. His aim was to move it from stagnation toward the role of leadership entrusted to it. This leadership stems from its role as the bearer of a final and universal message. Its foundational principles remain constant, while its applications are flexible and responsive to changing social realities. This message carries a spiritual essence and guiding objectives intended for all humanity.

## **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study lies in uncovering the epistemological foundations upon which Abd al-Rahman Taha built his intellectual project. His work directs attention to the necessity of Islamic modernity in confronting the reality of Western modernity. The latter has revealed clear shortcomings in its outcomes, which led its own proponents to search for what lies beyond it. This shift reflects an attempt to overcome the structural flaws that emerged within the modern Western experience. The study also aims to present concrete examples drawn from the intellectual sources and references that shaped Taha's thought.

## **Research Problem**

The central problem of this research can be formulated as follows: given that Abd al-Rahman Taha is intellectually and spiritually affiliated with Sufism, what is the role of Sufism in his reformative project of philosophy and in his theorization of an Islamic modernity that serves humanity? From this main question arise several sub-questions. How did Taha establish the possibility of an Islamic modernity? How did he conceptualize ethics within this project? How did he respond to calls for rupture with heritage? What alternative did he propose? How did he understand ethical formation in terms of means and mechanisms? How did he defend the Qur'anic text as revealed truth? From which sources did he derive his tools of guidance and defense?

## **Objectives of the Study**

This study seeks to demonstrate the impact of Arab-Islamic Sufism as a coherent intellectual framework capable of effecting change. It shows its potential to be integrated into reformist intellectual and practical projects that aim to move the Muslim community from decline toward progress. The study also encourages researchers to invest in Sufism as the Islamic dimension of spiritual purification. This requires refining its texts, disseminating its heritage, and benefiting from the lived experiences of its practitioners. Contemporary societies are in greater need of sound, action-oriented engagement than of abstract ideas that are merely articulated and then abandoned.

## **Research Methodology**

The study adopts an analytical approach based on a careful examination of the thinker's texts and concepts as presented in his works that articulate his reformative project. Relevant examples are collected and organized according to their shared reference frameworks. These materials are then classified and traced back to their origins within classical Islamic Sufi literature.

### **Structure of the Study**

The study begins by examining Abd al-Rahman 'Taha's theoretical articulation of Islamic modernity and by clarifying the premises upon which he built his conclusions. It then moves to an analysis of the status and function of ethics in his thought, along with the means and mechanisms he proposed for ethical formation. Finally, the study addresses his position on contemporary approaches to interpreting the Qur'anic text and the alternatives he offered. All these elements are examined through the lens of the Sufi intellectual framework that underpins his project.

### **1. A Renewed Spirit of Modernity in a Different Era**

The concept of modernity has been defined through multiple terms and interpretations. These variations reflect differences in time, place, and intellectual context. They also correspond to the goals and theoretical starting points through which each intellectual current sought to present a new perspective within its field. One of the main arenas of modernity and renewal has been the domain of thought and philosophy.

In the Western context, the emergence of the concept of modernity coincided with the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. It was associated with openness, intellectual freedom, and the exploration of newly discovered events and newly formulated ideas. This development aimed to align thought with a rapidly changing reality (Lalande, 2001, p. 822). Modernity in this sense represents a distinct civilizational pattern grounded in novelty (Lipovetsky, 2018, p. 85). It stands in opposition to traditional patterns, meaning earlier or inherited cultures. It is characterized by a conscious effort to transcend past interpretations and concepts, while maintaining this transcendence into the future. Human intellectual history, from this perspective, is viewed as a continuous process of enlightenment and expansion that seeks an ever-renewed mastery of the foundations of thought and its principles.

Within this framework, modernity directed its critical focus toward the Church. Some of its members embraced this orientation, despite opposition from ecclesiastical authorities. They called for new interpretations of doctrines and for the reinterpretation of Catholic and inherited religious teachings in light of emerging philosophical, historical, and psychological theories. This approach was justified by the claim that earlier theological writings were shaped by the historical conditions of their time. It also represented a reaction against the growing centralization of ecclesiastical authority, a rejection that became explicit during the Enlightenment. Among the most prominent features of Western modernity were the prioritization of reason over revelation, the secularization of societies, the rejection of submission to any fixed creed or ideology, and the assertion of the inevitability of doctrinal change in accordance with civilizational progress (Ahmed Mohamed Mahmoud Sayed, 2013, pp. 20–26).

This outlines the reality of Western modernity and some of its intellectual manifestations. In contrast, the Arab and Islamic world experienced a period of decline and stagnation at the time when the signs of religious reform and the Enlightenment were emerging in Europe. Ironically, the Enlightenment itself had drawn inspiration from the golden age of Arab-Islamic civilization. These transformations affected multiple fields and disciplines.

As a result, the Arab and Islamic world sought to imitate the Western model and to move within its orbit. Efforts focused on transferring technological and technical progress, alongside a growing fascination with modernist ideas. This climate gave rise to calls among Arab thinkers for a renewed reading of heritage and for the necessity of aligning it with civilizational advancement and scientific progress. Consequently, numerous reform and renaissance projects emerged at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. The influence of these projects, with their diverse ideological orientations, has continued into the contemporary period.

Among these contemporary projects is that of the thinker Abd al-Rahman Taha. Certain dimensions of his work are devoted to establishing the theoretical foundations of Islamic modernity. His reformative approach is based on a dual methodology of deconstruction and reconstruction. In his book *The Question of Ethics: A Contribution to the Ethical Critique of Western Modernity*, he undertakes the phase of critique. This critique targets the practical, discursive, rational, and epistemological practices of Western modernity and exposes the ethical deficiencies that have accompanied it. He then moves to the phase of reconstruction in his work *The Spirit of Modernity: An Introduction to the Foundations of Islamic Modernity*. In its introduction, he clarifies that the first book was not a purely destructive exercise, as some critics claimed. Rather, it contained foundational elements of construction and renewal. This reflects the approach of a thinker who does not overlook reflection and re-creation, even when engaging in what appears to be intellectual deconstruction (Taha, 2006, p. 15).

Abd al-Rahman Taha, in his philosophical approach, called for the establishment of an Islamic modernity. He prepared the groundwork for this initiative with rational premises that make Islamic modernity a viable alternative to Western modernity (Taha, 2006, pp. 17–18). Among these premises are the following:

- Modernity, in general, possesses multiple potentials rather than a single, uniform one. This is evident from the diversity of Western modern experiences, which are far from homogeneous. There are various modernities depending on geographical context, such as “French modernity” or “German modernity,” and also modernities differentiated by field, such as “political modernity” or “social modernity.” Modernity can also vary according to the strength of certain sectors relative to others; for instance, some countries exhibit stronger economic modernity than legal modernity, and so on. All of this occurs despite sharing a common historical trajectory and destiny (Himelfarb, 2009, p. 11).

- The distinctiveness of Arab and Islamic societies in terms of their history and destiny is an established fact. This distinction helps determine the path of the Muslim community toward modernization. Islamic time, in this sense, functions as an ethical dimension in which modernity manifests, bringing benefits and promoting moral excellence. Moreover, Islam, as a revealed religion, provides the means for goodness in this world and prepares the grounds for success in the hereafter.

Taha observed that Western definitions of modernity, despite their varying comprehensiveness, tend to treat modernity as if it were a singular, almost miraculous historical entity, acting upon all things with the power of a divine being. He considered this view inherently non-modern because it elevates modernity from a rational, operational concept to a sacred, quasi-mythical object. To overcome this “deification” in his project, he distinguished between two levels of modernity: its spirit and its reality.

The spirit of modernity refers to the set of values and principles capable of advancing human civilization regardless of time or place. Reality, on the other hand, denotes the actualization of these values and principles in specific historical and spatial contexts. Naturally, the applications of this spirit will differ according to temporal and spatial circumstances (Taha, 2006, pp. 24–175).

Taha’s distinction between these two levels stems from two considerations. First, it reflects his respect and reverence for the foundational principles of the model he theorizes—Islam. The spirit of Islam itself is beyond reproach, even if human implementation of its principles yields results that do not fully align with its intended purposes. The spirit of its law is transcendent, while its application varies according to human effort; it may succeed or fail. Second, this distinction responds to Taha’s observation of the misguided and often unethical consequences of applying Western modernity, despite the high ideals and justice of some of its theoretical principles.

He then proceeded to present the model of modernity as applied in an Islamic context, based on several guiding principles united under three core tenets: the principle of sound judgment (*al-rushd*), the principle of critique, and the principle of comprehensiveness.

The principle of sound judgment emphasizes independence and creative freedom, liberated from any guardianship or authority that might obstruct the productive process of generating new values or re-creating existing ones. The principle of critique, in turn, entails adherence to rational principles while

distinguishing between homogeneity and heterogeneity. This allows for greater precision, scrutiny, and classification, such as differentiating between various forms of life, fields of knowledge, domains of culture, and other areas.

The third principle, comprehensiveness, calls for the expansion of modernity across all areas of life and levels of conduct, extending its influence beyond the society in which it originated. This principle disregards historical or cultural differences and opens a new era of globalization (Taha, 2006, pp. 24–29).

Taha then examined the outcomes arising from these principles, detailing the general and specific conditions required for their Islamic application. The goal is to enable a transition from a current, imitative form of modernity to a prospective, creative modernity. He noted that he did not explicitly invoke principles commonly cited in Western discourse on modernity, such as rationalism, subjectivity, individualism, humanism, freedom, or secularism. This is because he regards his three chosen principles as foundational. From these core principles, the other principles of Western modernity can be derived and later compared with the pillars of his own framework during the Islamic application of the spirit of modernity.

## 2. Islamic Modernity Shaped by the Ethics of Sufism

Abd al-Rahman Taha assigned great importance to ethics in his project, whether in establishing a contemporary Islamic philosophy, critiquing the reality of Western modernity, or grounding the principles he regards as foundational for an Islamic modernity as an alternative to Western modernity. A careful examination of his work shows that most of the principles and pillars he develops—whether in his evaluative approach to Western modernity or in his constructive approach to Islamic modernity—are compared, in both detail and application, to the ethical concerns of Sufism. He subjects them to the refined, aesthetic sensibilities of Sufi reflection regarding life, the cosmos, humanity, and Islamic law.

The emphasis on ethics is a well-known feature of Sufism. Sufi thought and practice were built upon ethics and manners derived from the sacred texts, inspired by the Prophet's presence, or observed in their spiritual guides. They transmitted these teachings through a rigorous chain of authorization or acquired them through personal experiential practice. Sufis considered the essence of Sufism to be morality, stating: "Sufism is character; whoever increases your good character increases your Sufism" (al-Suhrawardi, 2000, p. 62). They also maintained: "The consensus of the scholars in this field is that Sufism is character, and all discussion revolves around a single principle: performing good and refraining from harm" (al-Harawi, n.d., pp. 161–162). Furthermore, they affirmed: "Engagement in every noble character and avoidance of every base trait... are virtuous morals manifested in a noble era, by a noble man, among noble people" (al-Qushayri, 1989, p. 465).

In light of this Sufi celebration of ethics, Abd al-Rahman Taha sees the primary purpose of the Prophet Muhammad's mission as the establishment of ethics (Taha, 2006, p. 204). This view, however, is contestable. The foremost purpose of the prophetic mission is the call to monotheism and the prevention of associating partners with God. Ethics, while important, does not constitute the mission's primary objective. Numerous textual evidences support this, notably those emphasizing God's mercy and forgiveness of all sins except associating partners with Him, as stated in the Qur'an: "Indeed, Allah does not forgive associating partners with Him, but He forgives anything else for whom He wills" [An-Nisa: 48].

Nonetheless, Taha's perspective can be reconciled if one regards monotheism as a stage among the spiritual stations that a seeker attains. These stations are inseparable from ethics, which the seeker gradually cultivates to reach the ultimate spiritual goals. At the culmination of these stations is the singular devotion of the heart to God. This approach finds support in the work of Imam Abdullah al-

Ansari al-Hanbali al-Harawi (d. 481 AH), known as Maqamat al-Saririn (Stations of the Wayfarers), which implicitly and explicitly points toward this ethical and spiritual orientation.

Taha's deep concern with ethics, and his regard for it as both the ultimate goal and foundational principle, stems from his view that ethics is inseparable from action corresponding to thought. He states: *"Action is nothing but a collection of behaviors or deeds that can be judged as either good or evil. Thus, they fall within the domain of ethics. Consequently, ideas must remain inseparable from ethics... We need a philosophy capable of addressing various challenges, obstacles, and difficulties that hinder the renewal of our contribution across different fields. This cannot be achieved through abstract thought alone; rather, it requires thought that is fully imprinted with action and formed by it in a complete and integrated manner"* (Abd al-Rahman Taha, 2013, pp. 55–56).

For Taha, ethics is never detached from action, and thought must be fully shaped by action in order for the community to confront challenges and resume its process of contribution and advancement. He even argues that ethics applies to pure thought itself, not just to action. He writes: *"Properly understood, ethics encompasses all human actions, of every kind. Even theoretical action is itself an ethical action because, by virtue of our humanity, we seek to preserve our lives in a way that brings benefit or avoids harm. In this original utilitarian sense, theoretical action is an ethical action"* (Abd al-Rahman Taha, 2013, pp. 55–56).

This connection between knowledge and action reflects a central feature of Sufism, which consistently emphasizes the union of theory and practice. One of their foundational sayings is: *"Knowledge without action is a means without an end; action without knowledge is a sin; and action is superior to knowledge when it is applied"* (al-Fasi, n.d., p. 37).

In Sufism, action is also a condition of sincerity, for one cannot claim truth without acting upon it. As the Sufi ethicist Ahmad Zuruq explains:

*"It is well-known that Sufism is recognized only in conjunction with righteous deeds. Knowledge of it without action is deception, although action is a condition of perfection. It has been said: knowledge calls for action; if action is absent, knowledge departs"* (al-Fasi, Ahmad Zuruq, n.d., p. 46).

For this reason, Abd al-Rahman Taha explicitly expressed his bold view that ethics are essential qualities, surpassing material needs in importance for the continuation of life. Ethics form the foundation of dignified humanity. They are not, as many Muslims traditionally consider them, mere complements to behavior or a set of virtuous customs. Rather, for Taha, they are indispensable; without them, a human being is degraded from the rank of honor to that of beasts. He writes: *"The entire religion is ethics—both rulings and objectives. It seems that the former conception has captured the attention of the majority of Muslim scholars, who consider moral excellence only a component of religion. They treat it as one part that does not affect the overall system of life if neglected. This diminishes the significance of ethics, whereas the social order of human life cannot exist without the establishment of ethics among its members. Therefore, we must disagree with the common view"* (Abd al-Rahman Taha, 2005, p. 293).

Thus, for Taha, ethics are essential to humanity itself. When ethics are absent, human beings descend into a state of bestiality. Accordingly, the goal of realizing ethical essence is not merely to promote good or prevent evil. Rather, it is to achieve true human essence, which cannot be attained by abstract rationality alone, as advocated by Western modernity. If rationality alone were sufficient, some groups of humanity would not have perished through ignorance while others survived by reason.

For Taha, the solution lies in ethics grounded in faith and the principles of Islam. He states: *"Whoever increases in moral excellence, increases in humanity; and conversely, whoever falls short in moral excellence, falls short in humanity"* (Taha, 2006, p. 227).

This statement aligns directly with his definition of Sufism mentioned earlier. For Taha, Sufism embodies true humanity and the unique honor granted to human beings above many other creatures.

### 3. The Ethics of Compassion: A Sufi-Existential Alternative to the Modern Humanistic Principle of Universality

Among the proposed principles of the spirit of modernity is the principle of comprehensiveness. For Abd al-Rahman Taha, a central element of this principle is universality. However, he reconceived it as an existential universality encompassing all beings, both sentient and non-sentient. This reinterpretation aims to foster genuine connection among the creatures of the world, avoiding the principle of separation that is characteristic of Western modernity. In contrast, human solidarity in the modern Western context, while present, remains flawed and incomplete.

Taha examined the ethical deficiencies in the Western application of the humanistic principle of universality and identified three forms of separation. The first is the separation from heritage, which involves negating its sanctity regardless of its nature. Arab readers may recognize some of its Islamic and Arab manifestations. The second is the separation from nature, which entails negating its sacredness through a will to dominate the universe and subjugate the natural world entirely. Taha refers to the “technical cosmos,” in which humanity is contained, its will appropriated, and it becomes independent of itself, governed by two principles: “everything is possible” and “everything that is possible must be done” (Abd al-Rahman Taha, 1997, p. 47). The third is the separation from geographical space and the physical space of objects.

While these projects brought certain benefits and fostered forms of human solidarity, in practice they amounted to a declaration of war on the sanctity of the triad—heritage, nature, and space. This has hastened what Taha describes as the end of heritage, the end of nature, and the end of geography, as conceptualized by modernists, resulting from this deliberate separation (Taha, 2006, pp. 238–241). Taha argues that this triad possesses inherent rights over humanity, akin to a mother’s rights over her child: care, nurturing after birth, and the return of kindness, all while maintaining a balanced protection of rights between parent and child. Humans’ relationship with this triad, therefore, must be governed by compassion, analogous to the filial bond that connects a person with their parent. This, he contends, is precisely what the modernist application of universality in human solidarity fails to achieve. From this perspective, he establishes the principle of compassion as the guiding ethic: all created beings, despite their differences, are to show mercy to one another, embodying the divine attribute of al-Rahman in their moral conduct (Taha, 2006, pp. 241–244).

This principle, formulated by the thinker, carries clear Sufi connotations. It is derived from the spiritual experience that he shared with all seekers of Sufism. Regarding the extension of moral conduct and refinement from humans to all creatures, the Sufis state: “*There are three kinds of adab (proper conduct): adab with God Almighty, adab with His Messenger and His law, and adab with His creation*” (Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, 2010, p. 646).

For them, adab is not limited to human interactions but extends to all creation, encompassing every being. They also classified moral conduct into degrees. The first degree entails recognizing the station of creation: that all creatures are bound by their capacities, confined by their abilities, and subject to divine decree. By understanding this, one attains three benefits: the safety of all creatures from oneself, even a dog, and the cultivation of love for all creation (al-Harawi, n.d., p. 162). Consider the gradations of Sufi refinement: even non-sentient parts of nature are included in the sphere of mercy. They mention the dog, a creature from which harm might occasionally be expected. How much more should this mercy extend to inanimate objects and other beings?

Al-Fudayl, one of the eminent Sufis, said: “*If a servant performs all possible acts of goodness but mistreats a chicken, he cannot be counted among the beneficent*” (al-Qushayri, *al-Risala al-Qushayriyya*, ed. Abd al-Halim Mahmoud and Ibn al-Sharif, Cairo: Dar al-Sha‘b, 1409 AH/1989, p. 411).

Accordingly, numerous stories are recounted about their care for all creatures and their aversion to causing harm, since it is considered the work of Satan to inflict injury. For example, one account tells of a devout ascetic who saw a sheep standing on three legs and asked: "Who has done this to her?" The boy replied: "I did, to cause you distress." The ascetic responded: "No; rather, bring distress upon the one who commanded you to do it. Go, you are free" (al-Qushayri, *al-Risala al-Qushayriyya*, pp. 412).

These examples illustrate the existential universality that the Islamic application of the spirit of modernity seeks to achieve, as approached by Abd al-Rahman Taha.

Regarding the derivation of the principle of compassion (*tarahum*) from the name *al-Rahman*, one of God's Most Beautiful Names, this derivation is grounded in the notion of moral refinement and emulation of the Creator's attributes to the extent of human capacity. This approach has long been emphasized by philosophers and sages and practiced by Sufis. For them, realizing the meanings of God's beautiful names is synonymous with achieving proper conduct. As Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya reports: "*Whoever commits himself to alignment with My Names and Attributes is thereby committed to proper conduct*" (Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Madarij al-Salikin*, ed. Mustafa Sheikh Mustafa, 2010, p. 647).

Ibn 'Arabi similarly describes the people of God—the Sufis—as embodying the meanings of these divine names: "*For this reason, He described Himself as possessing Names and moral qualities, known in their terminology and meanings to the scholars of the outward forms, and to the people of God by actual embodiment. From this, the names of God are made manifest in them. As He said about His Prophet ﷺ: 'Among the believers, He is Kind and Merciful' [Qur'an 9:128]. He described Himself as the Best of Creators, the Best of the Thankful, and the Best of the Helpers; all of these qualities are manifested in the people of God according to the prescribed Sunnah and the divinely ordained path, which they adopted as a means of drawing near to God*" (Muhammad ibn Ali ibn 'Arabi, 1999, p. 54).

Ibn 'Arabi also defines the station of Sufism poetically: "*Sufism is likening oneself to our Creator, For it is a noble character, behold its wonder.*

*Sufism is purified ethics, With God, it has no equal in rank*" (Muhammad ibn Ali ibn 'Arabi, *Al-Futubat al-Makkiyya*, ed. Ahmad Shams al-Din, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1420 AH/1999, vol. 8, p. 400).

Following this, Abd al-Rahman Taha attributes to the Name *al-Rahman* a dimension of existence that transcends the conventional Islamic framework. He interprets the relationship between *al-Rahman* and humanity as one of closeness. While its precise nature may remain unknown, the human awareness of this spiritual proximity strengthens a sense of responsibility and deepens the recognition of connectedness between oneself and all other creatures.

Since all religions affirm the Name *al-Rahman*, it is often elevated to the status of a proper name for God, highlighting the principle of mutual compassion in interactions with others, regardless of differences in perception or reality. This serves to protect the compassionate individual from the perils of excessive individualism, a problem frequently associated with the Western application of modernity. Moreover, in the Name *al-Rahman*, the concept of mercy is universalized in the mind. The value of mercy, as a divine attribute, precedes other attributes in its manifestation, appearing prominently in human life and evident in its effects on creation. Thus, mercy becomes a cosmic value, its existence linked to the existence of compassion itself, uniting hearts and extending benevolence to all beings (Taha, 2006, pp. 247, 248, 252, 254).

Thus, the Sufis understood the Name *al-Rahman* as a representation of divine existence itself. This Name embodies the totality of the divine attributes, linking it intrinsically to existence. They did the same with mercy, noting that original mercy: "pertains to existence; it is the source of all compassion and the origin of every blessing, since all bounties and gifts depend upon it, for that which does not exist cannot be described by any of these" (al-Kashani, 2000, p. 292).

Abd al-Rahman Taha, employing these meanings, states: "It follows that the fundamental principle in everything is mercy, so that it is the first of all things. Had thinkers realized this remarkable truth—that in the beginning, there was mercy—they would have found satisfactory answers to their questions about existence and beings, such as: Why is there existence rather than non-existence? The answer is that mercy precedes all; without mercy, nothing would exist. I exist because I am the object of mercy. Therefore, knowledge of mercy precedes knowledge of existence and ought to be the primary focus of philosophers and thinkers" (Taha, 2006, p. 250).

#### 4. The Prophet ﷺ: The Complete Model of Ethical Refinement and Humanity

Abd al-Rahman Taha made the process of ethical refinement (*takhalluq*) a central pillar of compassion, actualizing universal mercy that encompasses all beings. He defines *takhalluq* as the attainment, to the extent of one's capacity, of the moral qualities exemplified by a model through attachment to that model. In ethics, real and obligatory values exist to be realized; they require a concrete exemplar in whom the highest embodiment of these values is manifested. This exemplar, to whom aspiring souls attach themselves, serves as the means by which they seek to acquire ethical refinement through actions patterned on the observed behaviors and virtues of the model rather than on absent or theoretical notions.

The model around which Taha centers his thought is the Prophet ﷺ, representing the highest level of human moral perfection and the realization of universal mercy. Emulation of the Prophet ﷺ serves as both a conduit and a measure for the extent to which one embodies the meanings of God's Names. He writes:

"Since attachment to the divine model corresponds, in proportion, to attachment to the prophetic model, the attainment of the divine model's ethics is in proportion to the attainment of the prophetic model's ethics. Accordingly, to the extent that a person attaches themselves to the Merciful Messenger, they receive their share of his noble mercy; and in proportion to this share is their portion of the greater mercy in which the Name al-Rahman is manifested" (Taha, 2006, p. 457).

Through this attachment, the Prophet ﷺ shows compassion to the heedless through gentle admonition, extends guidance with kindness, and regards transgressors with mercy, perceiving sins as if they arise from oneself rather than from others. He then endeavors, to the best of his capacity, to remove these faults, out of compassion for others (Taha, 2006, p. 457).

The Merciful Prophet ﷺ is regarded by the Sufis as the central conduit for ethical refinement, owing to his unique moral character, which God Himself has affirmed: "*And indeed, you are of a great moral character*" [Quran 68:4].

The meaning of this verse is that God introduced His Prophet ﷺ as the one in whom the dispersed moral excellences of previous prophets are unified, as confirmed by the accounts of their deeds (al-Qushayri, *Lata'if al-Isbarat*, ed. Ibrahim Basyuni, Cairo: Egyptian General Authority for Publishing, 1390H/1971, vol. 6, p. 185). "Great moral character" signifies the aggregation of all noble virtues. These virtues were realized in the Prophet ﷺ because his ultimate concern was God alone; he engaged with creation through his character while maintaining the detachment of the heart. Thus, in Sufi understanding, *takhalluq* (ethical refinement) is characterized by moral interaction with creation and sincerity with the Divine (al-Kashani, 2000, pp. 266–267).

Hence, the Prophet ﷺ serves as the Sufi exemplar of *takhalluq*, manifesting the Muhammadan truth. Abd al-Rahman Taha frequently uses the term "Muhammadiyah" rather than "Islamic," not following the trend of some scholars who describe Islam as a religion "invented" or "created" by Muhammad ﷺ, often echoing orientalist terminology, such as "Muhammadan Islam" or the "Muhammadan Message" (Tizini, n.d.). Taha, however, chooses "Muhammadiyah" to indicate attachment to the Muhammadan truth, which signifies the complete manifestation of the Divine Essence, Names, and Attributes. In this

framework, the “Perfect Human” corresponds to humanity at its highest stage of moral, spiritual, and intellectual perfection, fully realized only in the Prophet ﷺ (Afifi, n.d., p. 37).

Regarding the functional role of the Prophet ﷺ in ethical refinement through the meanings of divine Names, Taha writes: *“The aspirant in takhalluq does not pursue ethical refinement arbitrarily; rather, they do so by emulating the Prophet ﷺ. In this way, their moral development is firmly rooted in divine ethics, for it is founded on the prophetic embodiment of divine morality, not on social conventions derived from the behaviors of others, nor on subjective moral inclinations inspired by one’s conscience”* (Taha, *The Question of Ethics: A Contribution to the Moral Critique of Western Modernity*, 2000, p. 85).

The Sufis interpreted the famous saying, *“His character was the Qur’an”* (reported by Muslim in a long hadith on night prayer; see: Safi al-Din al-Mubarakfuri, *Minat al-Mun’im fi Sharh Sabih Muslim*, 1st ed., Riyadh: Dar al-Salam, 1420H/1999, vol. 1, p. 468), which is attributed to the Mother of the Believers, Aisha (RA), in an allusive manner. They explained it as a symbolic and subtle reference to divine ethics. She refrained from explicitly stating that the Prophet ﷺ was characterized by God’s ethics, and instead expressed the meaning by saying, *“His character was the Qur’an,”* out of reverence for the Divine Presence and delicacy in expression. This reflects her profound knowledge and refined manners (al-Suhrawardi, 2000, p. 58).

Prince Abd al-Qadir also emphasized ethical emulation through patience as exemplified by the Prophet ﷺ, who embodied all virtues necessary for well-being in this life and ultimate success in the Hereafter. He said: *“He repelled evil with good and met every harm with appropriate opposites, adopting divine ethics and actualizing them through the Merciful Names. This encompasses the noble traits of character, the sciences of religious and worldly governance, which govern the order of the world and its maintenance, and the happiness of the virtuous, which cannot be fully recorded by pens nor captured by imagination”* (Amir Abd al-Qadir al-Jazairi, 2004, p. 46).

Finally, Abd al-Rahman Taha asserts that the ultimate purpose of God’s commandments is the manifestation of power in service of mercy, not power for its own sake. It is an aspect of divine compassion and humanization that God sent messengers as specific exemplars to guide humanity. These messengers were selected from among humans out of mercy, rather than through means that might instill fear or terror. The content of divine commands and prohibitions embodies ethical values and spiritual meanings, which elevate humans along the stages of perfection and proximity to the supreme model. There is no greater mercy than the continuous advancement of human dignity and noble character. His call to reflect on the purposes and objectives of creation—representing the facets of divine mercy—aims to elucidate the external causes of things. In contrast, Western applications of modernity emphasized external effects, leading to separatist projects and a series of ethical deficiencies (Taha, 2006, pp. 257–258).

## 5- The Quranic Text: Uniqueness in Modernity

The readings of pioneers of Arab modernity often focused on heritage texts, among which the Qur’anic text held a central place. These readings, despite their methodological diversity, aimed at modernizing these texts through new interpretations. Their purpose was to uncover creative dimensions in the reinterpretation process. However, this creativity tended to be detached, as it disregarded the beneficial elements of the Arab-Islamic heritage. This detachment resulted from the prevailing claim of total separation and epistemic rupture from tradition, which guided these modernist approaches, often in imitation of Western modernist methodologies.

Abd al-Rahman Taha characterizes these modernist readings as critical readings, in contrast to creedal readings, which rely on tradition as a source of interpretation. The work of critical readings concentrated on the analysis of specific verses, resulting in fragmentation that failed to encompass the Qur’anic text as a whole. These readings typically addressed selected verses rather than the entirety of the Qur’an.

The supreme objective pursued by these readings was the removal of a particular doctrinal obstacle: the obstacle of sanctity. They employed specific strategies, involving a set of methodological tools and gradual processes, which can be categorized into three plans:

- The Humanization Plan (Anthropocentric Reading): This aimed to focus on humans while diminishing the connection with the Divine.
- The Rationalization Plan: This emphasized reliance on reason while minimizing the role of revelation.
- The Historicization Plan: This directed attention toward worldly matters while neglecting the hereafter.

Taha clarifies that these plans merely reproduce the Western modernist reality, which emerged from the historical struggle between the leaders of the Enlightenment and the Church, imitating it meticulously. Consequently, they failed to achieve genuine creativity in Qur’anic interpretation. True innovation cannot arise from mere explicit imitation or crude projection (Taha, *The Spirit of Modernity: An Introduction to the Establishment of Islamic Modernity*, 2006, pp. 178–193).

After criticizing “Abdul Rahman Taha” for the imitative modernist reading plans, he proceeded to propose new, creative plans that counter those approaches. His first plan was the **creative humanization plan**, which aims to honor humanity by removing all sanctity surrounding it. This stems from the idea that the Qur’anic text, in its form of linguistic transmission and verification, assumes a human dimension. It departs from its purely divine aspect, which is not bound or limited by language, and assumes the Arabic language of humans, addressed to humanity in general.

Through this plan, humans regain their dignity—not by withdrawing themselves from God’s authority, but by aligning with God’s will, which guarantees their continuity and the fulfillment of their honor. God did not create humans solely to attend to their earthly affairs; rather, He appointed them as His vicegerents to manage the affairs of the world. In this, the greatest honor is conferred upon humanity, serving the welfare of human authenticity. Consequently, the **creative humanization plan** penetrates modernity more profoundly than the imitative humanization plan, according to the first principle of modernity, which emphasizes care for humans (Taha, *The Spirit of Modernity: An Introduction to Establishing Islamic Modernity*, 2006, pp. 197–198).

In Sufi writings, this principle reflects the concept of **vicegerency**, as posited by the thinker, which achieves the highest ranks of human honor, ranking just below divinity. Abu al-Ala Afifi states: “Human beings are the most complete manifestation of truth because they are the noble summary and the universe encompassing all realities of existence and their degrees. They are the microcosm in which all perfections of the greater world—or the perfections of the divine presence, in both names and attributes—are reflected. Therefore, humans alone among creation deserve God’s vicegerency. Since the angels did not understand the truth of human origin and the secrets God placed within it through His names—they did not share in humanity’s collective reality—they refused to prostrate to Adam and denied his vicegerency” (Afifi, n.d., p. 36).

Abdul Rahman Taha then moved on to the second plan, known as the **creative rationalization plan**, which aims to expand the mind through two dimensions: the dimension of its intellectual activity and the dimension of the fields of reasoning. The method of this plan involves engaging with the Qur’anic text using all the tools of observation and research provided by modern methodologies and theories, without relying on inherited projection. This approach allows the discovery of new aspects of expanded Qur’anic reasoning, grounded in understanding the verses and reflecting on values and objectives, transitioning from a purely material level to one that integrates both material and ethical dimensions.

This plan does not remove the transcendence of the Qur’anic text, as imitative traditions do in response to Western modernity. Rather, it **expands human reasoning within the text** by encouraging the

recognition of the values upon which human existence is founded. The plan works to bring what benefits the intellect and to counter what harms it, such as excessive transcendentalism—the belief that humans cannot access aspects of the future—despite God having taught what humans did not know, through the principle of reflection promoted in the verses, which connects phenomena with values and events with lessons.

The Qur’anic intellect is closely linked with the heart. In the Qur’an, the heart is not confined to emotions or feelings; it is a **comprehensive faculty** and a central point linking sensory perception with intellectual understanding, and intellectual perception with spiritual insight (Taha, 2006, pp. 199–202). This integration allows for the continuous actualization of novelty and the realization of a renewed religious modernity.

For this reason, Taha considers the Qur’anic text to assign the functions of reason, understanding, comprehension, and reflection to the heart. God says: “They have hearts with which they do not understand” (Al-A’raf 7:179), “Do they not reflect upon the Qur’an, or are there locks upon their hearts?” (Al-A’raf 7:179), “Except for one who comes to God with a sound heart” (Ash-Shu’ara 26:89). “The heart is the force underlying the stage of intellect. If God intended ‘heart’ in this verse to mean intellect, He would not have said ‘for those who have a heart.’ Every human possesses intellect, but not every human is granted this force underlying the intellect, called the heart in this verse. Thus, God said ‘for those who have a heart.’ The transformation in the heart mirrors the divine transformation of forms. Knowledge of truth does not come from intellect alone but through the heart, and then intellect receives it from the heart, just as thought receives it” (Muhammad ibn Ali Ibn ‘Arabi, *Al-Futubat al-Makkiyya*, ed. Ahmad Shams al-Din, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1999, p. 437).

Ibn ‘Arabi al-Hatimi then distinguished **two modes of Qur’anic revelation**. The first is the Qur’an revealed to the tongues, whose path is understanding. The second is the Qur’an revealed to the hearts, whose path is tasting and experiencing its sweetness. In this sense, the Qur’an continuously descends to renew tastes and diversify them, so they never fade. As he explains: “If the station and status of the Qur’an are as we have mentioned, every seeker will find in it whatever they desire. For this reason, Shaykh Abu Madin used to say: ‘A disciple cannot truly be a seeker until they find in the Qur’an all that they seek’” (Muhammad ibn Ali Ibn ‘Arabi, *Al-Futubat al-Makkiyya*, ed. Ahmad Shams al-Din, 1st ed., Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1420 AH / 1999, Vol. 8, p. 137).

Elsewhere, Ibn ‘Arabi speaks of the continual renewal of meanings, inspirations, and knowledge bestowed upon the heart: “The one stationed in this state receives, with every breath, a new knowledge. They are thus in a state of new creation, while others remain entangled in the illusion of this new creation. God, exalted be He, commanded His Prophet, may blessings be upon him, to say: ‘My Lord, increase me in knowledge’ (Taha 20:114). This is a prayer to remove the veil that prevents awareness of the new creation and causes one to miss abundant good present in existence. The veil is nothing but similarity and resemblance; without it, no one would be confused by the new creations that belong to God in the world, in every moment and in every affair. Only those who affirm the continual renewal of the world at every age have realized this” (Muhammad ibn Ali Ibn ‘Arabi, *Al-Futubat al-Makkiyya*, ed. Ahmad Shams al-Din, 1st ed., Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1420 AH / 1999, Vol. 8, p. 32).

The **third plan** is the **creative historicization**. The thinker Abdul Rahman Taha designed this plan to reinforce morality by connecting the Qur’anic verses with their environment, time, and various contexts. It should be noted that the initial contexts of revelation represent the first and most complete realization of the objectives or values. These realizations are renewed whenever circumstances and contexts change, so the original values appear revitalized, strengthening faith. This occurs without erasing the authoritative rulings of the Qur’anic text, as is often the case in Western modernity. Rather, the ruling is affirmed, and its intended purpose is activated and manifested, guiding ethical conduct according to the objective of the law.

Thus, the legal verses possess **two aspects: a legal dimension**, i.e., rulings, and an **ethical and purposive dimension**, with the legal aspect subordinated to the ethical one, as it serves as a means to achieve the ultimate goal. This approach enhances the creative understanding of the Qur'anic text by clarifying the objectives, wisdom, values, and ethics contained in the verses. In this way, the focus is on practical conduct in life more than in the imitative historicization plan. The new plan seeks to bring what benefits moral behavior, unlike the older plan, which merely aims to prevent what is mistakenly perceived as harmful to behavior, that is, the legal rulings of the Qur'an.

The new plan uncovers the forms, contexts, and degrees of moralization in the Qur'anic verses, employing the principle of consideration (*i'tinur*) called for in the text. Qur'anic historical events are not limited to occurrences dictated by objective causes. Rather, they transcend the circumstances of their revelation because they embody objectives and values that are timeless. These values are inherent in the text and are renewed with each new event, forming lessons for humanity that, if acted upon, can transform behavior, alter the course of life, or shape history.

There is, therefore, no equivalence between the Qur'anic text and conventional historical texts. The Qur'an is **the final revelation**, and as a seal, its relevance is not confined to the moment of its descent; it extends to all subsequent times. The Qur'anic text continuously engages with human realities in every age, maintaining permanent contemporaneity. This demonstrates that the Qur'an possesses a **historical modernity** unparalleled in its scope (Taha, 2006, pp. 202–204).

Considering that Qur'anic verses are **multi-dimensional**, conveying both rulings and ethical guidance, this perspective is derived from the **Sufi understanding of the Qur'an**, which recognizes both an apparent (*zahir*) and a hidden (*batin*) meaning. This distinction extends beyond the text itself to the entire cosmos, which reflects the same duality in Sufi thought. The hidden meaning is associated with **divine manifestation upon the hearts of the gnostics**, delivered through illuminations and insights in knowledge and spiritual taste.

Al-Tusi explains: “All the sciences of religion fall within three categories: verses from the Book of God, reports from the Messenger of God, or wisdom that occurs to the heart of a saint among God's chosen. This principle originates from the tradition of faith, in which Gabriel asked the Prophet, peace be upon him, about three foundations: Islam, Iman (faith), and Ihsan (perfection of worship). Islam is outward; Iman has both outward and inward aspects; Ihsan is the reality of both the outward and the inward” (Al-Tusi, 1960, p. 22).

This relates to the **modernist perspective on the Qur'anic text**, and Abdul Rahman Taha's approach seeks to **guide and refine this modernist view** by imbuing it with a Sufi-ethical dimension. This ensures that the objectives and values of the text serve as a guiding light for interpreters and readers of tradition. By following these principles, their analyses remain aligned with the methodology intended by the text, preventing their interpretations from diverging from its intended purpose.

## Conclusion

After this exploration of modernity in the thought of Abdul Rahman Taha, particularly his Sufi perspective, the study arrived at the following conclusions:

- The thinker calls for an **Islamic modernity**, through which the shortcomings of Western modernity can be corrected. The results of Western modernity exposed certain deficiencies in its original society, prompting Western intellectuals to search for metaphysical foundations. How much more so in a context where modernity arises in a **distinctive environment**, unlike the Western one, with its own mission and a unique heritage and vision of the universe and life.
- Taha makes **morality the ultimate purpose of human creation**, as it represents the goal for which God created and honored humanity. When morality is neglected, human life transforms from construction to destruction, both materially and spiritually.

- One of the greatest means of moral development is attention to **Sufi moral cultivation**, based on emulating the meanings of God's names and attributes according to one's capacity, since the universe reflects these divine realities.
- The **medium for Sufi moral development** and its realization is linked to the **singular model of the Perfect Human**, represented by the Prophet, peace be upon him. The effect of moral cultivation manifests only through emulation of this complete model, which reflects the ultimate perfection in the realization of God's attributes.
- In evaluating modernist readings of the Qur'anic text, Taha draws on **Sufi thought** to respond to the plans of humanization, rationalization, and historicization employed by these readings. These modernist approaches relied on borrowed tools that fundamentally contradicted the principles of the Qur'anic text, seeking to remove its sanctity and confine its meanings to the original contexts of revelation, with the aim of stripping the divine presence from it and diminishing its authority in human hearts. In contrast, the Qur'an is an **eternal text**, renewed in spirit, objectives, and values, which remain relevant across all times.
- Abdul Rahman Taha represents, in every sense, a **thinker committed to the concerns of the Arab-Islamic nation**. He embodies the stream of **rational Sufism**, which utilizes a heritage long debated among Muslims, turning it into genuine intellectual fuel for his project. He achieves this by drawing upon Sufi texts, the experiences of Sufi masters, and his own practical and contemplative work to propose solutions based on elevated thought and management.

## References

- Al-Fassi, A. Z. (n.d.). *Qawa'id al-tasawwuf wa shawabid al-ta'aruf* [Principles of Sufism and examples of recognition] (N. Hamadi, Ed.). Sharjah: Arab Center for Publishing.
- Lalande, A. (2001). *Mawsu'at Lalande al-falsafiyya* [Lalande's philosophical encyclopedia] (K. A. Khalil, Trans., 2nd ed.). Beirut: Awa'idat Publications.
- Lipovetsky, G. (2018). *'Asr al-faragh: Al-fardaniya al-mu'asira wa tabannulat ma ba'd al-badatha* [The Age of Emptiness: Contemporary individualism and postmodern transformations] (H. Idokhraz, Trans., 1st ed.). Beirut: Nama Center for Research and Studies.
- Al-Mubarakfuri, S. D. (1999). *Minat al-Mun'im fi sharh Sahih Muslim* [Minat al-Mun'im: Commentary on Sahih Muslim] (1st ed.). Riyadh: Dar al-Salam for Publishing and Distribution.
- Taha, A. R. (1997). *Al-'amal al-dini wa tajdid al-'aql* [Religious work and the renewal of the mind] (2nd ed.). Casablanca: Arab Cultural Center.
- Taha, A. R. (2000). *Su'al al-akhlaq: Musabaha fi al-naqd al-akhlaqi lil-badatha al-gharbiyya* [The question of ethics: A contribution to the ethical critique of Western modernity] (1st ed.). Casablanca: Moroccan Cultural Center.
- Taha, A. R. (2005). *Al-haqq al-Islami fi al-ikhtilaf al-fikri* [Islamic right to intellectual difference] (1st ed.). Casablanca: Arab Cultural Center.
- Taha, A. R. (2006). *Ruh al-badatha: Al-madkhal ila tasnis al-badatha al-Islamiyya* [The spirit of modernity: An introduction to establishing Islamic modernity] (1st ed.). Casablanca: Arab Cultural Center.
- Taha, A. R. (2013). *Al-bihar: Ufuqan lil-fikr* [Dialogue: A horizon for thought] (1st ed.). Beirut: Arab Network for Research and Publishing.
- Al-Kashani, A. R. (2000). *Lata'if al-'alam fi isbaraat abl al-ilham* [Subtleties of knowledge in the indications of the inspired] (M. H. Zadeh, Ed., 1st ed.). Tehran: Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.
- Al-Jazairi, A. Q. (2004). *Al-mawaqif al-rubhiyya wa al-fuyudat al-subuhiyya* [Spiritual stations and celestial effusions] (A. al-Kayyali, Ed., 1st ed.). Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya.
- Al-Qushayri, A. K. (1971). *Lata'if al-isharat* [Subtleties of indications] (I. Basyuni, Ed.). Cairo: General Egyptian Authority for Authorship and Publishing.
- Al-Qushayri, A. K. (1989). *Al-Risala al-Qushayriyya* [The Qushayri Epistle] (A. H. Mahmoud & I. al-Sharif, Eds.). Cairo: Dar al-Sha'b Foundation.
- Al-Ansari al-Harawi, A. (n.d.). *Manazil al-sa'irin* [Stations of the travelers] (A. al-Kayyali, Ed.). Beirut: Kitab Publishers.

- Al-Tusi, A. S. (1960). *Al-Luma'* (A. H. Mahmoud & T. A. B. Surur, Eds.). Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Haditha.
- Al-Suhrawardi, U. (2000). *Awārif al-ma'ārif* (A. H. Mahmoud & M. I. al-Sharif, Eds.). Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif.
- Himmelfarb, G. (2009). *Al-turuq ila al-badatha: Al-tamwir al-britani, al-tamwir al-faransi, wa al-tamwir al-amriki* [Paths to modernity: British, French, and American Enlightenment] (M. S. Ahmad, Trans.). Kuwait: National Council for Culture, Arts, and Letters.
- Ibn 'Arabi, M. b. A. (1999). *Al-Futubat al-Makkīyya* [The Meccan Revelations] (A. Shams al-Din, Ed., 1st ed.). Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya.
- Ahmad, M. M. S. (2013). *A'da' al-badatha: Muraja'at al-'aql al-gharbiy fi ta'zīm fikir al-badatha* [Enemies of modernity: Reviews of Western reason in the crisis of modern thought] (1st ed.). Riyadh: Center for Contemporary Thought.