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# Muhammad ‘Abduh

## Islam and New Urbanity in the Nineteenth-Century Arab World

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## MUḤAMMAD ‘ABDUH: ISLAM AND NEW URBANITY IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY ARAB WORLD

Kinda AlSamara\*

**Abstract:** Most studies of the distinguished 19<sup>th</sup>-century Arab scholar and reformer Muḥammad ‘Abduh focus on the religious reforms he instigated. Very few studies discuss his vision for modernisation through educational, social and political reforms. ‘Abduh realised these reforms were necessary for creating a civil society based on a new mode of urbanity (*madaniyya*). This article examines how Muḥammad ‘Abduh managed to bridge the gap between secular modernists and religious traditionalists by reinterpreting Islamic doctrine with a contemporary outlook and emphasising how the Islamic faith could shield people from the moral temptations, traps and pitfalls that modern European people were facing. In his view, achieving this new mode of urbanity was mandatory for the Arab world to keep up with the urban development, social progress and scientific advancements occurring in the West.

**Keywords:** *madaniyya, urbanity, modernity, civilisation, 19th century, Arab world, Nahḍa*

### MUḤAMMAD ‘ABDUH

What is this sheikh who speaks French, travels to the lands of the Franks, translates their books, refers to their philosophers and discusses with their scholars, issues *fatwā* unheard of previously, participates in charity associations, raises funds for the poor and needy. If he is one of the men of religion, let him spend his life between the mosque and his home, and if he is a man of this world, then we see that he is doing by himself more than all the rest altogether.<sup>1</sup>

Distinguished 19<sup>th</sup>-century scholar and reformer, Muḥammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905) was an important figure in the articulation and development of urbanity (*madaniyya*). Initially, he looked at Western urbanity as a whole and considered the many ways in which it manifested. In particular, he focussed on issues related to education and religious reform (*iṣlāḥ*).<sup>2</sup> ‘Abduh

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<sup>1</sup> Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, *Tārīkh al-Ustādh al-Imām al-Sheikh Muḥammad ‘Abdūh* (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Manār, 1906), 3:268.

<sup>2</sup> The West paid particular attention to what Muḥammad ‘Abduh did with their Western concepts of new urbanity. Their observations were published in books such as *Modernism in Egypt*, in 1933, by Charles Adams; *Modern Trends in Islam*, in 1947, by the Hamilton Gibb; and *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, in 1962, by Albert Hourani. Each of these books credit ‘Abduh as being the link between the Islamic community and European urbanity.

wanted to adopt the ideals of Western modernity, but within an Islamic framework: he wanted to give *madaniyya* an Islamic identity.

## EARLY YEARS

In the late nineteenth century, the Egyptian religious scholar, jurist and liberal reformer<sup>3</sup> Sheikh Muhammad ‘Abduh led a regional movement in Egypt to modernise Muslim institutions. ‘Abduh pointed out how the Arab modernists of the period were eager to adopt modernity and all it promises, while traditionalists resisted change, which, the latter asserted, stemmed from foreign influences antagonistic towards Islam.<sup>4</sup>

‘Abduh, who was from one of Egypt’s longstanding Turkish families, was born in 1849<sup>5</sup> in the Maḥallat Naṣr Nile Delta area and died not far away, near Alexandria, in 1905. He spent his childhood years in Maḥallat Naṣr, gaining experience in swimming, horse-riding and the use of firearms. In addition, his father hired for his son a teacher who came to the house regularly and taught young ‘Abduh to read and write. At the age of ten, ‘Abduh attended the classes of a local sheikh and, after two years, demonstrated his talent as a student by memorising the entire Qur’ān.<sup>6</sup>

‘Abduh’s achievements encouraged his father to send him to study at Aḥmadī Mosque in Ṭanṭā.<sup>7</sup> After a while of learning Arabic grammar, however, ‘Abduh became infuriated by his teachers, who would often discuss a subject using range of technical terms, without providing any proper explanation. ‘Abduh complained saying it would be impossible to understand the content without providing explanations. As a result of this method of education, ‘Abduh ran away from his teacher and took refuge in his (maternal) uncle’s house. After a while, ‘Abduh’s brother found him and returned him to the mosque. However, he ran away again, this time returning to Maḥallat Naṣr. There, just like his relatives, ‘Abduh made the decision to become a farmer and give up learning. In 1865, ‘Abduh married and attempted to settle down.<sup>8</sup>

After just 40 days of marriage, ‘Abduh’s father tried to force him to return to Aḥmadī Mosque; however, ‘Abduh was unwilling. Thereafter, his uncle Darwīsh Khāḍir, who was a local sheikh, was given the task of teaching ‘Abduh. Sheikh Darwīsh expressed deep concerns

<sup>3</sup> The word ‘reformer’ is usually translated in the sense of “to improve, to better, or to put something into a better position.” See, Mehmet Ozalp, *Islam between Tradition and Modernity* (Canberra: Barton Books, 2012), 210.

<sup>4</sup> Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1789-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 171-172; Matsumoto Hiroshi, “The Islamic Reform by Muḥammad ‘Abduh: His Reform Idea and Movement for Institutional and Legal Reforms,” *Annals of Japan Association for Middle East Studies* 3, no. 2 (1988).

<sup>5</sup> Muḥammad ‘Abduh’s birth date has been widely debated – most sources place it in 1849 (or 1266 AH), while others suggest it was anywhere between 1842 and 1848. The date 1848 was given by ‘Abduh, see Riḍā, *Tārīkh al-Ustādh*, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Adams, *Islam and Modernism: A Study of the Modern Reform Movement Inaugurated by Muhammad ‘Abduh* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2010), 20.

<sup>7</sup> Yvonne Haddad, “Muhammad ‘Abduh: Pioneer of Islamic Reform,” in *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*, ed. ‘Ali Rahnama (London: Zed, 1994), 31.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in *Majallat al-Manār*, 8 (1905): 381.

about ‘Abduh’s sudden extreme aversion to learning, after he had been such a successful student. However, Sheikh Darwīsh’s insistence and patience reignited ‘Abduh’s desire to learn and gradually engaged his interest. After a short time, ‘Abduh began reading widely and making notes on specific passages so he could ask questions and engage in discussions.<sup>9</sup>

After a short period studying with Sheikh Darwīsh, ‘Abduh decided to return to Aḥmadī Mosque in Ṭanṭā. He immediately became a hardworking student and was extremely diligent with his studies. His fellow students observed his dedication and started flocking to ‘Abduh, asking for help in their studies. In 1866, ‘Abduh was admitted into the great centre of Islamic learning, al-Azhar University.<sup>10</sup> For the next four years, he attended lectures and engaged with readings at al-Azhar. However, as was the case at Aḥmadī Mosque, ‘Abduh was disappointed not only with the teachers and sheikhs, and their use of technical terminology without providing any explanations, but he also found their choice of subjects extremely restrictive. Throughout these four years of studying at al-Azhar, he remained a student with Sheikh Darwīsh. Darwīsh encouraged ‘Abduh to look beyond al-Azhar’s curriculum, to subjects including logic, mathematics and geometry. Taking this advice, ‘Abduh became the student of many notable philosophers and mathematicians, such as Sheikh Muḥammad al-Basyūnī, Sheikh Ḥasan al-Ṭawīl and Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī.<sup>11</sup>

### ‘ABDUH’S MEETING WITH JAMĀL AL-DĪN AL-AFGHĀNĪ

‘Abduh first met al-Afghānī in 1869, when his teacher Muḥammad al-Ṭawīl had taken him to an evening meeting at al-Afghānī’s house. ‘Abduh found al-Afghānī to be a brilliant teacher who would engage in critical thinking and analyse Islam’s inner depths – something the majority of his teachers at al-Azhar were unable to do.<sup>12</sup>

However, ‘Abduh was unable to study formally under al-Afghānī, as he was only on a brief visit to Egypt at the time, on his way to Istanbul. In 1871, al-Afghānī returned to Egypt, which allowed ‘Abduh to immediately become one of his students.<sup>13</sup> Al-Afghānī’s students studied classical Arabic religious texts, examining their meaning and judging their relevance to the present. Al-Afghānī explained the teachings contained in each text and sought to apply them to the contemporary time. The most important thing for ‘Abduh was that al-Afghānī was not prepared to just accept a point without first examining, testing and even replacing it. For al-Afghānī, blind tradition – *taqlīd* – was to be rejected in favour of reviving reason – *ijtihād*.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, this perspective would come to define ‘Abduh’s career. ‘Abduh appreciated this form of education as he had been used to a standard at the Aḥmadī school and Al-Azhar that he found extremely problematic.

<sup>9</sup> Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 23.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-24.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>13</sup> Haddad, “Muhammad ‘Abduh,” 31.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in *Majallat al-Manār*, 8 (1905): 399–400; Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *An Introduction to Sharī’ah* (Selangor, Malaysia: Ilmiah Publishers, 2006), 171.

‘Abduh believed human reason allowed individuals to discern right from wrong. He stated the Qur’ān must align with human reason – if a current interpretation of the Qur’ān appeared to be irrational, a new one must be found. ‘Abduh’s position made him subject to scrutiny and the centre of much controversy. He was charged with reviving Mu’tazilite thought, the extinct branch of Islamic theology that privileged human reason over faith.<sup>15</sup> ‘Abduh would be followed by this accusation throughout his life.

His modernising position, focussed on independent thought and, when needed, revisionism, came to be viewed with deep suspicion. Finally, Sheikh ‘Ulaish, the head of the conservative circle of al-Azhar, openly accused ‘Abduh of being a Mu’tazilite.<sup>16</sup> ‘Abduh answered this accusation saying:

If I give up the blind acceptance of the Ash’arite doctrine, why would I take up blind acceptance of the Mu’tazilite doctrine? Therefore, I am giving up blind acceptance of both, and will judge matters according to the proof presented.<sup>17</sup>

This statement did little to reduce the controversies and arguments surrounding him. However, in 1877, when ‘Abduh presented himself at the final year examinations in al-Azhar, he found many of his examiners against him. ‘Abduh would not have been allowed to graduate from al-Azhar without the intercession of Muḥammad al-‘Abbāsī (in office from 1870-1882),<sup>18</sup> who was impressed with ‘Abduh’s work and thought he had become a fully-fledged *‘ālim* (scholar).<sup>19</sup>

## EDUCATIONAL REFORMS

After earning his degree from Al-Azhar University in 1877, ‘Abduh became a teacher of modern philosophy in Islamic and secular schools. He made a concerted effort to employ al-Afghānī’s teaching techniques.<sup>20</sup> ‘Abduh believed people needed a modern education if they were to be prepared for a *madaniyya* state. At the time, traditional schools focused exclusively on Islamic studies. ‘Abduh proposed a new education system that emphasised modern science as a main subject, along with mathematics, languages and comparative religion.<sup>21</sup> ‘Abduh wanted to overhaul their administration, curriculum and social objectives to bring them in line with the educational institutions of Europe and America. He insisted that, without reforming al-Azhar, progress in other areas would be impossible.

In 1878, ‘Abduh was appointed by liberal Prime Minister Riāḍ Pāshā to teach history at the newly-founded Dār al-‘Ulūm. This institution, established in 1873 by ‘Alī Mubārak, Minister

<sup>15</sup> Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Religion and Politics under the Early ‘Abbāsids: The Emergence of the ProtoSunnī Elite* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 61-62.

<sup>16</sup> Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 42.

<sup>17</sup> *Al-Manār*, 8 (1905): 391.

<sup>18</sup> Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 30.

<sup>19</sup> *Al-Manār*, 8 (1905): 393.

<sup>20</sup> Muḥammad ‘Āṭif ‘Irāqī, *al-Sheikh Muḥammad ‘Abduh, 1849-1905* (Cairo: al-Majlis al-‘Alā lil-Thaqāfah, 1997), 16.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Abbās Maḥmūd ‘Aqqād, *‘Abqarī al-Iṣlāḥ wa-al-Ta’līm, al-Imām Muḥammad ‘Abduh* (Cairo: Dār Miṣr li-l-ṭibā‘ā, 1960), 184.

of Education, aimed to rival al-Azhar.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, ‘Abduh became a teacher of the Arabic language and literature at the School of Languages, another institution championing reform and modernisation.<sup>23</sup> While working in both positions, ‘Abduh continued in his position at al-Azhar. As a former student of al-Azhar, ‘Abduh was fully aware of the educational situation within the institution, based on his negative experiences.

The encounter with the traditional systems of learning encouraged him to undertake reform. In the traditional system, “the students were to read texts, their commentaries, the glosses on the commentaries, and the super glosses on the glosses,”<sup>24</sup> without any critical understanding or analysis. He sought to change this, so his classes competed with the advanced scientific and analytical style of Western education, and included other disciplines such as science, philosophy and history.

Scholars mentioned ‘Abduh’s strategic focus to undertake change at al-Azhar was based on his own experiences. That is, “his first experience with learning by rote, memorizing texts and commentaries and laws for which he was given no tools of understanding, was formative in his later commitment to a thoroughgoing reform of the Egyptian educational system.”<sup>25</sup> ‘Abduh and scholars of his time had been deprived of an intriguing type of learning. They “grew up in a lustreless age ... he, and others like him, went on studying dull, lifeless rules cut off from their wellsprings in the Qur’an and the canonical writings, shorn of their roots in the language of the Arabs.”<sup>26</sup> The negative impact of his dry learning experience triggered the desire to reform the education system in Egypt.

However, ‘Abduh’s first mission into education did not last long. In 1879, the Khedive of Egypt, Ismā’īl Pāshā (r. 1864-1879), was replaced by his son, Tawfīq Pāshā (r. 1879-1892). Tawfīq Pāshā was hostile to reform, expelled al-Afghānī from Egypt and forced ‘Abduh into retirement, returning him to his hometown of Maḥallat Naṣr.<sup>27</sup>

In 1880, however, Riād Pāshā, who had been absent when Tawfīq Pāshā took the throne, returned to Egypt. He appointed ‘Abduh to the editorial position at the official government newspaper, *al-Waqā’i’ al-Miṣriyya* (The Egyptian Affairs). ‘Abduh found himself able to freely voice his reformist ideas through this government journal.<sup>28</sup> ‘Abduh believed in education as the key to all reform and success. In 1881, in an article on gradual reform through education, titled “The Error of the Wise”, he wrote that “whoever seeks the good of the country, let him strive for nothing other than perfection of education, then everything that he was seeking would be accomplished ... without exhausting the mind or the body.”<sup>29</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Riḍā, *Tārīkh al-Ustādh*, 3: 242.

<sup>23</sup> *al-Manār*, 8 (1905): 404.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Uthman Amin, *Muhammad ‘Abduh*, trans. Charles Wendell (Washington, D.C.: American Council of Learned Societies, 1953), 3.

<sup>25</sup> Haddad, “Muhammad ‘Abduh,” 31.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>27</sup> *Majallat al-Manār*, 8 (1905): 404.

<sup>28</sup> Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 46.

<sup>29</sup> Oliver Scharbrodt, *Islam and the Baha’i Faith: A Comparative Study of Muḥammad ‘Abduh and ‘Abdul-Baha’ Abbas* (London: Routledge, 2007), 99.

After some time, ‘Abduh was involved in a short-lived revolutionary movement against foreign interference. Led by the Minister of War, Aḥmad ‘Urābī Pāshā, the movement’s campaigning aligned with the ideas of reform ‘Abduh had been taught under al-Afghānī. For this reason, ‘Abduh willingly offered his support, becoming an advisor to many of the movement’s leaders. However, in 1882, ‘Urābī Pāshā’s revolution met with an unfortunate end. After failure to expel the British from Alexandria, ‘Urābī Pāshā and everyone judged to have participated in the revolt were arrested.<sup>30</sup> Although ‘Abduh had been against any violence, he was found guilty of administering unlawful assistance to the principal ministers and his fate was exile from Egypt.<sup>31</sup> This exile became an addition to the myriad setbacks he faced in furthering his agenda of reform and modernisation.

It seems ‘Abduh had the right idea in avoiding violence. He knew that change cannot be implemented by force, because it will be resisted and eventually rejected. Some scholars failed to understand that revolutions undertaken by armed, uneducated angry men have proven, time and time again, to be a recipe for disaster, leading to the tragic loss of innocent lives. ‘Abduh stated the men of Islam are the spirit of the Islamic nation and they failed to recognise the importance of modern science. Instead, they keep themselves busy in archaic practices that have no relevance in modern times. He believed Muslims should study other religions in addition to Islam, and also study the history of civilisation and foreign developed countries to discover the secrets of their success.<sup>32</sup> ‘Abduh insisted, because advanced science, administration and education are responsible for the strength and wealth of developed nations, the only way for the Arab world to progress is to promote these things.

I am wondering why the pioneering Muslim journalists wrote so much about politics in their newspapers, and so little about education; when education is the foundation of all knowledge—political and otherwise ... Mr Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī is a highly qualified man. If he applied, his abilities to education he could help Islam attain great benefits. When we were in Paris together, they offered us a respite from politics by providing us with a place to live, far away from the prying eyes of the government. There we taught students whatever we wanted ... After ten years we were to have a number of educated followers go out and spread our proposed reforms far and wide. But, Jamāl al-Dīn discouraged this idea ... Unfortunately for Muslims, everyone capable of doing something useful is doing something else.<sup>33</sup>

Education had previously only been available to wealthy families who could afford to send their children to school.<sup>34</sup> ‘Abduh urged these wealthy families to contribute money towards building new schools and libraries with the view of improving the education of their children (who were to be future leaders). Wealthy families at the time did not respond enthusiastically

<sup>30</sup> Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 46; Elie Kedourie, *Afghani and ‘Abduh: An Essay on Religious Unbelief and Political Activism in Modern Islam* (London: Routledge, 2008), 118-119.

<sup>31</sup> Kedourie, *Afghani and ‘Abduh*, 35.

<sup>32</sup> Muḥammad ‘Abduh; ‘Imārah, Muḥammad, *al-A‘māl al-Kāmilah* (Beirut: al-Mu‘assasah al-‘Arabiyya lil-Dirāsāt wa-al-Nashr, 2009), 841.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 807.

<sup>34</sup> Indira Falk Gesink, “Islamic Reformation: A History of *Madrasa* Reform and Legal Change in Egypt,” *Comparative Education Review* 50, no. 3 (2006).

to ‘Abduh’s request because they failed to perceive any direct benefits for themselves. ‘Abduh received far less support from these families than he expected. The government was also unhelpful.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, ‘Abduh criticised the education policy in Egypt. He tried to start reforming the entire structure of the curriculum, fees and subjects, and attempted to improve the schools and meet teacher’s needs. He highlighted the extensive flaws in the system stating:

The Egyptian government spends only two hundred thousand Egyptian pounds on education out of an income of twelve million pounds. It also keeps raising school fees to the point where education is becoming a luxury that ornaments a few rich homes ... There are only three schools for higher education in Egypt: the schools of law, medicine and engineering. The other components of human knowledge are denied to the Egyptian who is only superficially exposed to some of them in secondary schools ... The government’s plan seems to be first: to assist primary schools where reading and writing are taught. Second: reducing the spread of education in the country as much as possible. Third: limiting secondary and higher education to very narrow circles.<sup>36</sup>

‘Abduh continued to condemn imitative learning, *taqlīd*, which did not comprise analytical or thorough learning. As a result, tradition was mindlessly followed by people who had no idea why the tradition existed. ‘Abduh emphasised the importance of *ijtihād*, independent reasoning,<sup>37</sup> since it urged people to think about the reasons behind religious beliefs and practices. However, the need to implement the principles of *ijtihād* was not accepted by most scholars at al-Azhar University,<sup>38</sup> but they were accepted by those who had received a modern Western education.<sup>39</sup> Thus, his ideas were eagerly supported by his young followers and those who belonged to the Europeanised section of the population. His most influential supporters were “the higher ranks of the legal professions, teachers in the higher Government schools, and heads of Government departments.”<sup>40</sup>

All in all, ‘Abduh’s contribution to reforming al-Azhar University was profound. His strong convictions regarding the need to develop the education system enabled him to reform the teaching methods delivered at al-Azhar University. His efforts brought in a renewed system of learning, which moved the university away from traditional and conservative methods of imitative (*taqlīdī*) teaching.<sup>41</sup>

## IN EXILE: EGYPT’S MUFTĪ, ISLAMIC REFORMER

As mentioned previously, ‘Abduh was involved in a short-lived revolutionary movement, led by the Minister of War, Aḥmad ‘Urābī Pāshā. ‘Abduh travelled widely between Syria and Egypt and, in 1884, al-Afghānī invited ‘Abduh to join him in Paris.<sup>42</sup> After a short time, ‘Abduh

<sup>35</sup> ‘Abduh, *al-A‘māl al-Kāmilah*, 157.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Abduh, *al-A‘māl al-Kāmilah*, 3:170-172.

<sup>37</sup> Ibrahim M Abu-Rabi’, ed. *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 132-133.

<sup>38</sup> Muḥammad ‘Abduh, *al-Islām bayna al-‘Ilm wa-al-Madaniyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 2003), 208.

<sup>39</sup> Charles Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 37.

<sup>40</sup> Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 176.

<sup>41</sup> Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 22.

<sup>42</sup> Riḍā, *Tārīkh al-Ustādh*, 8 (1905): 455.



and al-Afghānī established an organisation in Paris: *al-'Urwa al-Wuthqa* (The Firmest Bond).<sup>43</sup> The aim was to reunify the Muslim nation and they spread their ideas through an accompanying publication with the same name. 'Abduh and al-Afghānī tried to identify a series of solutions to the difficulties and issues encountered by the Muslim world.<sup>44</sup>

After publishing just 18 issues, *al-'Urwa al-Wuthqa* was suppressed by British colonial troops and Ottoman authorities in Egypt, both of which considered it subversive. Although *al-'Urwa al-Wuthqa* proved short-lived, it was an influential organisation with promising ideas primarily promoted by al-Afghānī.<sup>45</sup> 'Abduh's ideas and vision left an important legacy of religious autonomy, which he brought about by dismantling obsolete conservative traditions.<sup>46</sup> The influential newspaper, *al-'Urwa al-Wuthqa*, summarised how 'Abduh's work contributed to the new urbanity in six main points: 'Abduh identified the historical issues that led to the decline of the Arab community, and presented solutions to these problems; he replaced the despair in Muslims' thinking with a hope of victory; he called for a steadfast commitment to the principles of Muslim fathers and ancestors; he fought against the accusation that Muslims were unable to achieve any progress as long as they remain committed to the principles of Islam; he provided the people with information detailing political changes and events; and lastly, 'Abduh supported relations between the Arab world and other nations.<sup>47</sup>

'Abduh left Paris for Tunis for a short time and returned to teaching in Beirut 1885. He tried to unite students from all faiths together in his lectures, which focussed on theology and, in particular, the commonalities between all three Abrahamic religions. Ultimately, 'Abduh wanted to present their common aspects as a channel through which to be united.<sup>48</sup>

'Abduh's Beirut lectures were based on Islam as the pinnacle of human achievement. He believed the strength of the West was derived from Islamic ideas during the golden ages. He also thought the Europeans were motivated to act since most of them had the independence and capacity to exercise choices and make decisions. They would also use their reasoning when seeking out facts. Thus, if Muslims sought to obtain the cultural progress present in Europe, all they needed to do was to re-appropriate the Islamic ideas and values that Europe had taken for itself. However, it was vital these values be associated with the *salaf*.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 58; John L Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 129.

<sup>44</sup> Riḍā, *Tārīkh al-Ustādḥ*, 2:250-254, 279-85; Haddad, "Muhammad 'Abduh," 33.

<sup>45</sup> Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 61-62; Munā Ḥusayn Dasūqī, *al-Sheikh Muṣṭafā al-Ghalāyīnī fī Maḥālimihī al-İṣlāḥiyya: Dirāsah Muqāranah baynahu wa-bayna al-Shaykhayn Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī wa-Muḥammad 'Abduh* (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-'Aṣriyya, 1999), 69.

<sup>46</sup> Chris Barker, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* (London: Sage, 2005), 12.

<sup>47</sup> Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 170.

<sup>48</sup> *Majallat al-Manār*, 8 (1905): 462; Elie Kedourie, *Afghani and 'Abduh*, 15; Muḥammad 'Abduh, *The Theology of Unity*, trans. Kenneth Cragg and Ishaq Musa'ad (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1966), 37; Vincent J. Cornell, "Muḥammad 'Abduh: A Sufi-Inspired Modernist?" in *Tradition and Modernity*, ed. David Marshall (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 99; Şükran Vahide, and Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi', *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 22.

<sup>49</sup> Muḥammad 'Abduh, *Risālat al-Tawḥīd* (Cairo: Dār al-Hilāl, 1980), 11.

Although perceived to be a radical by some, ‘Abduh was a pragmatist who tried to find a middle ground between tradition and modernity, but would nevertheless draw on Islamic principles to justify each element of change and, if an element proved unacceptable, he recognised it would have to be modified or rejected altogether. This, of course, meant the new modernity, though inspired by European progressivism, would be Arabic in style and substance. ‘Abduh wrote:

It is wrong, or rather ignorant, to require the nation to follow ways unfamiliar to it ... It is wiser to preserve the nation’s customs entrenched in its members’ minds, then call for improvements that are not far from them. Once they are accustomed to them, something higher can be asked of them, gradually. Thus, not long would pass before they leave behind their backward habits and ideas for what is higher and more refined, without their realising.<sup>50</sup>

To justify his progressivism, ‘Abduh looked to the past – to the Golden Age of Islamic science and scholarship that was flourishing during the European Dark Ages. He reminded modernist Arabs that they were no strangers to modernity, and urged them to not dismiss Islam as a strict and forbidding religion, but to see it as a guiding principle, one that could preserve and protect the integrity of the culture.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, ‘Abduh encouraged traditionalists to let go of antiquated ideas and not to rest on Islam’s laurels. He asked them to hold on to the timeless essence of their faith and use it to usher in a new age of civic splendour.

‘Abduh’s ideas reached Egypt and various influential people in the government, including the British Consul-General of Egypt, Lord Cromer, who were impressed by ‘Abduh’s liberal thoughts and interceded on his behalf in order for him to obtain a pardon.<sup>52</sup> In 1888, ‘Abduh was allowed to return to Egypt. He received several positions, such as a judge at al-Maḥākim al-ahliyya al-ibtidā’iyya (The Court of First Instance of the Native Tribunals), as well as a Consultative Member of the Maḥkamat al-Isti’nāf (Court of Appeal).<sup>53</sup>

In 1892, Abbas II Hilmi became Khedive of Egypt, which ‘Abduh found to be an opportunity for educational reforms. ‘Abduh passionately called for a new kind of education and the reform of the traditional al-Azhar system as essential underpinnings of a modern Arab society. The young must be instructed with a mindset and skills that better prepared them for modern life, which was inevitable.<sup>54</sup> A famous sheikh once asked ‘Abduh, “Why do you want to change the al-Azhar? You learned here.”<sup>55</sup> To which ‘Abduh replied, “That is why I am worried.” The sheikh went on, “But what you learned at the al-Azhar has made you the advanced intellectual that you are now.” ‘Abduh said, “I have become the advanced intellectual

<sup>50</sup> ‘Abduh, *al-A‘māl al-Kāmilah*, 1:321.

<sup>51</sup> Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 173; Yoav Di-Capua, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 23; Muḥammad al-Haddād, *Muḥammad ‘Abduh: Qirā’a Jadīda fī Khitāb al-Islāh al-Dīnī* (Beirut: Dār al-Ṭalī‘ah lil-Ṭibā‘ah wa-al-Nash, 2003), 56.

<sup>52</sup> Kedourie, *Afghani and ‘Abduh*, 37-38.

<sup>53</sup> Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 69.

<sup>54</sup> Muḥammad ‘Imāra, *al-Imām Muḥammad ‘Abduh: Mujaddid al-Dunyā bi-Tajdīd al-Dīn* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1988), 55-56.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

you see before you only after spending ten years cleaning my mind of the nonsense which I absorbed from al-Azhar.”<sup>56</sup>

Impressed, Abbās II ordered the formation of an Administrative Committee tasked with enacting the reforms. Coming into operation in 1895, this committee included ‘Abduh as a government representative. Through its activities, ‘Abduh was able to institute wide-ranging reforms, including the addition of subjects like arithmetic, algebra, Islamic history, composition, geometry and geography to al-Azhar’s curriculum.<sup>57</sup>

The peak of ‘Abduh’s reforms, however, came in 1899 when he was made Muftī of Egypt.<sup>58</sup> This allowed him to become the country’s official interpreter of canonical law and gave him much needed authority to give legal verdicts – *fatāwā* – that were binding.<sup>59</sup> ‘Abduh opened up the ground to the public, contrary to what his predecessors had done. He no longer focused on issuing rulings specifically referred by government departments, but anyone was able to present matters of concern to him for his consideration. Many of the *fatāwā* he issued were seen to be liberal and modern, specifically those relating to social and political issues.

## SOCIAL REFORMS

The main goal of ‘Abduh’s movement was to bring social reform to the entire gamut of social life in all regions. “The call of Muhammad ‘Abduh received a response from many quarters and affected the life of the country in many directions.”<sup>60</sup> ‘Abduh contributed to the revival and reform of Muslim society. In the revival, ‘Abduh tried to impart to Islam a fresh expression, yet self-evidently authentic and in a form that could be understood by scholars and non-scholars alike.<sup>61</sup> The reforms had monumental impact in eradicate social issues, advocating women’s rights, escalating reform at al-Azhar, developing the religious and cultural consciousness, and establishing new schools. He believed an educated society is a functional society. ‘Abduh knew this and strived to improve people’s lives by improving family life. The best way to do this, in his opinion, was to make education available to all females, and to improve their status in society by giving them equal rights to men. ‘Abduh said, “A nation is based on families. Good families form good nations. Good families are united by Love and cooperation between parents, children and relatives. If someone is not a good member of a family, that person will also not be a good member of society or nation.”<sup>62</sup> It would be reasonable to assume ‘Abduh formed this perspective because he was raised in a small village by a big family with close ties to its relatives. Village life, unlike urban life, sanctified the

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 71-75.

<sup>58</sup> *Majallat al-Manār*, 8 (1905): 487.

<sup>59</sup> Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 79; Umar Ryad, “A Printed Muslim ‘Lighthouse’ in Cairo al-Manār’s Early Years, Religious Aspiration and Reception (1898-1903),” *Arabica* 56, no. 1 (2009).

<sup>60</sup> Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 206.

<sup>61</sup> For more in this point, see Ozalp, *Islam between Tradition and Modernity*, 210; Yusuf H. R Seferta, “The Concept of Religious Authority according to Muḥammad ‘Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā,” *The Islamic Quarterly* 30 (1986).

<sup>62</sup> ‘Abduh, *al-A‘māl al-Kāmilah*, 172.

family unit and endorsed the closeness of relatives who often lived in the same home or as neighbours.<sup>63</sup> Some scholar pointed out ‘Abduh was trying to inject rural values into urban conditions. This may be true. However, ‘Abduh must be commended for shining a light upon women’s issues, because he was fully aware the family unit is held together by women.<sup>64</sup> By demanding more access to education for girls, introducing new restrictions in divorce laws and trying to abolish polygamy, he paved the way for stronger families in the future.

Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī’s political efforts are about as effective as Princess Nāzī’s. Jamāl al-Dīn is a scholarly man, he knows the situation of the people, Muslims and Islam. He has the ability to enable them to achieve great things through an education, but he just focuses on politics. Now he has lost that ability ... The Princess could do great things if she applied herself to the issue of raising girls. She is surrounded by plenty of princesses who just spend their money frivolously on themselves. If she advised these princesses (and other wealthy women) to establish schools for girls, and invited teachers from Istanbul and Syria, the princesses would listen and together, they would achieve something worthwhile. If they do not see immediate results now they can rest assured that they have sowed viable seeds for future generations.<sup>65</sup>

One of the things ‘Abduh did to support women was to reinstate *ijtihād* (diligence in religion). This enabled him to declare a new *fatwā* that proclaimed a man may only have one wife. A man may only be married to two women if his first wife is barren.<sup>66</sup> He declared another *fatwā* that made a legal requirement for a man, who wanted to divorce his wife, to state his case to a judge and abide by the judges’ verdict and advice.<sup>67</sup> By reinstating *ijtihād*, ‘Abduh made it possible for scholars to re-examining the Qur’ānic interpretations in light of modern times. Every generation faces new problems and the Islamic texts should hold the solutions to these problems. He stipulated one condition for *ijtihād* – to use “logic and reason to understand the essence of the texts.”<sup>68</sup> Without logical reasoning and common sense, Muslims could easily be misguided by irrational ideas. ‘Abduh said (with a subtle sense of sarcasm),

If, by chance, we discover new ideas which go against long held traditions, we can do one of two things. We could accept that a tradition is right and admit that we are incapable of understanding God’s will. Or we can use logic and reason to understand the essence of a tradition and reinterpret and reconceptualise it for a modern world.<sup>69</sup>

To show how this could be done, ‘Abduh brought people’s attention to how the Islamic religion forbids the creation of any kind of statues. This tradition was created by the Prophet during a time when Pagan idolatry was rampant. People worshipped statues of various animals

<sup>63</sup> ‘Aqqād, *‘Abqarī al-Iṣlāḥ*, 107-108; ‘Abd Allāh Maḥmūd Shihātah, *al-Imām Muḥammad ‘Abduh bayna al-Manhaj al-dīnī wa-l-Manhaj al-Ijtīmā’ī* (Cairo: al-Hay’ah al-Miṣriyya al-‘Āmmah lil-Kitāb, 2000), 41.

<sup>64</sup> Ellen Anne McLarney, *Soft Force: Women in Egypt’s Islamic Awakening* (N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015), 78; Roxanne D. Marcotte, “Ṣaḥrūr, The Status of Women and of Polygamy in Islam,” *Oriente Moderno* 20, no. 2/3 (2001): 313-328.

<sup>65</sup> ‘Abduh, *al-A’māl al-Kāmilah*, 264.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>68</sup> Muḥammad ‘Abduh, “Ikhtilāf al-Qawānīn bi-Ikhtilāf Aḥwāl al-Umam,” *al-Waqā’i al-Miṣriyya* 1142 (1881).

<sup>69</sup> ‘Abduh, Muḥammad, *al-Manhaj al-Iṣlāḥī lil-Imām Muḥammad ‘Abduh* (Alexandria: Alexandria Library, 2005), 72.

and a pantheon of Greek and Egyptian gods and goddesses. This idol worship distanced people from the one true God, who revealed Himself to the Prophet. Since then, Paganism declined and devout Muslims were completely dedicated to God. Creating statues is a legitimate form of artistic expression throughout most of the civilised world and has nothing to do with Pagan idols. There is no legitimate reason for this tradition to restrict Muslim artists' means of expression any longer, and according to 'Abduh, this tradition is now redundant.<sup>70</sup>

'Abduh used the abolition of slavery to point out how traditions have been abandoned in the past because of changing circumstances. During the Prophet's lifetime, many families owned slaves and this was an accepted fact of life. As nations around the world fought fierce battles to liberate slaves, governments created laws that emancipated them and ensured their freedom, and societies adapted to the new paradigm.<sup>71</sup> He stated this example shows how flexible we must be with all traditions. Social customs and laws were, for 'Abduh, not sacred, so could be altered to meet the needs of the times. On the other hand, he maintained traditional laws of worship were in place for good reasons and devotional activity transcended social change.

'Abduh kept himself well-informed about developments in Europe and embraced those ideas that most contributed to the advancement of Islamic society.<sup>72</sup> His ideology was a synthesis of rationalism, liberalism, nationalism and, most importantly, the universalism of Islam. He believed the current rigidity of Islamic culture was holding back what was essentially a rational and fluid religion. 'Abduh reinterpreted the religious texts from a universal perspective, using modern reason, with the aim of reconciling European and Islamic principles. Moreover, 'Abduh promoted the principles of social justice and welfare, which, he believed, are rooted in religion.

## POLITICAL REFORMS

According to 'Abduh, there is a big difference between religious and political reforms. Religious reforms are achieved through discussion and debate; not with swords. Political reforms may require swords, but only when words fail. 'Abduh was well aware of the dangers of political revolutions. He knew that anything introduced by force and conflict would lack legitimacy and eventually fail. 'Abduh believed people should first be educated about the political process, then gradual changes should be introduced so everyone could adapt to them and get used to them slowly. He said, "To introduce sweeping political reforms would be like suddenly bestowing upon a child the privileges and responsibilities of an adult—the child would not be able to cope."<sup>73</sup> In the newspaper *al-Waqā'i' al-Miṣriyya*, 'Abduh wrote an article titled "Mistakes Clever People Make."<sup>74</sup> In this article, he used the American political system as a shining example of fair and balanced governance. American people vote for their political leaders and parliamentarians. The people use polls to influence these politicians, and

<sup>70</sup> 'Imāra, *al-Imām Muḥammad 'Abduh*, 273-274.

<sup>71</sup> 'Abduh, *al-A'māl al-Kāmilah*, 2:91-92.

<sup>72</sup> Mark Sedgwick, *Muḥammad 'Abduh* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2010), 22.

<sup>73</sup> 'Imāra, *al-Imām Muḥammad 'Abduh*, 194.

<sup>74</sup> Muḥammad 'Abduh, "Mistakes Clever People Make," *al-Waqā'i' al-Miṣriyya* 1079 (1881).

referendums to direct their decisions and actions. He used Afghanistan as a counterexample. If political freedom was introduced to that nation as a sweeping reform, the people, who have never had this privilege before, would be inclined to abuse their new rights and resort to mob mentality and strong-arm tactics, thus perverting their new political system.<sup>75</sup>

‘Abduh had much to say about tyrannical leaders. He wrote newspaper articles to raise awareness of the way common people were being oppressed. ‘Abduh said, for 20 centuries, ruthless tyrants forced the people to submit to their authority by keeping the people ignorant and unaware of their human rights. In a fair and just society, people should be able to influence their leaders and must hold them accountable for their decisions and actions.<sup>76</sup> ‘Abduh strongly believed, in a *madaniyya* state, everyone is equal, and there must be a separation of religion and state. This is clearly evident when, in 1881, ‘Abduh formulated the constitution for the Nation Party. The fifth bylaw of the constitution stated:

The Nation Party is a political party; not a religious party. It combines people from various religions, with different ideologies and doctrines; including [Muslims], Christians and Jews. Everyone who ploughs the fields, speaks the language of this land, and belongs to this nation is a brother; regardless of their beliefs. Their political and legal rights are equal.<sup>77</sup>

As a reminder to hypocritical religious scholars and leaders, he added: “This statement applies especially to the sheikhs of al-Azhar who know that the real law of Islam refuses hatred and considers all people equal.”<sup>78</sup> ‘Abduh strongly advocated the separation of religion and state. He wanted people to recognise the difference between an Islamic state and a *madaniyya* state. An Islamic state is limited to one philosophical and religious outlook, whereas a *madaniyya* state encompasses a plurality of philosophies and religions in which Islam is but a part. He refused to accept that one person can be in charge of religious and secular authority: “We have to recognise the difference between religious and state authority. Having one leader responsible for both authorities may have been appropriate in the past, but now, if we want to live in a modern society, we must find another solution.”<sup>79</sup> Authority in an Islamic community is held by “wise and benevolent men, regardless of their status in society.”<sup>80</sup> These men guide and advise believers in religious and personal matters, but they are not usually qualified to participate in affairs of state.

Because he championed the religious thinking of the Arab world in which he lived, ‘Abduh massively influenced the entire Islamic world. For this reason, he is widely considered to be one of the founders of Islamic modernism.<sup>81</sup> He reconciled new urbanity with established religion. ‘Abduh’s progressive liberal ideas were so strong and influential that they overshadowed his religious devotion. Most historians seem to have reached a similar

<sup>75</sup> ‘Abduh, *al-A‘māl al-Kāmilah*, 298-299.

<sup>76</sup> Muḥammad ‘Abduh, “al-Shūrā wa-al-Istibdād,” *al-Waqā‘i‘ al-Miṣriyya* 1279 (1881).

<sup>77</sup> ‘Imāra, *al-Imām Muḥammad ‘Abduh*, 99.

<sup>78</sup> ‘Aqqād, *‘Abqarī al-Iṣlāh*, 185-186.

<sup>79</sup> ‘Abduh, *al-Islām wa-n-Nasrāniyya*, 75-76; ‘Abduh, *al-A‘māl al-Kāmilah*, 109.

<sup>80</sup> ‘Abduh, *al-Islām wa-n-Nasrāniyya*, 79.

<sup>81</sup> Zakī Mīlād, *al-Islām wa-al-Madaniyya* (Beirut: al-Dār al-‘Arabiyya lil-‘Ulūm, 2007), 115-116.

conclusion about him. British diplomat Evelyn Baring Cromer (1841-1917)<sup>82</sup> considered ‘Abduh to be an agnostic.<sup>83</sup> English writer Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (1840-1922) likened ‘Abduh’s religious belief to his own: “I’m afraid ‘Abduh’s belief in Islam is weak; like my belief in the Catholic Church.”<sup>84</sup> Later, Hourani stated ‘Abduh’s thinking created a constant tension between the two demands (Islam and urbanity). However, researcher Chris Barker contradicted these opinions when he declared ‘Abduh was a religious giant.

## CONCLUSION

By looking at Muhammad ‘Abduh’s educational, social and political reforms, apart from his religious reforms, it is easy to see how important his liberal convictions and visionary aspirations were to the development of the modern Arab world. Nearly all his efforts to create a *madaniyya* state were strongly opposed by traditionalists, who dogmatically resisted anything and everything that resembled foreign influence. His proposed educational reforms were seen as a threat to the Islamic faith; his social reforms were received with suspicion and considered to be an affront to traditional Arab culture; and his political reforms conflicted with the religious leaders who wanted to hold on to their political power. ‘Abduh found a way to bridge the gap between religious and civil ideals by introducing *ijtihād* and demonstrating how logic and reasoning could be used to reconcile traditional and modern values. Today, one can look back and see that Mohammad ‘Abduh was a man ahead of his time. His intelligence, insight and strength of conviction are admirable traits that seem to be lacking in today’s modern leaders. We need visionaries like him today to chart a better course for our future: a future of peace and equality in which cultural and religious diversity are embraced and celebrated.

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<sup>82</sup> Lord Evelyn Baring Cromer held the international position of Control, which oversaw Egyptian finances after the Khedives’ mismanagement. In addition, during the British occupation, he was an agent and Consul-General in Egypt from 1883 to 1907. Cromer criticised all religions, not only Islam; however, other intellectuals started to write that Islam accepts the new urbanity and the only way to promote urbanity in the Islamic community is by following the urban model of Europe.

<sup>83</sup> Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 176.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

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