



A Different Kind of Political Islam: The Ideas of The Sudanese Scholar Mahmoud Mohamed Taha

Rusin Cristi

PhD student, Faculty of History, University of Bucharest, Romania

Email: cristi.rusin@s.unibuc.ro.

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Abstract

Ustadh Mahmoud Mohamed Taha is one of the least known but most interesting figures in Sudanese history. The movement he led, the Republican Brotherhood, played a significant role in the debates within Sudanese society during the 1950s-1980s. This study presents the life and thought of this figure, analyzing his main work: *The Second Message of Islam*. This volume forms the foundation of his entire Islamist ideology, a progressive, pacifist, and tolerant Islamism very different from that of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The essential characteristic of his conception is linked to the distinction between the Islamic message revealed in Mecca and that in Medina — more precisely, between the Meccan and Medinan surahs. He believed that the core teachings of the Qur'an with universal and timeless applicability are the Meccan ones, whereas the laws from Medina are temporary. These unique interpretations by Taha brought him into direct conflict with the Sudanese authorities, who accused him of apostasy — a conflict that ultimately culminated in his execution. His movement and ideas, unusual for traditional Islam, remain a relevant example of an attempt to modernize Islam and perhaps could have contributed to preserving Sudan's unity.

Keywords: *the second message of islam, the republican brotherhood, sudan, modernism, shari'a.*

Abstrak

Ustad Mahmoud Mohamed Taha adalah salah satu tokoh yang paling tidak dikenal tetapi paling menarik dalam sejarah Sudan. Gerakan yang dipimpinnya, Ikhwanul Muslimin Republik, memainkan peran penting dalam perdebatan di masyarakat Sudan selama tahun 1950-an hingga 1980-an. Kajian ini menyajikan kehidupan dan pemikiran tokoh ini, dengan menganalisis karya utamanya: Pesan Kedua Islam. Buku ini membentuk fondasi seluruh ideologi Islamisnya, sebuah Islamisme progresif, pasifis, dan toleran yang sangat berbeda dari Ikhwanul Muslimin di Mesir. Karakteristik esensial dari konsepsinya terkait dengan perbedaan antara pesan Islam yang diturunkan di Mekah dan di Madinah — lebih tepatnya, antara surah Mekah dan Madinah. Ia meyakini bahwa ajaran inti Al-Qur'an yang universal dan dapat diterapkan sepanjang masa adalah ajaran Mekah, sedangkan hukum-hukum dari Madinah bersifat sementara. Penafsiran unik Taha ini membawanya ke dalam konflik langsung dengan otoritas Sudan, yang menuduhnya murtad — sebuah konflik yang akhirnya berujung pada eksekusinya. Gerakan dan gagasannya, yang tidak lazim dalam Islam tradisional, tetap menjadi contoh relevan dari upaya memodernisasi Islam dan mungkin dapat berkontribusi dalam menjaga persatuan Sudan.

Kata Kunci: *risalah kedua Islam, Ikhwanul Muslimin, Sudan, modernisme, syariah.*

INTRODUCTION

Mahmoud Mohamed Taha (ca.1909-1985) was one of the most unique figures of contemporary Islam in Africa. An illustrious reformer and thinker, with revolutionary ideas, who managed to lay the foundations of a political movement whose aim was to create a modern and tolerant Islamic state in Sudan. However, the figure of Taha is almost unknown outside the Sudanese region. Our aim is to explore the life and ideas of this unique personality through this study. Readers will be able to

discover another interpretation of political Islam completely different from what most Islamist movements propose.

The most important texts that we will use as primary sources for knowing Taha's ideas are his popular book, "The Second Message of Islam," and Steve Howard's diary, "Modern Muslims. A Sudan memoir." "The Second Message of Islam" was written in Arabic and published in 1967 in Sudan. In 1980, Taha asked a close disciple, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, to translate the book into English. It was published by Syracuse University Press only in 1987, 2 years after Taha's death. The translator described the book in his preface as follows: "The Second Message of Islam is the main text of the movement started and led by Ustadh (revered teacher) Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, the late Sudanese Muslim reformer who was executed by former President Numeiri of Sudan on January 18, 1985", Taha (1996). As Taha's disciple and close friend, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im knew the situation very well. His studies, published in the late 1980s in the West, are another valuable source for us.

Steve Howard's diary, "Modern Muslims: A Sudan Memoir," is a fascinating book. Howard is an American sociologist and professor at Ohio University. His studies and work focus on social change in Africa and social movements within the Muslim world. After graduating from university, Howard went to Sudan around 1982 and joined the Republican Brotherhood of Mahmoud Taha, spending three years with them. Following this experience, he wrote the diary mentioned above, a valuable resource for the in-depth study of Taha's movement and ideas. We will also use Howard's study entitled "Mahmoud Mohammed Taha: A Remarkable Teacher in Sudan," published in "Northeast African Studies" in 1988.

Our major interest in this study is to see who was Mahmoud Mohamed Taha and what kind of ideas he promoted. We will also discuss how Taha defined the status of non-Muslims (especially Christians), the role of women in society and *jihad*. These are three fundamental questions facing the contemporary Muslim community. Taha offered several interesting solutions to these problems. We will analyze these factors in an attempt to draw a series of relevant conclusions.

DISCUSSION

The Life of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha

There are several debates regarding the year of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha's birth. It is said that he was born either in 1909, 1910, or 1911 (Howard, 1988). It is certain that his place of birth is Rufaah, a small town in Al-Jazirah state, in the central-eastern area of Sudan. The region is dominated by the presence of Sufi brotherhoods, who had an important political, social, and cultural role in the history of Sudan. Moreover, Rufaah was the first town in the area where girls schooling was allowed in 1908, Taha (1996). For this reason, we could state that Taha was born and raised in a much more progressive environment than that of other Sudanese regions.

Taha's mother is believed to have died in 1915 and his father in 1920, leaving him and his siblings in the care of other relatives. He was the only child in the family who managed to successfully complete the entire cycle of primary education. After that, he enrolled at Gordon Memorial College in Khartoum to study engineering. He graduated in 1936, Mahmoud (2006).

Taha worked for a short time at the Sudan Railways, but resigned in the early 1940s, Howard (1988). He became very interested in politics and the fate of the Sudan. At that time, Sudan was under the rule of an Anglo-Egyptian condominium since 1898. In that period of the 1930s-1940s, the first political movements that militate for the independence of Sudan began to appear. One of them was the Republican Party of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, Magnarella (1982).

Taha came into contact with the intellectual circles where these ideas about independence were formed. Also, he read Western political and philosophical literature, especially Marxist literature, and asserted himself as a voice of freedom. He gathered around him an important number of sympathizers and laid the foundations of the Republican Party in October 1945, Voll (2015). The Party had an anti-monarchist, modernist, and progressive character, a fact evident in the pamphlets distributed in the mid-1940s. They wanted an independent Republic of Sudan, a modern state. However, the movement quickly came into conflict with the colonial administration, Taha (1996).

Taha criticized some of the local elites for deciding to collaborate with the colonialists. In his speeches and pamphlets, he harshly attacked the British administration, but also the Egyptians. He was eventually arrested in 1946 but released after fifty days, becoming one of the first Sudanese political prisoners. Later, but in the same year, he was arrested again for an anti-colonial march organized in Rufaah. As the leader and organizer of the uprising, Taha received two years in prison, Howard (1988).

After the two years of detention, in 1948, Taha decided to retire to his house in Rufaah and devote himself to religion. It was a period of seclusion (*khalwah*) and meditation inspired by the model of the Sufi brotherhoods. He stayed in his house where he daily prayed, fasted, and read the Qur'an. During this period of time, Taha developed a new ideology, inspired by religion. According to his new vision, Islam, as the true religion from God, was the only solution for all the problems of Sudanese society.

The period of seclusion ended in October 1951. He was employed for a very short time by the Water and Electricity Company in Khartoum, but then resigned, giving up his career as an engineer, and decided to spread his new message. For this, Taha gathered some of his former sympathizers and transformed the old political movement into a religious brotherhood. "The Republican Party" (*Al-Hizb Al-Jumhuriyn*) became "The Republican Brotherhood" (*Al-Ikhwan Al-Jumhuriyn*). Through his sermons, speeches and writings, Taha promoted a political message based on Islam. It was not something new in Sudan, as there were also other Islamist movements (based on political Islam), some of which were inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt (Besancon, 2017). However, Taha proposed a reinterpretation of Islam and the Qur'an, leading to the birth of a tolerant, peaceful, and progressive message that he called "The Second Message of Islam". This message, which is also the title of his main book published in 1967, is the ideological basis of The Republican Brotherhood, Taha (1996).

The year 1956 was a great year for Sudan's independence. The main political force that prevailed was the National Unionist Party, a center-right movement led by Ismail Al-Azhari (1900-1969), the first

prime minister of Sudan. That year, a huge debate began regarding the adoption of a constitution. One of the most important topics was the relationship between the state and religion, specifically the role of Islam in the Sudanese government. There were many groups in Sudanese society with different views, including Liberals, Marxists, and Islamists, but the most interesting was Taha's movement, Packer (2006).

Taha established himself as an extremely popular preacher, attracting an impressive number of followers. He also attends some mosques and gives Friday sermons. His followers gave him the title of *Ustadh* or *Ustaz* ("The Revered Teacher"). He and the Republican Brothers were involved in the political debates of the 1950s-1960s in Sudan, promoting equal rights for all Sudanese regardless of gender or religion. Despite the hostility from the authorities, their manifestos and pamphlets spread in many areas. Even so, the number of actual members of the movement never exceeded 1000, but the number of their sympathizers was much larger, Taha (1996).

The year 1969 came with a great challenge for the young Sudanese state. Ismail Al-Azhari was removed from power in a coup lead by General Jaafar Nimeiry (1928-2009). Nimeiry proclaimed himself head of state and began leading the National Revolutionary Command Council as the new government, Fluehr-Lobban (1990). The new military regime was hostile to Taha's movement. His public lectures were banned in 1973 and he was arrested in 1977 for violating this ban, Howard (1988). The 1970-1980s were a difficult period for The Republican Brothers. Despite these things, they considered Nimeiry's rule to be preferable to that of radical Islamists, Taha (1996).

In 1981 Islamist opposition to Nimeiry's regime grew greatly. In this context, Nimeiry was forced to make certain concessions to please the Islamists. This is how it is that in August 1983, he settled the old problem of the constitution and adopted Shari'a by presidential decree. From that moment, Sudan became an Islamic state, Besancon (2017). The decision had far-reaching long-term consequences, animating opposition in the predominantly Christian south, Warburg (1990).

In September 1983, after Shari'a was adopted, the Republican Brotherhood officially began a campaign against the regime. They did not want the adoption of Shari'a in the version of the Islamists but in

that of their own message, much more tolerant and progressive. Interestingly, at that time, Taha was still under arrest, but his followers began to criticize the regime harshly. Even more interesting is the fact that on December 19, 1984, Taha and other important members of the movement who had been imprisoned were released. A few days later, on Christmas Day, Ustadh Mahmoud Taha and his followers published a pamphlet highlighting the errors of the new regime. They criticized the president's Islamist politics and the irresponsible way of applying Shari'a. The pamphlet was written and distributed from Omdurman, the new Brotherhood center where Taha had moved. Omdurman was the largest city in Sudan, located in the north of Khartoum, and the site of the mausoleum of Muhammad Ahmad (1843-1885), the self-proclaimed *Mahdi*, Taha (1996).

At the end of December 1984, four members of the Republican Brotherhood were arrested by the police while distributing that pamphlet in Omdurman and Khartoum. The authorities argued that the arrests occurred because of the Republican Brothers' opposition to the government and the distribution of illegal materials. Moreover, The Republican Brotherhood was seen as an illegal organization. On Wednesday, January 2, 1985, the four Republican Brothers were brought before the court, but the trial was postponed. Three days later, on Saturday afternoon, January 5, Ustadh Mahmoud Taha was arrested and was charged with the same offenses. Taking into account the seriousness of the acts committed according to the legislation in force at that time, the five, Taha and his followers, were brought before a special court on January 7. The five stated that they do not recognize any decision made by the court because the court members are acting on the basis of unjust legislation imposed by force. It is notable that Ustadh Mahmoud said during the trial: "I have repeatedly declared my view that the September 1983 so-called Islamic laws violate Islamic Shari'a law and Islam itself. Moreover, these laws have distorted Islamic Shari'a law and Islam and made them repugnant. Furthermore, these laws were enacted and utilized to terrorize the people and humiliate them into submission. The laws also jeopardize the national unity of the country. These are my objections from a theoretical point of view", Taha (1996).

The whole process took two hours. Following it, the judges observed that Ustadh Mahmoud and their followers made strange claims about the Shari'a, Islam, and the Qur'an. These statements exacerbated the situation and led to their actions being considered apostasy. The judges decided: Mahmoud Mohamed Taha and his four followers are guilty of opposition to the government, distribution of illegal materials, organization of a banned group and the most serious – apostasy. All five were sentenced to death, Taha (1996).

According to the legislation from that moment, the sentence could not be given without the approval of the president. The decision of the special court of appeal was announced on Tuesday, January 15 and the President Nimeiry publicly announced his confirmation on Thursday, January 17, and directed the execution of Taha on Friday, January 18. That Friday morning, Ustadh Mahmoud Mohamed Taha was hanged in public, and his body was taken by a helicopter and buried in an unknown location in the desert west of Omdurman, O'Sullivan (2001). This was the end of the great thinker who elaborated on The Second Message of Islam.

The Theory of The Second Message of Islam

"The Second Message of Islam" (in Arabic: *Ar-Risalah Al-Thania min Al-Islam*) is the title of Taha's most important book. The first edition was published in the holy month of Ramadan 1386 A.H (January 1967 A.D). The volume was re-edited several times during Taha's life, reaching the fourth edition. In the introduction to this latest edition, Taha said the following words about the book: "The book is the basic text for the Republican Cause", Taha (1996). This clearly demonstrates that the main work should be studied to understand the ideology of Taha and the Republican Brotherhood. Also, according to Steve Howard, Taha's book is a "extremely concise treatise on how the Qur'an applies to human life at this modern stage of its history and how, as a divine document, *al-mudhaf*, it evolves to guide every stage of existence", Howard (2016).

The book is the result of Taha's reflections from the seclusion period of 1948-1951. The main theme that gives the title of the book is the theory of the *Second Message of Islam*. In the introduction to the

fourth edition, Taha explains the title as follows: “It is not my purpose in this introduction to discuss in detail any of the book’s different themes. I wish, however, at the outset, to emphasize and clarify an important point, namely, that Islam consists of the two messages: a *First Message* based on the subsidiary texts of the Qur’an, and a *Second Message* based on the primary texts of the Qur’an. The *First Message* has already been interpreted and elaborated, while the *Second Message* still awaits interpretation and elaboration. That shall be done when its man and its people come”, Taha (1996). In the introduction to the third edition, he also reveals the purpose of this book: “Mohamed is the Messenger of the First Message and he is also the Messenger of the Second Message. While he explained the First Message in detail, he only outlined the Second Message. Its elaboration requires now a fresh understanding of the Qur’an. This is the purpose of this book. Those who approach this book with an open mind will be guided to the right path”, Taha (1996).

During his period of seclusion, Taha realized that the relationship between Islam and modernism is a complex one. The Islamic Shari’a seemed incompatible with the modern world. A majority Islamic nation like Sudan would have had only two options: to adopt Shari’a or to accept modernism. In both cases, the consequences were serious. If Sudan adopted Shari’a, then it would have remained an anachronistic society that would have applied the laws of the 7th century in a 20th-century world. Sudan would have been seen as a fanatic and backward state. In the second case, if Sudan had rejected Shari’a and adopted secular modernism, then it would have become an atheistic and unbelieving society where immorality would have spread. These two opposing models were promoted in Sudan by Islamists and Marxists. In this context, Taha developed a middle way: this is “The Second Message of Islam”, An-Na’im (1988).

Taha's book has six chapters dealing with very serious issues of political and social philosophy. The first two chapters address general issues: “Civilization and Material Progress” and “Philosophy’s View of the Individual and Community”. The last four chapters deal with concrete issues related to Islam and Islam's response to the previous issues: “The Individual and Community in Islam”, “Islam”, “The First

Message” and “The Second Message”. In these chapters, Taha argues that Islam is the only solution to create a proper and solid society and a good political regime. This shows that Taha's ideology is Islamist (political Islam), but we are talking about a unique progressive Islamism, Mahmoud (2006). In a letter from 1963, Taha states that “my own party is the Republican Party. It built its ideology on Islam”, Howard (2016). What particularly interests us is the content of the last three chapters of “The Second Message of Islam”.

Taha explains that Islam, as a religion of submission to God, is the creed of all His prophets and messengers. This is a well-known idea that also appears in many places in the Qur'an: “Say (o, Muslims), “We believe in Allah and that which has been sent down to us and that which has been sent down to Ibrahim (Abraham), Isma'il (Ishmael), Ishaq (Isaac), Ya'qub (Jacob), and to Al-Asbat [the offspring of the twelve sons of Ya'qub (Jacob)], and that which has been given to Musa (Moses) and 'Isa (Jesus), and that which has been given to the Prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him we have submitted (in Islam).” (Qur'an 2:136); “Verily, We have sent the revelation to you (o Muhammad) as We sent the revelation to Nuh (Noah) and the Prophets after him; We (also) sent the revelation to Ibrahim (Abraham), Isma'il (Ishmael), Ishaq (Isaac), Ya'qub (Jacob), and Al-Asbat [the offspring of the twelve sons of Ya'qub (Jacob)], 'Isa (Jesus), Ayyub (Job), Yunus (Jonah), Harun (Aaron), and Sulaiman (Solomon); and to Dawud (David) We gave the Zabur (Psalms). Moreover, Messengers We have mentioned to you before, and Messengers We have not mentioned to you, - and to Musa (Moses) Allah spoke directly” (Qur'an 4:163); “He (Allah) has ordained for you the same religion (Islamic Monotheism) which He ordained for Nuh (Noah), and that which We have revealed to you (O Muhammad,), and that which We ordained for Ibrahim (Abraham), Musa (Moses) and 'Isa (Jesus).” (Qur'an 42:13).

Mahmoud Mohamed Taha talks at one point in his book about the so called “Islamic Trinity” - the most important messages brought by the three great prophets: Moses, Jesus and Mohamed. He said: “With the coming of Moses and the descent of Torah upon sons of Israel, the Islamic concept entered a new phase, the phase of the scriptural

religions, namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam- with the Torah for the Jews, the Gospel for the Christians and the Qur'an for the Muslims [...] For the first time in history, monotheistic belief merged with regulative law on a wide scale. Then came Jesus with the New Testament, and the Islamic Trinity was completed with the sending of the Final Prophet Mohamed", Taha (1996). He then explains that the message of the Torah was a very strict and harsh one in an extremely violent historical context of the Middle East. The people were undisciplined and because of this the Torah contains many punishments. The purpose of these harsh laws of Moses was to correct their behavior. Instead, the message of the Gospel of Jesus was a pacifist one in a different historical context. If during the time of Moses the Jews formed a warlike and violent tribal society, during the time of Jesus they were under Roman domination and were powerless. For this reason, the Gospel emphasizes patience and acceptance of suffering in order not to worsen the situation of the people of that time.

According to Taha's explanations, the two messages are contradictory. The Torah is based on punishment and justice, while the Gospel is based on forgiveness and mercy. Two opposite extremes and this is evident from the following verses: "Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot." (Deuteronomy 19:21) for Torah and "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also." (Matthew 5:38-39) for Gospel. Ultimately, the Qur'anic revelation struck a balance between the two extremes. Taha said: "Since Islam, as brought by Mohamed, is in the equilibrium between Judaism and Christianity, the Qur'an also contains the qualities of both Judaism and Christianity. For example, "The penalty for an evil is an equal evil, but he who forgives and reforms, his reward is upon God. He does not love the unfair ones." (Qur'an 42:40) [...] It means that Islam, as revealed in the Qur'an, is not one message, but two: one at the beginning closer to Judaism, and the other at the end closer to Christianity", Taha (1996).

Taha explains the two messages of Islam as follows: "Islam developed between the two towns of Mecca and Medina, beginning in Mecca (around 610 A.D); when it failed to gain acceptance there, the

Prophet migrated to Medina (in 622 A.D), where Islam succeeded. [...] It was not the ultimate Islam that succeeded then, but rather the Islam at the level of *al-iman*. The Qur'an itself is divided into two parts: one of *al-iman* and the other of *al-islam*, in the sense that the former was revealed in Medina, while the latter was revealed earlier in Mecca. Each class of texts has its own distinguishing features, reflecting the fact that the *Medinese Qur'an* pertains to the stage of *al-iman*, while the *Meccan Qur'an* pertains to the stage of *al-islam*", Taha (1996).

The Qur'an is structured in 114 surahs, most of which were revealed in Mecca (nearly 2\3 surahs). These Meccan surahs emphasize belief in God and the Last Day, trying to persuade people to abandon idolatry and return to their Creator. The mode of exposure of the message is through invitation, persuasion and tolerance. This message was far too complex and lofty for the people of that time. For this reason, the message was rejected and abrogated for a moment by the Medinite surahs. These surahs deal with much more "worldly" aspects: marriages, divorces, loans, wars, spoils, etc. The message from Mecca was more similar to the message of Jesus, and the one from Medina to that of Moses. When humanity reaches a higher stage of development, the message from Mecca will finally be applicable. Since the message from Medina will become anachronistic and impossible to apply in that new historical context, the message from Mecca, which is the original message of Islam, will replace it. This is *The Second Message of Islam*. Taha concluded in one chapter: "Thus we reach a significant conclusion: many aspects of the present Islamic Shari'a are not the original principles or objectives of Islam", Taha (1996). According to Mahmoud Taha, the current Shari'a is based on the message from Medina, which is a temporary message, not the original, final, and universal message.

Taha believed that all the great moral principles of mankind are to be found in the Meccan part of the Qur'an: freedom, equality, tolerance, justice, and peace. From these Quranic principles, we can create our own laws to suit the current context in which we live. We don't have to go back to the 7th-century laws from Medina, which were very good, but had a limited validity in time. Today is the 20th century, and humanity has reached a new stage of development where the message

from Medina is no longer appropriate. The best solution to Sudan's and the world's political and social problems is the message from Mecca, *the Second Message of Islam*, which provides a Qur'anic framework for creating perfect legislation. This was Taha's theory that was the basis of his and the Republican Brotherhood's conceptions regarding the main topics of interest discussed in Sudanese society.

Other basic ideas of the Republican Brothers

The status of women in Islamic societies was and remains a debated topic, including in Sudan. Islamist politicians and ideologues see that the role of women is limited to the domestic and family space, El-Tigani Mahmoud (2003). Because of this, women's education is not an important topic for them. Unlike other Islamists, Taha's movement considers the role of women to be much more important and advocates for their increased involvement in social and political life. The key point of this understanding is provided by the fact that the Republican Brotherhood, unlike other political and religious movements, also accepted women. Howard's testimonies are relevant in this regard. He said: "The Republican Brothers and Sisters constructed a comprehensive social system that both allowed them to hone their practice of the teaching of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha and to turn inward in a limited fashion from the society that viewed those practices with some degree of suspicion or incomprehension", Howard (2016).

The Republican movement emphasized the idea of equality for men and women, according to Taha's teachings, derived from a specific reading of the Qur'an, Adrahtas (2020). One of the most shocking aspects to Sudanese society at the time was the fact that the Brotherhood organized religious gatherings attended by both men and women. Howard attended one such gathering: "He took me to the *dhikr* [circle of remembrance of God] that week before sunset on Thursday, when the Republicans gathered for one of their major meeting of the week at the home of their leader, Ustadh Mahmoud Mohamed Taha. Abdalla joined the semicircle of brothers and sisters who stood chanting the name of God in the declining sun outside of the house." (Howard 2016: 16). However, Howard informed us that, despite both men and women participating in the *dhikr* ritual, in the canonical

prayers (*as-salat*), they did not sit in the same row. This does not mean that the status of equality is flawed, with women actively participating in the Republican Brotherhood in distributing street pamphlets and organizing reading circles, Howard (2016).

The basis of the entire understanding of the status of women for the Republican Brothers is found in Taha's book "The Second Message of Islam": "Islam's original percept is complete equality between men and women, as indicated by their equal responsibility before God in the Day of Judgement, when the scales of deeds are set [...] But Islam was revealed at a time to a people who went so far as to bury girls alive in fear of the disgrace if they were taken as spoils of war, or to avoid the burden of having to feed them in time of drought and famine [...] Early Islamic legislation was, in fact, a great leap forward for women, in comparison to their previous status. Nevertheless, it was far below Islam's ultimate objective", Taha (1996).

Taha here again distinguishes between the first applied message, from Medina, and the *Second Message* from Mecca, whose objective is to establish a balance of equality between men and women. This is the real and universal objective of Islam regarding the status of women. Also, Taha considered polygamy and sexual segregation to be part of the same temporary and anachronistic legislation of Medina, Taha (1996).

Another important topic is that of the status of non-Muslims in Sudanese Islamic society, especially the status of Christians. Christianity was the second most important religion in Sudan, with a majority in certain regions in the south, El-Tigani Mahmoud (2023). The adoption of Shari'a in 1983 and its imposition in Christian regions led to violent protests and the outbreak of war, An-Na'im (1989). Christians were bound to obey Islamic laws as second-class citizens. Mahmoud Mohamed Taha did not agree to such a thing, and the letter of December 25, 1984, reflects his attitude on various important subjects, including the status of Christians. We think it relevant to provide some of the content of the letter: "These laws have jeopardized the unity of the country and divided the people in the north and south by provoking religious sensitivity, which is one of the fundamental factors that has aggravated the southern problem. It is futile to anyone to claim that a

Christian person is not adversely affected by the implementation of the Shari'a. A Muslim under Shari'a is the guardian of a non-Muslim in accordance with the *verse of the sword* and the *verse of jiziyah*. They do not have equal rights. It is not enough for a citizen today merely to enjoy freedom of worship. He is entitled to the full rights of a citizen in their country with all other citizens. The rights of southern citizens in their country are not provided for in Shari'a but rather in Islam at the level of fundamental Qur'anic revelation, that is, the level of Sunnah. We therefore call for the following: 1. The repeal of the September 1983 laws because they distort Islam, humiliate people and jeopardize national unity. 2. The halting of bloodshed and implementation of a peaceful political solution instead of a military solution. This is the national duty of the government as well as the armed southerners. There must be a brave admission that the South has a genuine problem and the serious attempt to resolve it", Howard (2016).

The content of the letter is very interesting. Taha is directly concerned with the problem of Christians in the South and criticizes the forced implementation of Shari'a. He does not agree with the use of the two verses of the Qur'an, Surah 9, "the verse of the sword" (9:5) and the "verse of jiziyah" (9:29), because they are part of the Medina legislation. Christians and all non-Muslim citizens deserve equal status with Muslims. This is the authentic teaching of the Qur'an and Islam for all ages and periods. Moreover, Taha states in his book: "there should be no discrimination on the grounds of birth, race, color, faith or sex", Taha (1996).

Mahmoud Mohamed Taha's opinion about *jihad* is also very interesting, an extremely relevant subject these days. The propaganda of radical Islamists such as members of Al-Qaeda, ISIS or Boko Haram have made jihad an armed struggle against non-Muslims and the duty of every "good Muslim". The ideological roots of this orientation can be found in the 60's with the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966). Taha formulated a completely different interpretation, also based on the theory of *the Second Message of Islam*. He said that *jihad* is not an original percept in Islam. "Armed *Jihad*" was necessary in the violent historical context of 7th-century Arabia. Today, in the modern world we live in, *jihad* in this form has lost its effectiveness. What really matters

is the “spiritual *jihad*”, the struggle with the self, Taha (1996). This concept is known in Islam as *jihad al-nafs* and has a very important meaning, especially in Sufi circles.

At this point, it would be appropriate to discuss the relationship between the Republican Brotherhood and the Sufi brotherhoods. Howard was very interested in this aspect of Taha's movement. In Sudan, there were many Sufi brotherhoods (in Arabic *turuq*) such as Khatmiyyah and Qadiriyyah. Howard says that many of the members of Taha's movement were initiated into these brotherhoods. However, the Republican Brotherhood did not function as a Sufi brotherhood. They had rituals of *dhikr* gatherings, but they did not have an initiation rite. This indicates that it was not a Sufi brotherhood, as noted by Howard (2016).

CONCLUSIONS

Following our brief analysis, we can draw several conclusions. First of all, Ustadh Mahmoud Mohamed Taha was a unique personality who managed to create a movement based on a very progressive and tolerant Islamist ideology. Despite not being an *alim* (a graduated scholar of Islam), Taha was a spiritual leader who had a deep understanding of the Qur'an. Many of his ideas and methods may have been inspired by Sufi brotherhoods. His objective was to create a modern and independent Sudanese Republic where people can be free and equal, as the Qur'an teaches us. His concerns for Sudan are very clear from his ambitions to reform the regime. The way he raised the question of the status of Christians and non-Muslim citizens of the South is of great interest. The problem of the southerners was solved only after the country split in two, Sudan and South Sudan, as Taha warned in 1984. His unique ideas and his theory of *The Second Message of Islam*, perhaps, could have saved the unity of Sudan and created a modern and prosperous state. Ustadh Mahmoud Mohamed Taha and the Republican Brotherhood will remain in the history of Sudan, Africa, and Islam as an interesting attempt to modernize Islam.

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