

Modern Muslims

Contents

List of Illustrations	vii
Acknowledgments	ix
Prologue: <i>Noon</i>	i
1 Unity	9
2 The Path of the Prophet	36
3 A Human Rights Culture	59
4 A Women's Movement	97
5 Communicating Islamic Reform: Small Media, Big Ideas	134
6 A Modern Muslim	167
Epilogue: Freedom	186
Appendix: "Either This or the Flood"	203
Notes	207
Glossary of Sudanese Arabic Terms	211
For Further Reading	217

Prologue

Noon

Of the 114 chapters of the Qur'an, 29 of them begin with stand-alone letters of the alphabet, signifying what humankind is not yet sure. The Arabic letter *noon* (ن) appears in Islam's holy book by itself at the beginning of one of its chapters, challenging the world to uncover knowledge of God that may be just beyond human reach. The letter *noon* also represents the crescent moon in Sufi symbolism, its incompleteness a reminder of the striving in which humans must engage in order to seek but never achieve the complete state of perfection. Perfection is the ultimate goal of this striving, which, not coincidentally, may also unlock all of the knowledge contained in the Qur'an. As I encountered the men and women of the Republican Brotherhood in Sudan, I came to think of myself as "*noon*"—very much an incomplete man and unsure of what I was looking for, and eager to be guided. I was also a bit awed by what I perceived to be the brothers' and sisters' already achieved "perfection," or at least by their positive attitudes in the midst of Sudan's deteriorating conditions.

The Qur'an's two shades of meaning, one *zahir*, or revealed, and one hidden, or *batin*, were also intended as a challenge from

God to promote study, prayer, and reflection that would ultimately lead to the understanding of God. I have spent more than thirty years admiring the members of the Republican Brotherhood, who dedicated their lives to improving themselves and the world by uncovering as much of the hidden meaning as God would allow. For a variety of reasons—some clearly spiritual—my sharing in those discoveries was always many steps behind my Sudanese friends.

After living with the brothers from early 1982, my first departure from the group took place at a farewell *jelsa*, or “meeting,” in November 1984, in Omdurman at a most difficult time for the members of the Republican Brotherhood. More than fifty Republicans and the movement leader, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, had been in prison for more than a year because Sudan’s President Jaafar Nimeiry anticipated that they would oppose the imposition of his version of Islamic law, put in place in September 1983. In the midst of their political difficulties, the brothers tried to put the best face on my decision to leave for the United States in order to complete work on my PhD degree. Sudan’s reputation for warm hospitality had been fully realized in my years in the community; I had grown particularly fond of one of their terms of greeting, *mushtageen* (“you’ve been missed”), which was used even by people who had seen each other only a day or two before. It could also be used ironically—in the Sudanese sense of humor—accompanied by a sly smile. It had not taken a great deal of negotiation for me to move in with members of the Republican Brotherhood; recruitment was important to the movement, and my joining them was a point of pride. My own inclination was to de-emphasize their pride in me, but I also learned to accept the Sufi code of “let what is done for you be done for you.”

The brothers in the house where I lived had invited my favorite *munshid*, or performer of the modern hymns or odes for which the Republicans were well known, to sing in his rich

baritone for the evening's farewell. Beds were brought from inside the house to the courtyard for us to sit on. The Republican brothers took departures from the group very seriously. As one left a group of Republicans, the group would raise their arms in farewell while chanting the name of God until the traveler disappeared from view. The group's intense solidarity was the sum of its members' collective focus on the teachings of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha. The departure ritual, which I was to experience countless times over the years, was designed to be a memory, an image to hold in your heart to sustain you until you returned to this group of brothers and sisters or were welcomed by the next one on your journey.

Over the course of three decades of arrivals and departures to and from groups of Republican brothers and sisters, I have tried to make academic sense of what I had seen living with the Republican Brotherhood in Sudan. I wrote many conference papers on the reformist methodology of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha and about this group of men and women and their families who saw themselves as the vanguard in promoting a new approach to Islam's role in the modern world. I sought grants and leave from my teaching to support my writing about the Republicans, and was successful in these requests from time to time. I accepted a Fulbright Senior Scholar award to teach sociology at Bayero University Kano, Nigeria, intending to produce a scholarly book on the Republican movement—in a location far from the distractions of home. I enjoyed the intense Islamic atmosphere in Kano—surprised to find it more conservative than Sudan—but the five chapters I managed to write despite the heat and electricity failures did not satisfy me. My writing struck me as strained and distant.

I think that the many moving parts of this Sudanese movement: its role in Sudan's history, its radical nonviolent challenge to conventional Islam, its many intriguing characters who were my close friends, all weighed heavily on me, making daunting

the prospect of my bringing it all together as a compelling book. Sudan's descent into pariah-state status—ethnic cleansing in Darfur, the endless and bloody war in the South, the indefatigably intolerant Islamist government—made me question my desire to be associated with Sudan. It is also worth considering that my slow start in telling this story may have been a function of my discomfort in having an earlier, more religiously observant version of myself confront the dry-eyed current version.

I became determined to get the story of the Republican Brotherhood out as the world became more and more concerned about the rising Muslim voices raised in political rhetoric in the years following Iran's 1979 revolution. I should note that many Republican brothers themselves and other friends were frustrated by my taking so long to tell their story. The Republican narrative was not without its tensions, but it became increasingly difficult for me to see where a small social movement of men and women committed to progressive changes in their society and the peaceful proselytization of their message across a relatively obscure African country, fit into the grand narrative of the "Islamic Threat," particularly after 9/11. Academics, pundits, reporters, preachers, and former presidents had all streamed to the Muslim world to understand, among other things, "Why do they hate us?" Shelves of bookshops in the United States were crowded with such titles by "disgruntled Muslims" as *Infidel*, by Ayaan Hirsi Ali; *A God Who Hates*, by Wafa Sultan; and *The Trouble with Islam*, by Irshad Manji.

As I came to know the men and women of the Republican Brotherhood, I just wanted to understand how to get as close to this progressive movement as possible because it spoke to me intelligently and forcefully as a vital commitment to positive change in Africa. And I was deeply moved by and drawn to the strong sense of community that appeared to be the foundation for the enthusiasm they had for their work. I liked the balance of spiritual conviction and warm Republican social

solidarity—which often centered on food—represented in the popular Sudanese saying they often quoted, *mafi din bidun an-geen* (“No religion without batter,” that is, you can’t pray on an empty stomach—it rhymes in Arabic).

Today’s determined Western interest in the details of life within Islamic social organizations largely focuses on finance and leadership, a concern for how those two factors ignite the potential for violence, rather than on how members of such groups actually lead their lives or what identifies them as “Islamic.” The Republican Brothers and Sisters constructed a comprehensive social system that both allowed them to hone their practice of the teachings of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha and to turn inward in a limited fashion from a society that viewed those practices with some degree of suspicion or incomprehension. The Republican way of life during the era of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha’s leadership was an application of his intense search for the meaning of the Qur’an—revealed to the Prophet Mohamed in the seventh century—in today’s world. I focus on the mundane details of their lives here in order to give a sense of the everyday, plodding quality of the work of reforming Islam. This work has never proceeded in a linear fashion in Sudan, but rather in halting steps. In the Republican case, those steps were directed out of spaces of their familiar headquarters for thinking, discussing, and engaging in spiritual life and making a contribution to the understanding of and practice of human rights in their country.

The intention of this memoir is to shed light on social change promoted through the vehicle of a modern Islamic movement dedicated to its members’ understanding of the pursuit of peace. That social change can be a product of tension between religious orthodoxies and “new understandings” of faith is my central interest while experiencing the impact each has on the other. The Sudanese roots of this movement were deep, so although describing its membership as representative of Sudan would be misleading, the brothers and sisters were leading Muslim lives

guided by a theology of indigenous provenance. The members of the Republican Brotherhood were determined—in the face of Islamic extremism of which they themselves were victims—to provide an example of what they believed an Islamic community should and could be. They joined this movement and built its identity out of a hopeful view of the future, not out of rage, discontent, or grievances against the ruling regime. They had no political agenda except that democracy and human rights were central to their movement’s message and practice in every forum that they organized. The Republican view was always that societal-level human rights or democracy could be sustained only when their source was one’s personal practice.

My memoir is in part motivated by the fact that the Republican Brotherhood and the work of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha have been largely relegated to footnotes in contemporary studies of Sudan and Islam and/or to unflattering portrayals in a few books and the media. For me, the Republican Brotherhood represents an indigenous expansion of the Islamic intellectual project that drew strength from both opposing colonialism and from the initial colonial investment in education for Sudan’s “modernity.” Mahmoud Mohamed Taha’s fresh understanding of the texts of Islam revealed possibilities for the Sudanese nation. The postcolonial expansion of primary, secondary, and higher education made Taha’s progressive message attractive and accessible to people at a variety of social levels.

My title for this memoir, *Modern Muslims*, might raise eyebrows across the Muslim world at the suggestion that I may be perceiving many Muslims as outside of this rubric. In fact, my title reflects the growth of my observation over years of interacting with the Republican Brothers and Sisters, of the intense link between the theology and movement of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha and their role in the struggle to secure a place for Sudan in a postcolonial and just world. The modern state of the Republic of Sudan is in the very name the Republicans gave to

their movement. The movement's emphasis on women's rights, human justice, an educated populace, and democratic governance constituted an impressive twentieth-century agenda for an organization dedicated to Islam. But my primary intention with the selection of the term "modern" for the title was to emphasize the dedication that Taha and his followers had to the idea that Islam had always been modern and contemporary. They saw their task as helping society catch up with that fact.

The members of the Republican Brotherhood never contested elections or attained any political office; their only tools were moral suasion based on their understanding of the word of God and their intense effort to serve as a model community dedicated to peace and human equality. They developed a philosophy of living and applied it to marriage and family, birth and death, and every human possibility in between. They invited all to see how they lived their lives or to listen to and read about their philosophy, their *fikr* (ideology) in books, lectures, hymns, and newspapers. They were harassed and imprisoned for their principled stands for political liberty and freedom of conscience. And they organized themselves to divide the labor of the movement and develop special skills to run it, valuing everyone who wanted to participate, while reaching out and speaking to women and young people particularly with their message. The Republicans tried to treat each other, as Khalid El Haj, who was an important movement leader, reminded me, with *a-sadiq, al-muhubba, wa al-ikhlas* (truth, love, and charity). These values were always very much in evidence in the solidarity that characterized the movement; these were people who eschewed ties to their own families in some cases, in favor of spending all of their time with fellow Republicans. And they found reflections of their teacher, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, in those that they loved.

After many years of reflective frustration, I finally decided to compose a personal account of my experience living with the

Republican Brotherhood, trying to avoid putting the movement in an academic box, while telling their story as a respectful, engaged observing participant. I want to describe how I learned to live as a member of this group of Brothers and Sisters, and what I learned about life in doing so. I feel that this book is my responsibility to those who shared their lives with me, perhaps a testament to the care in their instruction. My philosophy as an academic researcher has always been that “we are part of what we seek to understand,” and this memoir is my most forthright expression of that. I witnessed Republican weddings and all-night and pre-dawn meetings, tried to learn their hymns, ate too much of their food, slept in their houses and in the courtyards outside their houses, visited them in prison, greeted their newborns, listened to their stories, and attended their burials. I have been a privileged witness to the dramatic era of change in which they have lived, and it is time to offer an account. Much of my narrative here is in effect an oral history passed down to me from brothers and sisters who took time to tell me what they knew of Ustadh Mahmoud and/or relate their own personal interactions with him and with each other. Although I sometimes heard a variety of versions of the events I describe here, I have tried to present a consensus view. And this interpretation is my own, of course.

In the chapters that follow I provide a perspective on the history of this movement and details of its members’ efforts to organize family and movement life against the backdrop of a Sudan at the beginning of the era it is still mired in today, of intolerant rule by an Islamist state. The execution of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha by the Nimeiry regime on January 18, 1985—for trumped-up charges of “apostasy”—signaled in many respects the beginning of the Islamist era that envelops Sudan today. I will describe here the events leading up to that *sharia*-defying act and its impact on Taha’s followers. An injunction from the Qur’an—that there should be “no compulsion in religion”—was

taken by the Republican Brotherhood as one of its mottos or inspiring principles. And this Qur'anic verse was violated by the government of Sudan and the Islamist organizations that supported it in the act of executing Mahmoud Mohamed Taha. That fundamental conflict is at the heart of this book.