

Is the Koran the same as “Mein Kampf”?

Mahmud Taha: The example of a libertarian interpretation of the Quran

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War is a teacher, but in a completely different sense than the war supporters hoped for: it divides the ranks within the former left. In times of war, the true self reveals itself: this was the case with Noske, and it still remains today with some anti-Germans, such as the “Bahamas” (ex-Communist League, Group K) or parts of the weekly newspaper “Jungle World”: Germany is waging war alongside the USA, but the “anti-Germans” are for it!

This is the bankruptcy of all anti-German ideology. They spit venom and bile at the resurgent peace movement, and yet this very movement is the only force opposing German participation in this war and thus German ambitions for global power. In the old Gulf War fashion, these anti-Germans now need a reincarnation of Hitler; and this time it is the Koran, which they equate with “Mein Kampf” (cf. “Islam as the enemy,” GWR 263, pp. 1 and 8).

However, every “holy book” of the book religions differs from “Mein Kampf” in that, unlike Hitler, it is open to multiple interpretations, alternating between brutal, domination-justifying passages and ethical, liberating passages. The comparison is therefore rationally refuted and can be interpreted as outright racism if—as in Judaism (e.g., Martin Buber) and Christianity (e.g., Tolstoy)—interpreters of the Quran can be found who can present a libertarian interpretation of the Quran. There are plenty of such interpreters, especially in Islamic Sufism; one example here is the Sudanese Mahmud Taha, who was executed as a heretic (in Islam, an apostate) in 1985.

Mahmud Taha's Quran-Interpretation

In his most important work, “The Second Message of Islam” from 1967, Taha distinguishes two phases in the life of the Prophet Muhammad: one for his life in Mecca and one for his time in Medina. According to Taha’s interpretation, only the sermons of the Meccan phase (biographically prior to the Medinan phase, but paradoxically referred to in Taha’s terminology as the “second message”) have universal validity; the sermons in Medina (First Message), on the other hand, are time-specific, having been valid in the 7th century but no longer today. Taha assigns Quranic verses about jihad—the armed struggle against unbelievers—to the Medinan phase, in which Muhammad cooperated with the rulers and prepared for war against Mecca. Taha completely rejects this verse, in contrast to attempts to reinterpret it as nonviolent (e.g., by the Islamic Gandhian Abdul Ghaffar Khan). According to Taha, the Medinan phase also included slavery, capitalism, Sharia law, and the oppression of women. The principles preached in Mecca, when Muhammad was oppressed and an outlaw, were Quranic verses about peaceful persuasion, legal equality between Muslims and non-Muslims, and gender equality (women were equal members of Taha’s organization; veils, polygamy, and gender segregation were rejected). According to Taha, the Meccan sermons also focus on individual freedom in connection with social justice:

“The fundamental principle in Islam is that every human being is free. (...) The fundamental principle in Islam is communal property.” (Taha quoted in Övermann)

Law—for Taha, as well as in anarchism—equated with violence congealed into power, and according to this interpretation, in the 7th century, it was bound to force people, due to their imperfection and lack of enlightenment, to suppress anti-social impulses. However, according to Taha, the higher the standards of reason in human societies developed, the more likely it was that legal constraints would have to be withdrawn. Sharia is retrospectively justified for the 7th century, but rejected for the 20th century. Yet even modern Western democracy and constitutional law, largely freed from draconian corporal punishment, is, for Taha, merely a transitional stage on the

path to a new civilization: Where the exercise of individual freedom leads the individual to harbor “no malice toward anyone, even in their deepest innermost being,” where “ignorance decreases and knowledge increases,” where “concordance of action and consciousness” exists, an individual, according to Taha, is “at the highest level of Islam, where restrictions on the believer through prohibitions, but also through punishments, are obsolete.” (Taha) In contrast, neither Bin Laden nor the “Bahamas” are at any level of Islam, let alone the highest. According to Taha’s interpretation, God values individual freedom so highly “that he never wanted to restrict it through any authorized representative, thus Islam itself goes beyond a parliamentary representative democracy.” Taha as a proponent of enlightened anarchy based on a libertarian interpretation of the Koran. A question for the anti-Germans: is something like this possible, even conceivable, with Hitler’s “Mein Kampf”?

Literature

- Annette Övermann: The “Republican Brothers” in Sudan. An Islamic Reform Movement in the 20th Century, Peter Lang Verlag, Frankfurt 1993.
- Various articles about Taha in GWR Nos. 132 and 191.

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