

# Liberal Islam Between Texts and its Modern Condition

ABDULKADER TAYOB

At a conference in Khartoum in April 2006, Islamist leader Hassan al-Turabi caught the attention of more than one observer when he expressed unusually liberal views on Islam. He also came to repeat similar views in an interview on Arabiyyah satellite channel:

“I want women to work and become part of public life, Allah willing. Allah gave them certain advantages over us, and gave us certain advantages over them. He gave men and women advantages over one another. I would like there to be equality between people, because we were all created from the same soul: ‘Allah created from a single soul its mate.’ ... I have not found a *hadith* that prohibits women from being Imams.”

In Sudan some ulama were swift in condemning these public statements, and called for meeting out the appropriate capital punishment (*hadd*). Internationally, Turabi’s statements have attracted much attention given his position in the Islamist camp.

Turabi has been the unquestioned leader of the Sudanese Islamists who first originated in the 1960s as a branch of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers. He eventually became the real power behind the throne following a coup that unseated a democratically elected government in 1989, and has led the Islamization of the country for most of the last decade of the twentieth century. Since 2001, however, Turabi and General Omar al-Bashir broke up their thirteen-year alliance, and Turabi has been arrested twice in a brush with his former ally. Meanwhile, he has been campaigning for more liberal reforms but, still, under a clearly Islamist ideology.

## Texts beyond contexts

In the last year or so, a group at ISIM has come together to put such remarks in a larger time span framework. Rather than simply regarding such statements as the harbingers of a liberal Islam, or as unorthodox views challenging the essence of Islam, we urged scholars and researchers to look for broader patterns in modern Islamic thought. Such analyses would give a better perspective on the statements and utterances of individual thinkers such as Turabi. Several articles have since then appeared in the *ISIM Review* on this theme. This, my final reflection as ISIM professor at the Radboud University, is dedicated to sharing some thoughts on the recent spate of liberal Muslim pronouncements.

Turabi himself has been rather more liberal in comparison to other Islamist leaders with whom he shares a political ideology. In the early 1990s, Turabi told an American audience that women need not wear a headscarf. Soon thereafter, though, the government of Sudan introduced a bill that made *hijab* mandatory. Turabi’s liberal views completely contradicted the project of Islamization that he had campaigned for and led during the greater part of Sudan’s post-independence era. During the height of Sudan’s Islamization project, women systematically lost rights on a grand scale, following similar Islamization projects in Pakistan and Iran. If there is anything unequivocal about Islamization projects of the twentieth century, then it is the systematic erosion and denial of the rights of women in public life. Thus, for Turabi to utter such statements today raises even more questions than provides answers.

**The Sudanese Islamist leader Hassan al-Turabi has become known for what appear to be contradictory statements, for example, defending women’s rights one day and denying them another. Significantly though, such conflicting statements are based on a singular fidelity to Islamic texts. Rather than just explaining the apparent contradictions by referring to the contexts in which such statements are made, the author argues that only by moving beyond contextuality is it possible to capture and understand the power of texts in modern Islamic thought.**

In a book on Islamic fundamentalism and gender, Shehadah has argued that moderate Islamists like Turabi tailor messages for respective audiences.<sup>1</sup> They present one message for domestic purposes, and another for international arenas where they defend the reasonable credentials of Islam. In this particular case, it seems that Turabi is employing the liberal vision of Islam against his earlier allies and in contradiction with his earlier practices. On an international level as well, there is a ready audience for liberal and moderate

Islamic voices. Turabi’s words seemed in step with a whole range of international policy think-tanks that have urged governments in the last few years to identify moderate and liberal Muslims, and build alliances with them. The much-publicized Rand Report of 2003 and more recently, the report of the policy research unit for the Dutch government (WRR), are two well-known cases in point.<sup>2</sup> Academics like Etzioni have joined the call for building a public culture with the participation of moderate Muslims.<sup>3</sup>

Notwithstanding, one ought to look beyond the expedient proclamations, and identify Turabi’s statement as an expression of a highly problematic but powerful pattern in modern Islamic thought. I suggest that we go beyond a contextual reading that maps Turabi’s statements in national, regional, and global settings. Turabi’s mode of argument is too familiar to be restricted to the contexts and settings of the hour. It is a mode of argument that has been employed in a diverse number of contexts. Its proliferation and ubiquity therefore demand more careful reflection on a more comprehensive and fundamental level.

## Back to texts

Turabi’s approach is a familiar one of relying and appealing to a purely textual foundation for his views. A careful reading of his interviews indicates how his views filter one or the other texts from the Islamic legacy. And it is this particular textualist approach that merits scrutiny. It appeals to those both inside and outside Islam who yearn for an authentic voice to defend liberal values. As an Islamist leader, Turabi’s liberal views might be regarded more authentically Islamic than those of a feminist writer, such as Fatima Mernissi, or a liberal thinker, as Abdul Karim Soroush, relating the same thing. In Muslim matters, clearly, nothing can replace an argument founded on a set of texts. And nothing beats an Islamist defending a liberal approach through an appeal to texts.

Text-centred-ness is widely shared by Muslims across the broad spectrum of modern trends, and deserves close scrutiny as an ethic, and a way of doing things in the world. Recent progressive and liberal approaches have offered alternative ways of approaching the texts. Few, however, have explored the quandaries of the textualist–literalist approach as a fundamental modern feature that deserves critical review. In fact, I believe that paying more careful attention to the textualist approach of modern Islam should be the starting point of a fundamental analysis of its discourse. I would even venture to say that the play and obsession of texts in Islamic discourses mirrors the dilemmas of modern philosophy and its grappling with Existence, Being, and the threat of illusion. Texts pose a similar attraction and suggestion for Muslims in that they can unlock all secrets of a moral life.

## How texts work

I would suggest several important facets that show how texts work in Islamic discourses. The first point to note is how a textual approach could justify completely different standpoints on the same issue. As such, selecting texts that suited his particular view at the time, Turabi conveniently ignored others that contradict his position. Some might triumph at detecting the obvious contradictions in Turabi's position. But Turabi's contradiction is only valid if we judge him on the basis of a value or set of values outside the texts. If the principle position is not a value, but the selection of texts, one can find no fault with defending the rights of women one day and denying them another day. Turabi has, in effect, remained faithful to texts. The value itself is of secondary concern.

Turabi's method is widely employed, and reflected in a pattern that has justified Islam to trends and developments in the modern world. In the nineteenth century, it was modernization, then came nation building, left-wing mobilization, followed by Islamization. Always, a set of verses has been employed to support the sentiment that Islam is compatible with modern, anti-modern, socialist, nationalist, popular, third world, and European values. The only consistent feature of these processes of justification has been the selection of texts as a tool of legitimization. And so, I will venture to say that one of the cornerstones of contemporary Islamic thought is a fidelity to texts—any texts that can be presented as Islamic. When the principle is fundamentally grounded on texts, and the choice of texts is inherently subjective and arbitrary, then contradiction of values and effects necessarily follows, including self-contradiction. I would argue that a discourse dominated by texts builds a feeble foundation. One scientific theory to another, one political project to another, have all been anointed by texts. The texts are the only secure markers for discourses that have no moorings.

Certainly, this is not a classical relativist position of modern philosophy. Muslims are not engaged in a search for truth or reality that is thwarted by the available tools of observation, language, and practical reason. But they do find themselves in an equally fundamental quandary. They are engaged in the pursuit of a morally, upright life that covers ritual, belief, social engagement, and individual responsibility. And the key answers to these day-to-day practical questions are exposed to idiosyncratic choices that change rapidly as the modern world throws up its challenges in rapid succession. If the juggernaut is an accurate metaphor of social life in the modern world, then the shifting sands of a textualist approach can only be imagined. More recently, the support for violence faces a similar contradiction that sees the meaning of Islam being thrown from one side of the political fence to another.

Even though the textual approach is inherently problematic when it comes to values, it still has a powerful appeal. Unlike any other approach in modern Islam, the textualist approach captures the power of indigenous identity and authenticity. In a globalizing world that threatens to wipe out differences, the textualist approach appeals to the founding documents of early Islam, and provides a sort of security and a semblance of indigenous propriety. This text is ours and our projects based on these texts are justified since it is our cultural heritage. Such an appeal to authenticity cannot be dispelled out of hand. Cultural uniqueness is very much part of a global world that threatens to erase differences. The original texts of Islam restore uniqueness and specificity to Muslim projects.

It is not surprising to note how texts underline and promote the identity politics of the day. It has generally been ignored that Muslim governments used the textual approach even before the waves of Islamization in the 1970s. Initially, the politics of authenticity was a voice of protest against a colonial occupier in the period between the two world wars. Soon after national independence, post-colonial governments seized upon its magic to claim authenticity and exclusivity in the world of nations. Whilst Islamic protest groups took to the streets in the 1970s, Muslim governments themselves had already wielded the same card at international forums from the 1960s. They systematically appealed to exemption from international human rights charters on the basis of cultural specificity.<sup>4</sup> The Islamic revolutionaries hardly real-

ized the extent to which the politics of authenticity was a script of the powerful as it was of the powerless. Texts cut both ways, and as such suit the identity politics that Muslims have engaged in for most of the modern period.

Another important feature of the textualist pattern is its amenability to a personalist approach to religion. Appealing to texts stresses the transparency of the tools used to construct the ideology, the belief, and practices associated with Islam. The texts appear both accessible and amenable to a modern DIY approach to religion. And contemporary society has the technology to make these texts available in print, Internet sites, and multi-media formats. One can read one text, have it delivered to an email address, mobile phone, or fax on a daily basis. Accessibility of texts provides the basis for a profoundly personal approach to religion. The individualist approach of the texts does not reside in a deeply personal attitude to the spirit of God. But it conveys a powerful sense of immediacy in following a religious discipline.

## The promise of texts

The reformers of the nineteenth century promised that a return to the texts of early Islam would help Muslims to enter the modern world with dignity and respect. They ascribed the decline of Islam to the dead weight of a tradition that had accumulated over the original wisdom. This particular attitude spread across Muslim societies, challenging a myriad of different traditions and patterns that had developed over centuries. As we face the challenges of the twenty first century, however, this call for a return to texts has itself become a tradition of modernity.

This new tradition is embroiled in the politics of identity of the modern world. It yields very little reward at providing a clear ethic or set of values. But its inability in this regard is substituted by the substantial claim it makes in the name of authenticity and indigeneity. And its appeal lies in the substantially personal approach to religion that it provides for many Muslims. Contradiction, authenticity, and individualism are not consistent with each other, but they make a powerful combination in the right context.

Abdulkader Tayob is Professor at the Department of Religious Studies, University of Cape Town. He was ISIM Chair at the Radboud University Nijmegen.  
Email: aitayob@gmail.com

Image not available online

**Hassan al-Turabi,**  
**Khartoum,**  
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## Notes

1. Lamia Rustum Shehadeh, *The Idea of Women in Fundamentalist Islam* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003).
2. See: Cheryl Benard, *Civil Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, and Strategies* (Santa Monica et al: Rand Cooperation, 2003), at <http://www.rand.org>.
3. See: Amitai Etzioni, "Leveraging Islam," *National Interest* 83 (2006): 101-106; W. Asbeek Brusse, and I. J. Schoonenboom, *Dynamiek in islamitisch activisme: aanknopingspunten voor democratisering en mensenrechten*. Wetenschapelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid Rapport (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).
4. David Little, John Kelsay, and Abdulaziz A. Sachedina. 1988. *Human Rights and the Conflict of Cultures: Western and Islamic Perspectives on Religious Liberty* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988).