

BOOK REVIEWS

Wael B. Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurrahman Taha*. Columbia University Press, 2019, 359 pp.

In *Reforming Modernity*, Wael Hallaq makes Abdurrahman Taha's works an interlocutor of his project on a critique of modernity that he has begun in his previous works: *Shari'a* (2009), *The Impossible State* (2013), and *Restating Orientalism* (2018). Hallaq's and Taha's works share a common thread, focusing on ethics and critique of modernity. This book presents Taha's moral philosophy, extracted from dozens of his works that have been published since 1979. According to Hallaq, the paradigm of Taha's thought is different from that of Arab Islamic reformist thinkers, starting from Muḥammad 'Abduh to Muḥammad 'Ābid al-Jābrī, who are still trapped in the framework of modern thinking that relegates Islamic traditions (38). Taha is considered to have a unique perspective because he does not propose reform with the lens of modernity but by prioritizing ethical elements of philosophy.


Hallaq demonstrates how Taha's thinking is different from that of al-Jābrī, Taha's fellow countrymen. While al-Jābrī puts ethics as "theoretically articulated discourse," Taha puts it as a cultural practice or "applied moral technology of the individual and communal self." While al-Jābrī places *burhān* (demonstration) as the most important epistemology of Arab thought and at the same time considers *'irfān* (gnosis) as the cause of the decline of Arab and Muslim societies, Taha reverses the epistemological order and places *'irfān* as the most important epistemology (21, 258–60).

In addition to the similarities between Hallaq's and Taha's paradigms in viewing modernity, there are also Taha's ideas that Hallaq disapproves of. Among others, Hallaq rejects Taha's belief that the failure of modernism is due to a mismatch between what Taha calls the spirit (*rūḥ*) of modernity that is universal and can be traced in the history of all civilization and the reality (*wāqi'*) that is now represented by Euro-American civilization. According to Hallaq, this statement is true in the sense that there is no civilization that does not intersect with, and is not influenced by, other civilizations. However, modernity has a unique character not rooted historically in other cultures. The background of modernity as a colonialist project is considered to be one of the factors that shaped modernity. In achieving its goals, the colonial project did much violence that no other culture had done. If the prerequisites of modernity were only material, scientific, and mercantile sophistication, other cultures such as Islam and China's Qing Dynasty would be more likely to become modern before Europe. Therefore, to conclude that colonialism and human problems brought by modernism is because of the gap between the spirit of modernity and its modus

operandi is neglect of “the organicity of the relationship between the two” (82–86).

Furthermore, the colonialization of non-European territories, especially the Muslim majority worlds in the early nineteenth century, destroyed cultural, institutional, and intellectual Islamic treasures on a grand scale. This “structural genocide” not only abolished Islamic intellectual habitus, by replacing *Shari‘a* and its institutions, but also created new subjects with a worldview of modern nation-states. According to Taha, displacing the modern state subjects with spiritual subjects is by reversing the order of al-Jābri’s epistemological priority, putting ‘*irfān*’ ahead of *burhān* (258–59). One way to form an ethical self with ‘*irfān*’ epistemology is through a process of purification (*tazkiya*). Purification is built on the foundation of worship (*al-ta‘abbud*) along with intrascendentalism (*al-tash-hīd*), the belief in the sovereignty and perfect absoluteness of God. The latter relates to human freedom because the more someone believes in God’s sovereignty, the more infinite her or his freedom will be, and the more empowered her or his agency is. This ethical system encourages positive liberty, which can free the self (*nafs*) or ego (*anā*) of need, of domination over others, and most importantly of the self, in other words, “annihilation of the self.” With this paradigm, Muslim modernity should rest on morality and ethics rather than merely on industrial and economic achievements.

Taha’s concern for the modern subject is not aimed only at Muslims. His ethical thought is the same as the ethical critique of Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and the likes. Therefore, Taha’s contribution is projected to be a solution to the world’s predicaments created by modernity. Herein lies the significant role of Hallaq’s book in elevating Taha’s philosophical thought so that a wider audience can read it.

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Jarad Zimble, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to J. M. Coetzee*. Cambridge University Press, 2020, 274 pp.

The Cambridge Companion to J.M. Coetzee, edited by Jarad Zimble, covers the writerly practice of J. M. Coetzee; the author of fourteen novels, three autobiographical fictions, several volumes of translations, critical essays, correspondences, and short stories. This volume of essays is divided into three main parts through which the chapters reveal the main features of Coetzee’s corpus and the impact of the colonial conditions of the apartheid state in South Africa, European imperialism, and the process of decolonization on his works.