Taha Abderrahmane’s Ethics for a Secular Age

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I first encountered Taha Abderrahmane in a footnote on page 12 of Wael Hallaq’s *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity’s Moral Predicament*. He described Abderrahmane as the most powerful voice to the claim that the central sphere of Islam is the moral. Furthermore he insists that global society can learn much from Islam about creating moral communities highlighting the intellectual project of Taha Abderrahmane as a primary source. As a prolific author Abderrahmane has created an important body of work that seeks to re-ground Islamic philosophy in its tradition by placing ethics at the heart of its practice. Not only does his work address an ethical re-awakening within the Islamic community, but also his project acts as a global message that engages Western secular dominance in political, social and philosophical spaces. He expresses his central ethical message to the global community highlighting man’s stewardship of the earth, resources, and inhabitants. His critique takes up a diverse array of topics including secularism, modern ethical theories, political Islam, and the standard Western binary tropes of pitting reason against revelation and religion against politics.
Two of his works written at the turn of the 21st century focus on the need for a reinvigoration of Islamic ethics combined with a more robustly developed Islamic ethical theory. He offers a complex and cogent theoretical analysis on both accounts as an alternative to the dominant philosophy of Western secular modernity. He first provides a complex ethical theory aimed at an Islamic intellectual renewal in *al-ʿAmal al-dīnī wa-tajdīd al-ʿaql* (*Religious Practice and the Renewal of Reason*). In a second text written in *Rūḥ al-ḥadātha: al-madkhal ilā taʿsis al-ḥadāthah al-islāmiyya*, (*The Spirit of Modernity: An Introduction to Founding an Islamic Modernity*) he continues this line of ethical inquiry by outlining a conceptual framework for an Islamic modernity that places ethics at its core. Unfortunately unlike many of his Muslim intellectual contemporaries Abderrahmane’s works have yet to be translated into Western languages being neglected in Western scholarship. To help combat this deficit I will provide a brief synopsis of both of these important works.

**Religious Renewal**

In *Religious Practice and the Renewal of Reason* Abderrahmane asks in an era defined by a rapidly globalizing Western secular hegemony, what of ethics? Where are they to be found? And how are they to be expressed? Abderrahmane begins by critiquing the standard Western secular binaries of reason vs. revelation and religion vs. politics. He believes that this separation of man’s original ontological unity has led to a degradation of ethics that he argues define human existence. His project articulates the need for a return to man’s original unity as expressed in the Islamic tradition. He argues that the majority of Muslim scholars since the 19th century have blindly imitated the Western philosophical tradition in its secular approach that defines man as a rational animal placing rationality as the highest human attribute leaving no room for religious tradition in the public sphere. He critiques Aristotle’s definition of man as a rational animal who places the faculty of reason above other human faculties and actions. For Abderrahmane reasoning is simply one of many actions. He argues that the supremacy of reason has led to a strict binarism that characterizes Western secular modernity and its philosophical core that holds reason opposes revelation and religion opposes politics. These oppositional binaries characterize the division of man from his true nature as a holistic being. The core of his intellectual message is to restore this unity. His intellectual project begins from a teleological position of man as an ethical animal. Whereas the West places man and reason prior to ethics, Abderrahmane claims man as a ‘Man’ emerges—as ethics emerge. Man and ethics emerge simultaneously.