

# Mahmud Muhammad Taha: A Muslim Reformer who Dared to Die for his Convictions

- [Dr. Gerhard Lichtenthäler](#)



On Friday January 18, 1985 Mahmud Muhammad Taha, the spiritual leader of the Republican Brothers, an Islamic reform movement, was publicly executed for apostasy (renouncing Islam) in the Sudanese capital Khartoum. Taha had openly criticised Sharia law, introduced in Sudan in 1983. What is more, the movement had developed an understanding of Islam radically different from accepted norms. Although limited in numbers and confined mainly to Sudan, a study of the movement's ideology is relevant for a number of reasons. First, it provides evidence about the existence of an Islamic group who openly and through their numerous publications dared to radically reinterpret Islamic theology, challenging orthodoxy at its core. Secondly, the level of persecution consequently suffered by the Republican Brothers makes it clear why so few feel free to reopen the 'gate of investigation' (bab al-ijtihad), i.e. the free interpretation of Islamic law. Lastly, Republican thought is significant because it reveals interesting parallels to how Christians look at the Old Testament. Jesus distinguishes between the letter and the spirit and lifts the meaning of Old Testament law from a legal (outward - obligatory) level to a spiritual (inward - intentional) one. Similarly, Taha sees a Second Message - risala thaniyya in the Quran, a much higher set of ethical ideals which, according to the Republicans, result in a just society (mujtama salih) characterised by religious freedom, social justice and economic equality. Not surprising, Republican Brothers think very highly of Christians and the way of Jesus.

## Introduction

Islam in Sudan's political process is characterised by deep sectarian rivalry. The two most powerful groups, the Ansar (neo-Mahdist) and the Sufi brotherhood, the Khatmiyya have always dominated the political centre while many smaller Sufi orders complement the religiopolitical mosaic at the periphery. Somewhere in between are the Republican Brothers who have sought to combine philosophical mysticism with rational political analysis. Their Islamic ideology elevates the moral principles of the Meccan texts over the Medinan legal code, which is seen as less universal and restricted to time and place. Thousands of Sudanese Muslims and non-Muslims, intellectuals and students were drawn to aspects of Republican ideology and practice and admired Taha for his integrity and consistency on religious and political issues. However, his reform theology posed a considerable threat to the political, economic and religious aspirations of Northern Sudan's traditional Muslim elites. Taha's outspoken opposition to the introduction of Shari'a and his uncompromising criticism of Numayri's Islamic Way resulted in his arrest. He was consequently charged with apostasy and executed at the age of 76 on January 18, 1985.

## Taha's Second Message of Islam

The Second Message, where Taha's puts forward his main vision, resulted from a prolonged time of religious seclusion. The Quran, according to Taha, contains two messages. He sees a contradiction between the Islamic message of religious freedom and equality between the sexes, as revealed in Mecca and the Medinan verses on the same issues. In trying to solve this problem Islamic jurists developed the principle of abrogation (naskh) whereby verses revealed in Medina abrogate the legal (not the moral) significance of the Meccan verses. Consequently, the Sharia has become based on the Medinan texts, which, according to Taha, violate the values of equality, religious freedom and human dignity. Taha argues that God's earlier intentions were only suspended temporarily but not abrogated. Society in 7th century Arabia was not spiritually mature enough to live up to the ethically much higher Meccan code. To him the Sharia, as understood by Muslims today, represented temporary concessions only. His Second Message, therefore, is a call to reinstate the Meccan ideals of Islam. This would result in a society characterised by religious freedom, social justice and economic equality. The perfection of the Sharia, according to Taha, consists of its ability "to evolve, assimilate the capabilities of individual and society, and guide such life up the ladder of continuous development (Taha 1987:39)." This evolutionary process begins by moving from the First (based on the Medinan revelations) to the Second Message (based on the Meccan revelations) of Islam. The „subsidiary verses“ of the First Message which allowed concessions to a backward and barbaric society in the 7th century have „become irrelevant for the new era, the twentieth century“ while the Meccan verses now form the „basis of the legislation.“ for modern society (Taha 1987:40f).

Taha bases his main thesis on Sura 2:106 of the Quran, a verse that has served Islamic jurists as the basis on which to develop the principle of abrogation (naskh). In Yusuf Ali's translation the verse reads "None of Our revelations do We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, but We substitute something better or similar..." By selecting a North African variant reading of the Quranic text which substitutes the word "nunsi'ha" ("We postpone it") for "nunsiha" (We cause it to be forgotten), Taha arrives at the support he needs for his radical thesis. Taha sees these two messages or levels of meaning confirmed in both tawrat and injil (Old and New Testament). All contain "guidance and light" (Quran 6:91). For Taha, guidance refers to

the law as given in the context of the particular circumstances while light symbolises the higher level of moral precepts, which he deems above the law. For example; the Jewish tawra demands retribution (qisas) - an eye for an eye and a life for a life - but already contains a higher second message exhorting the believer that it is better to forgive and be reconciled. Jesus distinguishes between two separate levels, a lower one granting legal concessions and a higher one indicating original (divine) intention. This is clear from the Beatitudes "You have heard that it was said ... But I tell you, ...". Matthew 19:1- 9 is a particular vivid example where the Mosaic law concedes to divorce but where Jesus points out the original intention of the creator is for lifelong union. This type of higher moral ground or second message, says Taha, is also found in the Quran. One example of this is Sura 5:45 where it says "But if anyone remits the retaliation by way of charity, it is an act of atonement for himself." Taha's reform, in the eyes of the orthodox and those who advocate the return to the principles of the early community in Medina, is nothing short of revision of the Sharia. In contrast to most Islamists, for Taha, the authenticity and uniqueness of the Quran is not embodied in the early Muslim community but is waiting to be implemented by those who have grasped the Second Message.

## **Women**

The ideology of the Second Message does not stop at the reinterpretation of the Quran. Rituals, social customs, cultural values and legal practices are scrutinised and questioned by Republican thinkers. While Sufi rituals are very much part of Sudanese society today, participation in them, due to social norms, is restricted to men. The Republicans broke this social norm. Not only did women participate in all their prayers and other religious rituals but were the driving force behind the composition of many hymns and poems. Thousands of tapes recorded and distributed mainly by the Republican Sisters have had a considerable impact in spreading the vision and are not only enjoyed by followers but sympathisers and others as well. Moreover, the social freedom enjoyed by Republican Sisters was not only restricted to the activities within the community. A number of Republican treatises have been written by the Republican Sisters. Moreover, on street corners, in the markets and on the University of Khartoum campus they could be seen lecturing and distributing their own leaflets and booklets.

With the rise of the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood during the 1970s, traditional codes of dress and modesty challenged social norms to the opposite extreme and Republican Sisters frequently got involved in disputes with Muslim Brothers. Taha's position on this was that mature Muslim women were not „subject to alhijab“ (Arabic: veil) but free to „shoulder the responsibility of al-sufur“ (Arabic: unveiled, Taha 1987:145) In contrast to social norms, their marriage contracts included a clause which stipulated that the wife had equal right to divorce her husband. At the same time Taha stressed that „Islam's original precept is the continuity of the relationship between spouses“, not polygamy and divorce. (Taha 1987:140-3) There is not a single case known where Republicans have sought a divorce, not even in the case of the wife's infertility, one valid reason in Islamic law for divorce or to marry a second wife.

## **Republicans and Christians: Common Values**

Taha held the person and teaching of Jesus in high respect. He was in contact with Sudanese Christians and his writings indicate familiarity with Christian beliefs. He occasionally uses quotes from the Bible in his Second Message, especially from Christ's Sermon on the

Mountain (Taha 1987:121f). To Taha Jesus taught and practised ethical ideals, which, although beyond the reach of most, were worthy to strive for. His Sufistyle veneration of Jesus repeatedly earned him ridicule and laughter from his critics who labelled him “the first Sudanese claiming to be Jesus Christ”. Being aware of the discrimination suffered by Christian Sudanese Taha hoped for the reconciliation of Christian and Muslims in the Sudan. The Addis Ababa Agreement in 1972, opposed by the sectarian parties and the Muslim Brotherhood, was greeted by the Republicans who became strong supporters of Numayri for his peace accord. Republican Brothers and Southerners often found common ground for co-operation on many issues at Khartoum’s University campus during the 1970s. Moreover, Taha encouraged Father Philip Ghabush in his struggle against the Islamization of the Nuba tribesmen and the two men became symbols of resistance to religious dictatorship.

A mystic, Taha believed in the notion of the “oneness” of all believers and consequently encouraged fellow Republicans to seek the contact and dialogue with people of other faiths. When many of his followers later went on to study for postgraduate degrees in Europe Taha encouraged them to visit churches. These Republican attitudes and perceptions vis-à-vis Christianity, validated perhaps by Taha’s efforts to advocate a peaceful solution to the civil war, gained him the admiration and respect of many Southern Sudanese intellectuals and Christian leaders. Taha vehemently rejected cultural and religious notions of Arab- Islamic hegemony and supremacy and argued for the necessity of a democratic system as the only way to ensure equality of all Sudanese, regardless of religion or race. Provision for religious freedom Taha finds in the Quranic verse *lasta alayhim bi-musaytir* - “you are not to dictate them” arguing that Muhammad had no mandate to impose Islam on anyone.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has shown that there are Islamic groups who, even today, propagate alternative versions of Islam. For Taha and the Republican Brothers the real pilgrimage had to be performed in the heart and prayer was communion with God and not limited to specific times. Ultimately, however, his critique of the ulama (religious establishment) and his verbal attacks on the bastions of orthodoxy (Azhar and Mecca) attracted too much attention and led to the persecution of the movement. It is easy to see that these Republican positions alienated and marginalized the movement in the Northern Sudan. His opponents perceived Taha’s vision of reform as a religiously disguised recipe for a secular state where Islam was relegated to the private sphere of life. But what is perhaps more important, the political and economic implications of the Second Message posed a considerable threat to the established social order. The majority of Taha’s followers have since sought refuge abroad, often in the United States. Many of them, including women, are lawyers and University academics. Of the 2000-strong core group many remain active for the Republican way.

## **References**

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