

Intellectual Formation as a Conduit to the Spiritual Dimension of Man

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Subject: A Tabah Research seminar exploring sense and purpose in the rational sciences, and their inter-relationship.

Summary: The purpose of this Tabah Research seminar held at St Cross College, Oxford, was to explore the relationship between spiritual knowledge and the philosophical sciences by way of Dr Taha Abderrahmane's experiences in both disciplines. As arguably the foremost logician in the Islamic world today, in his mastery of traditional and modern formal logic, his academic experience coupled with his spiritual insight served to initiate the discourse. Spurred on by the defeat of the Arab armies in 1967, Dr Taha Abderrahmane began to question why the western philosophic sciences lacked any corresponding Islamic equivalent. In his understanding, gleaned from his considerable academic and considered personal research, the philosophical quest and its attendant activities are proposed as essentially a force for inter-cultural and cognitive unity. The seminar concluded that the development of philosophical tools for the purpose of intellectual perception can only be truly activated by the development of a spiritual discipline that is able to provide an objectivity necessary to the task.





INTELLECTUAL FORMATION AS A CONDUIT TO THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF MAN

A Seminar held at the University of Oxford on 16 October 2008 with Dr Taha Abderahmane

THIS EVENING represented the inaugural Tabah seminar at Oxford University, by which we intend to present a rolling program of inter-disciplinary engagements between the scholars and intellects of the Islamic world with professors and students of western academia. This type of forum aims to be unique in its appraisal of the capacity for Muslim theologians and philosophers to engage and potentially direct the intellectual enquiry presently pursued in the humanities in a direction that is perceptive of a common cultural aim. As convenors of this program, it was a distinct pleasure to be able to welcome Dr Taha as the first guest academic. The seminar was held at St Cross College and lasted for several hours before an invited group comprising Oxford academics, scholars, authors and Islamic community leaders.

Dr Taha proceeded to explore the relationship between spiritual knowledge and the philosophical sciences by way of his experiences in both disciplines. As arguably the foremost logician in the Islamic world today, in his mastery of traditional logic and that developed in the modern world, his insight and discourse was the more convincing and enlightening. Dr Taha began by presenting us with the trajectory of his intellectual development. Spurred on by the defeat of the Arab armies in 1967, Dr Taha began to search for the reason why the western philosophic sciences lacked any corresponding Islamic equivalent. He proceeded to study western languages such as French, German and English, together with Latin and Ancient Greek as prerequisite tools for the study of modern philosophy.

By way of a *doctorat d'état* from France, a notoriously difficult and sophisticated course of study, he mastered the understanding of modern logic and the necessary effect of language on the latter. His sublimated understanding led him to perceive that languages were primarily cultural identifiers and imprint philosophy with a subjective hue. If reason is the common tie of all men, language imprints the study of a common philosophic problem to garner differing results. This cultural appropriation plays, according to Dr Taha, a significant role so that in his appropriation of the intellectual sciences he consciously began to build the basis of a philosophy through rhetorical formulations, all the time aware of the impact the Arabic language would have on its perception. Dr Taha gave the example of the understanding of reason, *'aql*, in Arabic. Reason was the fruit of understanding

between two individuals rather than the discrete innate faculty in each of them. The act of reasoning internalises that which is being rationally perceived. This coupling for the activation of rational activity he related to the understanding in Islam that man is not an atomised individual but in essence a pair. The Quran, to support this contention, only addresses man as a couple; creation having been a process of manifesting pairs as the common denominator. The rational faculty is therefore an inter-connector. The delimiting of the word *'aql*, linguistically, as a limit or meaning to tie or bind something to another, is transcended by its being that activity which brings or connects things together. Correspondingly, the philosophic quest and its activities are seen by Dr Taha, to be a force for inter-cultural and cognitive unity.

In view of the above, Dr Taha went on to stress that he quickly realised that the rational faculty nevertheless had limits that could not be transgressed. These limits were varied, but in the main such limitation arose from the inability of reason to rationalise itself. That is to say, that the rational faculty can reason everything before it except itself. It cannot transcend itself by itself, as a higher faculty than reason is needed to do this. In Islamic philosophy, this principle is commonly known by the maxim that the *dalil* must be greater than the *madlul*¹. This was the impasse that Dr Taha arrived at in 1975, whereupon he searched for another cognitive discipline for knowing that which was true and existent but not capable of rational comprehension or enquiry. This 'direct' approach led him to the sufic treatises of earlier masters and sages which he then began to assiduously read, all the while realising that the simple act of reading those works could not lead to that reality which they were addressing. In effect, reading could not lead to transcendence, but to the desire for transcendence through the alchemy of a spiritual authority.

Dr Taha aptly dismissed the common academic notion that the attachment of the intellectual sciences to a necessary spiritual hierarchy implied a loss of objectivity. It was precisely such a spiritual dimension, in his estimation, which gave objectivity to the true development and understanding of the intellectual sciences, wherein each discipline could be properly and functionally situated to perform the task it is supposed to perform.

After speaking for three quarter of an hour, a discussion ensued around the need for the new formulation of a kalam discourse. A point was put to Dr Taha concerning the intellectual and cultural relativism facing the modern day humanities student, and the need for the ratification of the Islamic *turath* by intellectual enquiry as a conduit to spiritual understanding. Dr Taha agreed that this was an issue of anxiety amongst Muslims today which necessitated the development of a new theological discourse, but whose novelty lay in the extent of its application rather than the tools used. That is to say, the classical methodologies and tools need to remain intact, but the subject matter chosen for the discourse must conform to and reflect that which is at issue for contemporary man. As to the philosophic content of such a discourse, Dr Taha further added that there is a need for it to encompass the intellectual sciences that transcend the boundaries of the Islamic culture given the interpenetration of the world's cultures in the present age. This important direction and declaration formed the basis of several hours of discussion, in which it was decided that such a formulation

1. This maxim has important ramifications for apprehending the logical absurdity, on the one hand, of furnishing philosophic proofs for the existence of God, and on the other, for accepting the ubiquitous assertions of Darwinian evolution.

would need to be explored further in consequent colloquia at Oxford. The latter was all the more pertinent given that the renewal called for by Dr Taha was stipulated to be within the competence of those qualified Muslims educated in the West and directly exposed intellectually to those philosophies and sociologies insidiously at work in the wider world.





