

4 Muhammad Abduh or the failure of the epistemic transition

Justifiably considered to be the most important Muslim theologian in the last two centuries, Muhammad Abduh set himself the objective of modernizing Muslim society to catch up with Europe and to resist colonial domination. He developed a reformist doctrine that equally refused Wahhabism's rigorism and Rifaat Tahtawi's liberal secularization. His main argument is that Muslim societies can modernize without pushing religion back to the private sphere, because the Qur'an is open to progress. Founded on rationality, equity, and human responsibility, the Qur'anic message was, according to Abduh, scrambled by a poor understanding of the revelation and by social practices stemming from paganism. He affirms that Muslims did not know how to fully take advantage of the richness of the divine message, criticizing al-Azhar University for being closed to profane sciences, which cut religious thought off from historical evolutions. He offered the institution a curriculum including history, geography, and other disciplines of social sciences, which was refused. He then created his own training institution where he taught, in addition to traditional religious sciences, the work of Ibn Khaldun, in which he found an appropriate approach to address the issue of society's decadence. He outlined a vast reform program pertaining to education to be in line with the development of sciences and technology that had appeared in Europe.

In this context, Abduh is a central author in the question of cultural modernization, insofar as he sought to put an end to the supernatural beliefs of popular religiosity and to the conservative discourse of the ulema. The project of revisiting tradition for a renaissance of Muslim civilization attracted opposing currents of opinion to his approach: some seeking to build a European-style nation-state (Mustapha Kamil, Saad Zaghloul Lutfi Sayyid, Ali Abdel Raziq, Taha Hussein) and others concerned with preserving Islam and the Arab language (Rachid Rida, Hassan al-Banna). The divergence within the ranks of those aligning themselves with him comes from the bipolarity of his thought, mainly described in his major book *Risalat al-tawhid*.¹ This work is marked by a tension between a *theological pole*, borrowing the metaphysics of medieval tradition, and a *positivist pole*, constructed on the idea that the Qur'an encourages natural sciences. In this chapter, I will try to show why Muhammad Abduh's attempt to modernize Muslim culture failed. He certainly fought against the popular beliefs linked to worshipping saints; it made him appear to be a modern reformer, but he did not transform the religious

corpus inherited from past centuries. He did not propel a modern theology to accompany the secularization dynamics imposed by the historical changes that appeared in contact with Europe. Theology, says Abduh, is the *Tawhid* (oneness), “a science that studies the existence of God and his attributes ...”,² also called “*ilm al-kalam*”, the science of the Word of God and of reasoning by the Word. This science aims to explain the prophecies by means of the underlying rational discourse in the Qur’an, “which teaches us nothing that contradicts with our reason, although religion evokes miracles which are beyond our understanding”.³ The revelation, he states, is rational, even if sometimes reason proves incapable of realizing some divine mysteries.

The bipolarity of Abduh’s thought system

Muhammad Abduh is known as a reformist theologian, famous for his audacious “*fatwas*”, through which he showed his will to adapt Islam to modern life by resorting to reason. He is also known for his stances defending an Islam threatened, according to him, from outside by Western secularization, and from inside by the archaism of society that had “forgotten” the spirit of the Qur’an. It is not Islam’s fault, he repeats, that Muslim societies have fallen behind Europe; they themselves have given rise to the factors of decline of which he tries to study the historical origins. To this end, he gives a reading of the sacred text to illustrate that humanity is responsible for its situation, fighting against the idea of “*mektoub*” (what happens is already predetermined), fatalism through which Muslims shirk their responsibilities. This fatalist attitude, he states, is equivalent to accusing God of all the wrong that occurs, including decadence. It also clears the Muslim of wrongdoing when faced with his failures. To counter this passive attitude, as present among the mass of believers as among the very ulema supposed to know the *true Islam*, Abduh developed a thought system that explains the meaning of humankind’s action in this world.

In this general system, he gives society an autonomy – which must have provoked, according to him, the decline of Muslim civilization – to demonstrate that decadence does not come from divine will but instead from humanity’s responsibility. For this purpose, he outlines two adjacent epistemic spaces: that of God, studied by ‘*ilm al-kalam*’, and that of human nature, studied by positivism. He praises reason, nevertheless affirming that it is sometimes incapable of explaining divine mysteries; however, he resolves this tension by removing God’s essence from reason’s questioning, urged to focus on nature and humans only.

Knowing that the unlimited use of reason could contradict the revelation, he traced a boundary, a red line not to be crossed, subject to impiety. “I will begin my reading”, he writes, “by citing a hadith, and even if this hadith is not authentic, its meaning is confirmed by the Sacred Book; here it is: ‘Meditate on God’s creatures, but not on His nature, for you will perish.’”⁴ He thus divides knowledge into two spaces, one concerning the attributes of God, and the other concerning history. Reason is capable of explaining the latter but does not have the capacity to attain the former.⁵ God is beyond the scope of reason, even though his message

is rational and the world that he created obeys the reason capable of scientifically explaining it. This is how a naturalist positivism with a theological foundation, limited to the sensible world and forbidden to God's attributes, was conceived.⁶ His theoretical construction seeks to show that society's backwardness is not due to divine power, but rather to the incapacity to understand the *structures of reality* as God willed them. This leads Abduh to distinguish in one hand the domains of God, unfathomable and impenetrable by reason, and in another hand history, whose evolutions have human causes likely explained by reason. While this approach encompasses heaven and earth, it leaves human action, and the profane explanation of this action, ample room to maneuver. Hence, the splitting of Abduh's thought into a *theological branch*, with divine attributes as its subject, and a *positivist branch*, with nature and social evolution as its subject. On this specific issue, Abduh dismisses al-Ghazali's theory without naming him.⁷

The division of the epistemic space seeks to underline the role of human agency in the decadence of Muslims; it will allow Abduh to say that the Qur'an is not responsible for the course of history. For Abduh, the decline of the Islamic civilization began with the idea that divine power would leave no autonomy to man. How else to explain the Europeans' lead over Muslims? Did God want to give Christians more power over Muslims? Abduh responds to this latter question by explaining that Muslims had moved away from the *true Islam*, affirming that the lag behind Europe had nothing to do with divine will. This lag is explained by historical factors, thus indicating that human action is autonomous. For this reason, he was interested in Ibn Khaldun, and made him known to his students through teachings specifically focusing on his work. What attracted Abduh to the author of the *Muqaddimah*, was the ability of the profane argument to explain socio-political evolutions through a system of concepts forged on the basis of sociological structures. This is probably where he had the intuition of humanity's responsibility, signifying that if Muslim society is backward and dominated, it is neither God's intention, nor his responsibility. Abduh's message is that fatalism, which makes believe that everything that occurs is divine will, is in contradiction with the teachings of the Qur'an. To support this view, he cites the verse stating that "Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves" (s. 13, v. 11).

For Abduh, knowledge has three domains: 1. God, the Necessary Being revealed by religion, and whose existence is demonstrated by *'ilm al-kalam*; 2. nature, created by God who endowed it with immutable laws; 3. man, gifted with reason capable of understanding the secrets of nature and of human contingency. This separation of the field of knowledge intends to affirm that humans possess the intellectual means to decide their fate in happiness or misfortune, in enjoying earthly benefits or in ignorance of capacities and potentialities. God created nature with its complexity and offered it to humanity for them to understand it, to harness it and to make the most of it. In his relationship with nature, humanity needs the reason that God gifted them; however, in its relationship with God, humanity needs the prophetic revelation to provide the knowledge that reason is incapable of attaining. To grasp the structure of this epistemic approach, Abduh explains

that God's will is not arbitrary and, consequently, the action of humanity is likely to be led by realistic predictions. Humans can construct a project, they can invest in the future, and they are thus free, because the world willed by God obeys regularities that one must just know to be the master of one's fate.⁸ God created the world with rules that humanity has the intelligence to understand, and God does not arbitrarily change these rules, meaning that he is fair in relation to humanity and neutral in relation to humanity's action on earth. It is up to the individual to succeed or to ruin their life on earth and in the hereafter. In sum, humans are responsible for their destiny.

"In any case", writes Abduh,

actions come from effort and liberty, and nothing in God's omniscience prevents man from choosing effort; and if elsewhere everything that exists in God's omniscience must inevitably occur, it is because, once known to God, it must conform to reality; yet reality does not change.⁹

Yet the reality does not change means that the laws of nature do not change, which signifies that a human being can envisage and develop future plans by estimating his chances of success, insofar as he must know what to expect. If he succeeds, he is the author of his own success; if he fails, he is responsible for it, in a world that obeys rational laws. Abduh insists that the general rule established by God, outside the miracle that is exceptional, allows for the predicting, investing, and growing of humanity's power on earth for a better life. The laws of social life are not arbitrary and obey a rationality that derives its essential elements from human anthropology. "Reality does not change" draws close to Hegel's phrase, "real is rational", in other words that natural and human events have causes, and that reality possesses an autonomy that humanity needs to construct civilization and that the researcher needs to make it into a research subject. This posture delivers nature to reason and its scientific questioning. *Risalat al-tawhid* opens the possibility to a scientific discourse from the moment when human action liberated itself from the fatalism inherited from past centuries. This indicates that Abduh is a modern thinker, delivering the social fact to reason, to which it must provide rational explanations. According to him, in society and history, the source of causality can be found in memory, imagination and reflection, which signifies that the fate of the individual depends on his/her knowledge and will.

Under Ibn Khaldun's influence, Abduh developed a theory of the autonomy of history, distancing himself from the naïve idealism of the religious discourse. He bases society on the necessity of humanity to support itself through effort and work,¹⁰ and not instinctively, unlike animals.¹¹ Humans create sociability because they cannot live alone by themselves¹² and because they speak. The language enables him to produce ideas, images and representations. This necessary sociability is illustrated in an anthropological pessimism, showing that humans are neither angels, nor animals¹³ and that violence and conflict¹⁴ are too strong to be suppressed by a simple call for wisdom.¹⁵ Abduh's reasoning indicates that he is convinced that a social fact leads to another social fact, taking place in a

disenchanted space, neither obeying the supernatural, nor sorcery. *Risalat al-tawhid* is a reading of the Qur'an that tries to neutralize implicitly al-Ghazali's influence on theology and culture. It outlines an interpretation of Islam that is compatible with the idea that society is molded by human contingent actions, entailing humanity's responsibility. Abduh puts God before the social laws stemming from human nature, which the believer must respect if he wants to behave as a rational person. His thought contains a theology and a philosophy open to positivism blessed by the Qur'an, building a majestic throne for God, recognized as the creator of the universe. In doing so, Abduh neutralizes God's influence on the behavior of men. This consists of saying that, at the source, there is God, the creator of nature with laws that human reason can understand; there is also man, producing his own history, often without knowing it. This reasoning aims to convince the Muslim that his/her history depends on himself/herself and not on God.

Abduh's thought can be summarized as follows: 1. Since the Qur'an encourages the use of reason, Islam is thus compatible with the sciences and technology discovered in Europe. 2. Muslims steered clear of scientific discoveries because they lost the real interpretation of the Qur'an. 3. To overcome this situation of Muslim thought, it is essential to return to the *salafs*, to the great theologians and to the philosophers who used reason to comment on the Qur'an. In this context, he calls for a reform (*islah*) to stir up a renaissance (*Nahda*), encouraging Muslims to accept modernization and to take part in it. However, he neither criticized explicitly the old theology that had dismissed philosophy, nor recalled what opposed Ibn Hanbal to the Mu'tazilites or al-Ghazali to al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. He did not outline a critical history of Muslim thought, which could have strengthened his new vision. Abduh is torn between the philosophers (al-Kindi, al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd) on one side, and the orthodox theologians (al-Ash'ari and al-Ghazali) on the other, contradicting himself when he praises ones while taking the side of the others. He acts as if al-Ghazali's doctrine did not play a role in stopping the evolution of philosophical thought in the 11th–12th centuries. This contradiction is even more evident when he aligns himself with Salafism, borrowing the concept from Ibn Hanbal, who had specifically forged it to oppose the influence of Greek thought on philosophical commentaries on the Qur'an, which he denounced for having perverted the heritage of the pious ancestors (*salafs*). This notion was a weapon against the Mu'tazilites, accused of tarnishing the Qur'anic revelation with references to Plato and Aristotle. For this reason, one cannot simultaneously align oneself with Salafism and the Mu'tazilites.¹⁶ Implicitly, he vindicates the hostility of Muslim theologians to philosophy and secular sciences. He did not critically analyze these theologians, like al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyya; he settled for writing that Islam is compatible with science, without challenging the orthodoxy that fought against the scientific spirit and that exercised influence over Muslim culture. Hence his failure to reform the official interpretation of Islam, on which he certainly imposed the European scientific discoveries, failing nevertheless to make Muslim society accept the autonomy of secular social thought. Abduh's ambiguity is that, on the one hand, he wishes for the renaissance of philosophy without, on the other hand, criticizing those who banished it from the

intellectual domain. He lauds Ibn Sina but also al-Ghazali, who had fought against him, resuscitating the old debate on revelation and reason without deciding in favor of one or the other. "Reason", he writes, "is among the strongest supports [of the Muslim religion] and tradition among its most solid backings".¹⁷

Although favorable to natural sciences, Abduh's perspective blocked the birth of social sciences and philosophy, through a division of areas of knowledge that gives theology intellectual supremacy. Reason, he writes, is necessary to understand nature and society, but it is forbidden to submit the Qur'anic revelation to human reflection. For him, reason continues to cover the physical and metaphysical areas of knowledge, whereas the study of God and his essence come from a science that human reason is incapable of undertaking. In doing so, he classes the "reasons" by placing divine reason at the summit, declared superior to human reason. This classification would simply have been theological speculation, if it had not had significant intellectual and political consequences. Indeed, this postulate of the primacy of divine reason gives political authority to the ulema, who use it to control the field of knowledge and to oppose social sciences. It is not sufficient to declare that the natural world is the domain of reason to construct modernity. Theological knowledge must still be re-organized so that it is not an obstacle to profane knowledge, which needs cultural, ideological, and political conditions to develop. Abduh strengthens the legitimacy of the ulema to say what is true and what is false outside their domain, recognizing their authority to intervene in the profane cognitive field, which gives them a power that they use to stifle any reflection that does not conform to their writings. Instead of constructing a new theology considering the progress of human thought, Abduh restores the old theology, which plays the role of "police" in human sciences and society. In the cognitive field, the ulema still have a role of authority that delegitimizes any discourse presumed to be contrary to the reality as it is taught by the religious tradition.

The limits of modernization without secularization

Muhammad Abduh religiously legitimized the scientific discoveries realized in Europe, opposing Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's injunction a century earlier, who declared that all knowledge not derived from the Qur'an was illicit. He made science and technology (electricity, railways, the telephone) acceptable by explaining that the Europeans had better taken advantage of God's generosity, as he had given humans intelligence and reason to scientifically study the laws of nature. He even declares that Islam, unlike Christianity, is open to science, underlining that the Catholic Church, "persecuted Galileo when he affirmed that the movement of the planets corresponded to the same system known by the astronomers of our times".¹⁸ He also criticized Calvin for approving the order to burn Michel Servet, a Spanish doctor who wrote on blood circulation.¹⁹ Inversely, he states, the Qur'an encourages an understanding of nature and its mysteries through the reason that God gifted to man. However, similar facts to Galileo's persecution (the burning of Ibn Sina's and Ibn Rushd's books in Baghdad and Cordoba) occurred in Islamic lands, although he does not mention

them. In 1580, some years before Galileo's discovery, the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, Murad III had the Istanbul observatory destroyed, blaming the astronomers for not predicting the military defeat against the Christian armies that he was battling. "The destruction of the Istanbul observatory", writes Faouzia Farida Charfi, "marks the end of Arab astronomy, whereas the degree of precision of its installations could have provided an interesting contribution to the end of the 16th century, characterized in Europe by the emergence of new ideas".²⁰ However, this does not signify that Islam is closed to science as, for all caliph that he was, Murad III is not Islam, and the Bishops who condemned Galileo are not Christianity either.

Abduh's objective was neither to criticize the classic tradition, which bears some responsibility for the decline of sciences, nor to construct a new Muslim theology. He was concerned with opposing secularization that, under Europe's influence, risked attracting the social élites, according to him. He feared modernity expressed by Rifaat Tahtaoui would marginalize Islam in social and political life. To neutralize this tendency, he affirms that Islam is open to science and does not need secularization, judging that the latter is justified in Christian Europe and not in Muslim countries. For him, Islam is more open to reason and science than Christianity; thus, Muslim societies can get along without it.²¹ In this reasoning, Abduh does not perceive that neither the Qur'an nor the Gospels are opposed to secularization, while medieval interpretation of religion is.

In his writings, Abduh compares the medieval interpretation of Christianity, which was indeed intolerant, to his own interpretation of Islam, which he considers open to scientific progress. He concludes then that Muslim societies do not need to secularize, because the Qur'an is open to modern life. He did not grasp that the Christendom disappeared and gave birth to Europe.²² After the 18th century, it was not Christianity that was threatening Islamic lands, but capitalist Europe. This posture indicates that Abduh did not fully gauge the double revolution – religious and intellectual – that occurred in Europe in the 16th–17th centuries. He remained a prisoner of the competition between Christianity and Islam, perceiving the colonial expansion as the defeat of Muslims as such. He believes that 19th-century Muslims were faced with Christianity, while their adversary was instead the capitalist and secularized Europe that had previously experienced the Reformation and the Counter-Reform. He even considers the Protestant Reformation, which he views favorably, as the result of Islam's influence on Europe, following exchanges between the two religions in Andalusia and during the Crusades. On this subject, he writes:

What happened not long after this moment was the appearance among them of a school demanding the reform of the religion and a return to its primitive simplicity; in its reform, this school would arrive at a point which was not far from Islam; and even some sects, which derived from it, came to a belief that concurred with that of Islam, except concerning the recognition of Muhammad's mission; what they profess only differs from Islam in name, and rites, but not in spirit.²³

Abduh limits Protestantism to the abolition of the clergy, while the theological originality introduced by Luther is the doctrine of predestination, radically different from that of the Roman Catholic Church. Luther affirms that the rituals (*'ibadates* in Islam) are not important to enter heaven. Neither Abduh, nor any Muslim theologian would dare to say that the five pillars of Islam (prayers, fasting) are not necessary to enter heaven. Abduh did not see this fundamental aspect in Protestantism, which is at the origin of the secularization dynamic, borne by a European bourgeoisie more concerned with conquering markets and territories than assuring the salvation of souls.

Furthermore, Abduh sought to return to the philosophy of the Mu'tazilites and of Ibn Rushd when this thought no longer had the capacity to decipher historical reality after Galileo and Newton's discoveries. Indeed, the Muslim philosophers of classical antiquity were accustomed to commenting on the Qur'an using Greek reason. Let us recall that one of the first themes appearing in theological debates about classical Islam was the revelation/reason relationship, on which the Mu'tazilites and the Hanbalites displayed their disagreement. This debate and its controversies appeared when the Mu'tazilites felt the need to support the veracity of the divine message through the demonstrations of the profane reason that they found in Greek philosophy. There were controversies and confrontations between those upholding the primacy of the revelation and those following the primacy of reason, the former rejecting reason because it sometimes came into conflict with the revelation. Indeed, on many points, reason did not correspond with the dogmatic truth and, in this case, orthodox theologians gave primacy to the dogma, as did Ahmed Ibn Hanbal and his disciples, who made a literal reading of the Qur'an that was imposed for centuries. But this debate belongs to medieval thought, which presupposed that theology was the main source of knowledge about the hereafter and this world. Abduh updated it by trying to restore the Muslim philosophy of yesteryear.

He did not notice that scientific discoveries had provoked a paradigm change in knowledge about nature and human anthropology. He did not realize that by calling for the return of the Mu'tazilites, and thus implicitly Plato and Aristotle, he was aligning himself with medieval scholasticism, whose intellectual relevance was dismissed by the scientific discoveries. Therefore, he remained dependent on the scholastic system whose logic is demonstrative, going back to the causes, explaining the world's contingency of generation and corruption through a necessary source, not related to the first experience of the sensible world. It is with the Aristotelian operators of necessity, contingency, possibility, impossibility, and of the First Mover, that Abduh explains human evolutions and demonstrates God's existence. "It is evident", he writes, "that all contingencies are contingent, and that any contingency needs a cause to give it existence; thus all contingencies need a creator".²⁴ The Necessary Being is the source of life and knowledge and, as attributes, it has the will and almighty power that ordered the coherent and perfect universe, which attests to the Oneness of its creator. This way of thinking is specific to medieval culture, which seeks to explain the coherence of the cosmos through metaphysical speculations that assign humanity a

teleological function. This is one of the distinctive features of Abduh's work. It contains a contradiction between the will to modernize society and a way of thinking that has not broken with past culture. The following passage illustrates this contradiction:

By observing the sublunary universe and that it contains spheres, suns and moons, then by contemplating the inferior universe and that it contains plants and animals, we can conclude that ALL is governed by a law.²⁵

This passage displays a medieval reasoning consistent with al-Ghazali or Ibn Taymiyya speculations.

Abduh expressed his distrust regarding secular thought following his meeting with Herbert Spencer, one of the founders of modern sociology in the 19th century, whom he met in Manchester and with whom he maintained a correspondence. He considered that Spencer was a "philosopher" with great knowledge, but he was lost faced with questions that Abduh judged to be essential. He writes:

Although these philosophers and savants managed to discover numerous things helping the human being to live a better life, they seem incapable of discovering the original nature of the human being ... The philosopher (Spencer) was lost about what is happening in Europe. He clearly demonstrated his incapacity to offer solution: despite the extent of his knowledge. This said, where then resides the remedy? In fact, it involves returning to religion. Because it is religion that revealed human nature throughout the centuries, but alas! Humans turn their back on this reality every time.²⁶

This passage indicates why Abduh failed to achieve the epistemic transition that he wanted for Muslim culture. He did not perceive that the positivism that he was teaching was not that of Galileo or Newton. His positivism stems from Aristotelian naturalism and Platonic essentialism, in which human agency is ignored. It is not enough to express a cognitive need – already present in Greek philosophy – to assert oneself as positivist in the sense of modern philosophy. Galilean or Newtonian positivism is a philosophy born from the defeat of medieval metaphysics and scholasticism in Europe. The Galilean revolution bore a philosophy of the subject that Descartes formulated, and which put humanity at the center of the representation of the world, while Aristotle's positivism teaches that reality is hidden and that it must be known through disincarnated reason. As for Plato's system, scientific knowledge exists outside human perception and is developed by a force exterior to them. Conversely, the scientific discoveries of the 16th–17th centuries led towards the phenomenology that triumphed with German idealism and the philosophy of the subject. It was not Galileo who engendered Europe's great intellectual rupture, but rather the dynamic that he provoked, and which resulted in a change in episteme. After all, Galileo could not have led to Descartes, and Newton not have led to Kant. The Muslim culture adapted to Galileo and Newton by necessity, while remaining Platonic and Aristotelian.

Abduh did not grasp that Galileo's and Newton's discoveries turned knowledge upside-down, having radical consequences regarding philosophy and also theology, which had to evolve in Europe. Cut off from its modern philosophical roots, the positivism advocated by Abduh worships the technically-oriented reason, blessed by divine revelation. This explains why he did not create any intellectual dynamic in history, sociology, political economy, and political science. The fragility of his thought is explained by the fact that it extolled a positivism without a *subject*, equipped for natural sciences and not for human and social sciences. From this point of view, Abduh is partially responsible for the failure of secular thinkers who aligned themselves with him and who were unable to resist the attacks by the ulema of al-Azhar. He was audacious in delivering nature to scientific reason, but he was not innovative in theology, instead of reinforcing the traditionalist tendency. Failing to break with the old Islamic culture, and with the Greek philosophy at the foundation of the culture, Abduh limited positivism to natural sciences, dispensing with the perspective of subjectivation that denaturalizes social practices. He is manifestly imbued with Galilean positivism, which he integrates into his theology at the price of a contradiction that he does not perceive. His scheme is based on the eternity/historicity duality, the two terms referring respectively to God and to man. They establish two separate worlds of which the link

is almost cut off from the point of view of reason and sensations, and the association between them is only within ourselves; the speculation about elements of present life do not lead us to know, with all certainty, the truths related to future life.²⁷

This vision is a compromise between theology and anthropology, in which it is in humanity's interest to obey divine rationality if he wants to be satisfied, putting theology in the service of human development and progress. This is what Hassan Hanafi remarked in an article with the expressive title "Theology or Anthropology".²⁸ For Hanafi, Abduh "anthropologized" theology, while the opposite was necessary, in other words transforming theocentric culture into an anthropocentric culture. Theology, he states, is a mirror image of the world and theologians, he suggests, walk all over their heads and, if they used their feet, they would be anthropologists. A false science without a subject, theology is, according to him, a reverse projection of humanity's concerns about the speculative world. "Man would like to be perfect, learned, powerful, merciful, forgiving, etc. Then he attributes what is most dear in himself to that which he loves".²⁹ This analysis of religion, borrowed from Feuerbach, leads Hassan Hanafi to think that it is sufficient to replace the virtual subject of theology with the real subject so that it becomes an anthropology open to the reality of the world. The reformism of al-Afghani and Abduh "did not know how to assume this role",³⁰ says Hanafi, because it renewed the same theoretical foundations relating to the opposition between substance and spirit.

However, Hanafi did not perceive the originality of Abduh's thought, as the latter wished to meet the conditions of an epistemic transition, which did not

take place because the task exceeded his power. The ignition of a philosophy that would set the frame for scientific knowledge is the work of several successive generations where the thinkers are intermediary links. Descartes, who Hanafi justifiably cites, was an essential link in a transition continued by Kant. In this perspective, Abduh's vision is more relevant than that of Hanafi, because in Abduh's work, there is certainly scholasticism, but at the same time he delimits it, which could have led thinkers aligned with him to separate theology from science. Without being modern totally, Abduh could have been a precursor of modernity in Muslim thought for having attempted an epistemic transition that aborted. On the contrary, Hanafi sought to transform classical theology into anthropology, hoping to secularize religious knowledge and its concepts, in other words reformulate the dogmatic theology with modern philosophical language and politics: nation, state, history, progress, etc. Hanafi would like to Islamize Hegel and Marx, but the result would not be that for which he hopes, as it would be a "Marxist Islamism" and not a Kantian anthropology. In this synthesis, Islam would lose its spirituality and Marxism its critical dimension. Making a 10th-century theologian stand on his own two feet would not give birth to a modern philosophy whose emergence in Europe was made possible by a change of paradigm. This is demonstrated clearly in the later evolution of Hanafi, who became a moderate Islamist in the 1980s.

Muhammad Abduh's contradictory legacy

For over a century, the Arab world was hesitating to choose between the projects of Rifa'a al-Tahtawi and of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, or between the modernism of Muhammad Ali of Egypt and the dogmatic conservatism of the Saudi dynasty. Abduh rejected both paths by proposing a synthesis of the two. He was hostile to the idea of a secularized Muslim society, of which Tahtawi dreamed, while being convinced that Wahhabism was a deadly threat to Islam's future. He made a fusion between the two that was at the foundation of the consensus between the modernist élites and the conservative current. One renounced the separation of politics and religion and the other accepted the concept of the nation, abandoning the idea of *ummah*. Out of this came a half-modernist, half-conservative ideology that reflected the contradiction at the heart of the Arab societies, simultaneously calling for and rejecting modernity. The idea that society can modernize its material infrastructure by using science and technology, while respecting the theology inherited from the past, was established following Abduh. Since he is the source of this contradiction, he is recognized as an authority as much by the conservative ulema as by numerous intellectuals and politicians behind Arab nationalism.³¹

His will for reform seduced many social groups that aspired to modernity while being attached to Islam, especially the nationalists who dreamed of a nation-state and institutions modeled on Europe. Abduh offered them the religious legitimization to defend a different perspective from that of the political and social tradition. The nationalists' demands pertained to elected assemblies like in the West,

the modernization of education with the introduction of secular curriculum, an economy where the bank plays an important role, etc. Abduh made a nationalist ideology, a novelty in Muslim political culture, licit, causing a breach in the rigid conservatism of the traditional authorities of Islam, who tended to reject any evolution, condemned as *bid'a* (blameworthy innovation). In this capacity, he is claimed by secular Egyptian nationalism, represented in the last third of the 19th century by Mustafa Kamil, continued by Saad Zaghloul. Secular intellectuals, like Lufti el-Sayed, Ahmad Amin and Taha Hussein, respected him as much as those of the culturalist current like Rachid Rida, who claims to be his disciple. This does not mean that Abduh is a consensual thinker; he is rather an author whose work presents different and contradictory facets. His attachment to orthodoxy attracts culturalists, and his positivism seduces the nationalists wishing to create a modern economy based on the European model. The duality of bipolarity of his thought would divide his disciples into two camps: nationalists with a secularized discourse, who would conclude the battle for independence; and others who, having ideologically taken part in this battle, would be popular from the 1970s–1980s.

Therefore, Abduh is behind the two great political ideologies that dominated the Arab world in the 20th century: nationalism and Islamism. The first managed to impose modernity's institutional categories like the nation-state, but the second played an active role by refusing the secularization that these institutional categories required. The modernist current was particularly fragile, drawing its legitimacy from its anti-colonial fight, and not from a project in which the rising social classes could recognize themselves. The ideological weakness of Arab nationalism would manifest itself after the Arab independences that, paradoxically, initiated its decline. Its rival, Islamism, better culturally established in society, regained momentum, provided with leaders trained by the educational system of the postcolonial period.

The intellectual fate of the Arab world played out in Egypt in the 1920s, when al-Azhar University adopted Rachid Rida, agreed upon as Abduh's disciple, and rejected Ali Abdel Raziq. Indeed, it is revealing that two thinkers aligning themselves with Abduh, whom each wrote a book on the same theme – power in Islam – with a year's interval, had such different intellectual destinies. The first, Rida, was approved as the official disciple of the master by the ulemas who welcomed his work.³² *The second*, Ali Abdel Raziq, was banished and his book violently refuted, and its sale prohibited.³³ If two authors so very different, belonging to two diametrically opposed intellectual camps, claim to be Abduh's disciples, each accusing the other of betraying the master, can we say who is the legitimate heir and who is the real Abduh over 100 years after his death? Is he the neo-Ash'arite theologian that facilitated the emergence of Islamism or the positivist idealist? In reality, he is both at once, and it is this contradiction that explains why his positivist project was not followed by the intellectual effects and social transformations he wanted.³⁴

The modernist lineage of al-Nahda was intellectually stifled in the 1920s, during which al-Azhar took things back into hand. The figure of Mustafa Abdel Raziq, Ali's brother, illustrates the reining in of the movement of secularization

of thought ignited by Abduh. Trained at al-Azhar and Paris, and aligning himself with Muhammad Abduh, Mustafa Abdel Raziq wrote a book on the history of Muslim philosophy (*Introduction to the History of Muslim Philosophy*) in which he explains that Islam is not hostile to philosophy and that the rationality contained in the Qur'an must not be confused with that of Greek philosophy. Starting from these two affirmations, he tries to demonstrate that Sufism and *Shari'a* are the spiritual and rational expressions of Islam, seeking to reconcile all currents of Muslim thought, far from any critical approach, which made him a consensual thinker, designated as Rector of al-Azhar. He taught philosophy that was more a history of Muslim thought than a philosophy *per se*. He trained students, some of whom became historians of philosophy (Ibrahim Madkour),³⁵ mystical essayists ('Uthman Amin),³⁶ existentialists (Abdur Rahman Badawi), and positivists (Zaki Naguib Mahmoud).³⁷

The historian Albert Hourani considers that Abduh caused a breach in Muslim culture; by wanting to shield religious heritage, he broke it apart. Hourani perceives this action, whose consequences are still felt in Muslim societies, as involuntary. He judges that Abduh

had the intention of building a wall against secularism; in fact, he opened a convenient path through which it would seize positions, one after another. It is not by accident that a group of his disciples ... subsequently developed his doctrines towards a complete secularism.³⁸

Albert Hourani, whose book dates to the 1950s, was optimistic. Arab nationalism to which Hourani refers is not a "complete secularism". It pushed away from the religious issue, hid it, and never confronted it, like Mustafa Kamel with Turkish nationalism.³⁹ Arab nationalists could not alienate religion, which they used as a political resource, relying on Abduh. The Ba'ath Party, whose leader was Michel Aflaq, an Arab Christian, never advocated for the separation of religion from politics. He stated that "Islam is the essence of Arabism".

After the 1967 military defeat by Israel, "the historical compromise" ceased, and the two ideological currents that marked Arab societies since the 19th century, separated to turn on one another. Islamism gained in popularity following the failure of nationalist regimes (Nasser, Boumédiène, Assad) to modernize culture and to develop the economy.⁴⁰ Arab nationalism believed it could achieve material modernization without challenging the medieval corpus of religious heritage. It was in raptures over technology and science, nevertheless cut off from the cultural vision of the world that gave rise to them in Europe. This explains the failure of the ambitious industrialization programs of Nasser, Boumédiène, and others, who dreamed of modernity without citizenship, a productive economy without market laws and a state without civil society.⁴¹ Arab nationalism claimed Abduh's heritage and underestimated the question of cultural heritage, which continued, after the Arab independences, to be the subject of apologetic discourse, attempting to resurrect the past without critically questioning it. Rachid Rida was considered to be the sole disciple of Abduh in an educational system that ignored the reflections

of Lutfi Sayyid, Ali Abdel Raziq, Shebli Shumeyal, and Taha Hussein. Their erasure from memory shows that the presence of medieval religious culture and positivism in the same thought system leads the latter to fail. What is more serious, is that public-school curricula give Rida an important place, presented as a reformer in line with the master, and do not mention Ali Abdel Raziq's reflection that could have paved the way for a history of state power in Muslim societies.

The apologetic discourse on past heritage, more or less politically justified under colonial domination, was renewed by the post-colonial state, which did not give itself the means to propel a new theology and to reconstruct a new philosophy. It was in this climate of intellectual sterility that political Islam flourished, continuing the ideological limits of al-Nahda, which considered Muslim culture as an ahistorical essence, forbidding it to imagine new forms of social and political organization under the threat of *bid'a*. Deprived of historical consciousness, Muslims were cloistered in the rejection and negation that prevented them from gauging the progress in Europe, which experienced a veritable intellectual revolution in the 17th and 18th centuries. The anti-colonial resistance blurred the élites' perception of Europe, reduced to a single dimension: colonialism. The nationalists, like Michel Aflaq, Nasser, Boumédiène, and others, who represented the most intellectually progressive political trend, believed that their countries could make up for lost time by investing in economic infrastructure, underestimating the cultural dimension of the modernity to which they aspired. The contradictions that resulted in the failure of Nasser's experience in Egypt, or that of Boumédiène in Algeria, are rooted in the contradictory thought of Abduh, who believed that classical theology was compatible with the social relationships of an industrial economy. In the synthesis between modernity and conservatism, time would always work in conservatism's favor. If modernity reaches a compromise with its opponent, it denies itself a future.

Although there were disciples among the revolutionary nationalists and the conservative culturalists, Abduh was not shielded from criticism by extremists from both camps. There are Islamists who rejected his work, considering it to be a Western plot against Islam. This is the case for Mohamed Said Ramadan al-Bouti, according to whom Abduh played into the hands of the Western powers, who sought to weaken Islam by presenting Muslim societies as backward societies.⁴² This criticism is superficial and incoherent, unlike that formulated by Sayyid Qutb, who expresses respect for Abduh while regretting that the latter went so far to defend reason to the detriment of the revelation. Sayyid Qutb challenges Abduh's rationalism which, he states, sought to expose the universality of the laws of nature willed by God. He then separated them from divine will to the point of forgetting "another principle of the Qur'anic vision that wants divine will and omnipotence to be limitless ...".⁴³ Qutb aligns himself with al-Ghazali's positions and reaffirms the refusal to interpret the Qur'anic revelation with human reason, rejecting the compromise developed by al-Ash'ari. As Abduh did not break with medieval culture and the traditional corpus, he exposed himself to being corrected by thinkers aligning themselves with him, with regard to greater respect for dogma, as formulated by the Sunnite orthodoxy. Qutb's position is neither

incoherent, nor a break, with Abduh's teaching, which specified that in the case of dispute between reason and revelation, the last word falls to the latter.

There were also intellectuals with a secularized discourse who criticized Abduh, accusing him of being a false modernist. For Anwar Abdel-Malek, Abduh is a conservative theologian who slowed the modernization process of Muslim societies. He reproaches him for submitting the concept of the nation to Islam, which prevented the secularization of society. He considers that

by modernizing the traditional religion, [he] gave it its effectiveness and made it into what he wanted it to be: the only link capable of indissolubly cementing the ummah, the only acceptable philosophy, because it is national and consistent with the sources.⁴⁴

For Abdel-Malek, religious archaism should have been left to wither itself away. He believes that without Abduh, the religious archaisms underneath the modernist veneer would not have been renewed. Anouar Abdel-Malek's criticism seems naïve, as an archaic interpretation of religion does not disappear as a result of its own archaism; it disappears with the will to end it, expressed by ideological currents within society. For Abdel-Malek, author of a book on social dialectic, modernizing a religion involves reinforcing and perpetuating it. This posture presupposes that religion is outside its social matrix and that it is possible to separate the two, by modernizing the matrix and letting religion ebb away under the pressure of its archaisms. Furthermore, this position skips a historical element: in Muslim societies, there have not been social forces powerful enough to bring an end to cultural backwardness. Religion is a theater of conflicts between interpretations that express cultural levels and profound aspirations. Religion is not outside society, and it is not possible to modernize one without modernizing the other. Muhammad Abduh did not renew the tradition or archaisms; society did it because, at its heart, it did not have sufficiently powerful forces to break with medieval culture. Abdel-Malek asks too much of Abduh, who alone could not engender the intellectual rupture that, in Europe, was led by several generations including Descartes, Spinoza, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, and Marx, supported by social groups born from the great transformations that Europe had experienced since the 16th century. Moreover, Europe did not rid of religion; it rather adapted it to the new cultural and social conditions. This is what Protestantism accomplished, also forcing Catholicism to let go of its control over the consciousness of believers.

Ideas and representations are not autonomous from the social milieu that encourages and propagates them, or discourages and fights against them. In Europe, positivism was supported by a civil society that ascertained itself by confronting the traditional authorities still attached to the Greek metaphysical worldview. The Enlightenment created an intellectual dynamic that the reigning monarchies, contested by the bourgeoisie, could not oppose. In the Arab world of the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, there were no social forces to carry positivism and to impose it as a worldview. The bans following disputes

over books by Qasim Amin on women, of Ali Abdel Raziq on the state power in Islam, of Taha Hussein on pre-Islamic poetry, and others, illustrated that Egyptian society was not culturally ready to shift from al-Ghazali tradition towards positivism suspected, justifiably, of putting an end to the theocentric vision of the world. Beside the economic and cultural weakness of social groups aspiring to modernity, the intellectual limits of Muhammad Abduh's project reside in his incapacity to criticize the old theology and to give birth to a modern one⁴⁵. He left an ambivalent legacy to a society open to positivism without human agency.

Notes

- 1 Muhammad Abduh, *Rissalat Al Tawhid. Exposé de la religion musulmane*, trans. Michel B. and Sheikh Mustafa Abdel Raziq, Paris: Geuthner, 1925. The fact that this work is written in a simple style, avoiding heavy medieval erudition, does not necessarily mean that it is a popular book destined for the mass of believers.
- 2 Idem., p. 4.
- 3 Idem., p. 7.
- 4 Idem., p. 34.
- 5 Idem., p. 34.
- 6 This distinction can be associated with the division made by Kant between the knowable, a scientific domain, and the not knowable, a metaphysical domain. However, this is an illusion because, in the structure of Abduh's approach, the not knowable has intellectual and political authority through the ulema, who legitimize or delegitimize profane knowledge. Abduh did not separate the two domains of knowledge; he classed them in a hierarchical order.
- 7 We must recall that al-Ghazali theologically legitimized fatalism (*mektoub*) by refuting philosophy, reproaching Ibn Sina for writing that God has general control, and not particular control over earthly life. Ibn Sina makes the individual responsible for their actions, while al-Ghazali teaches that everything is willed by God.
- 8 Muhammad Abduh, *Rissalat Al Tawhid. Exposé de la religion musulmane*, op. cit., p. 119.
- 9 Idem., p. 45.
Here also Abduh breaks with al-Ghazali's thought without citing his name. We must recall that the latter refused the absolute character of the principle of Aristotelian causality by affirming that the laws of nature are not above divine will.
- 10 Idem., p. 52.
- 11 Idem., p. 64.
- 12 Idem., p. 66.
- 13 Idem., p. 45.
- 14 Idem., p. 68.
- 15 Idem., p. 69.
- 16 Some authors consider that Abduh is not Salafist; he would be instead *islahist* (reformist). They base this on the fact that he always rejected the devaluing of the present, which consists of saying that "yesterday is better than today". This is not contradictory to the Salafist posture, which proclaims that the pious ancestors had a better perception of Islam. Abduh writes that, throughout history, the practice of Islam was subjected to Christian, Greek, Berber influences ... It is this affirmation that founded the Salafist ideology.
- 17 Muhammad Abduh, *Rissalat Al Tawhid*, op. cit., p. 18.
- 18 *Al a'mal al kamila lil Imam Muhammad Abduh (Complete Works of Muhammad Abduh)*, edited and presented by Muhammad Amara, Cairo: Dar Echourouk, 1993, t. III, p. 291.

- 19 Idem., pp. 293–294.
- 20 Fawzia Farida Charfi, *La science voilée*, Paris: Odile Jacob, 2013, p. 64. Let us recall that more than a century after Galileo, Wahhabism would appear in the Arabian Peninsula (1744), teaching, among other things, that any knowledge not from the Qur'an is the work of the Devil.
- 21 Abduh limits himself with the idea that Europe developed because it walked away from Christianity. But Europe never broke with its religions; it was secularized, which is different. Secularization is not the negation of religion but it is instead freedom of consciousness expressing a human right. By secularizing, Europe discovered human rights, which is the most important moral realization in humanity's history. It was only after Europe's secularization that Christianity reconciled with humanism.
- 22 I borrow the concept of *Chritiandom* to Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1974.
- 23 Muhammad Abduh, *Rissalat Al Tawhid*, op. cit., pp. 131–132.
- 24 Idem., p. 23.
- 25 M. Abduh, *Al a'mal al kamila lil Imam Muhammad Abduh*, op. cit., vol. 1, pp. 285–286.
- 26 Idem., vol. 3, p. 525.
- 27 Idem., p. 63.
- 28 Hassan Hanafi, "Théologie ou Anthropologie?", in *Renaissance du Monde Arabe*, eds. A. Abdel-Malek, A. Bellal, H. Hanafi, Bruxelles: Duculot, 1970, pp. 233–264.
- 29 Idem., p. 240.
- 30 Idem., p. 247.
- 31 M. Abduh was co-founder of the Egyptian National Democratic Party, where the future leaders of the Egyptian Wafd Party (which would wrest independence from England) were formed.
- 32 Rachid Rida, *Al-Khilafa aw al-imama al-'uzma*, Cairo, al Manar, 1923.
- 33 Ali Abdel Raziq, *Usul al Hukm fil Islam*, Cairo, 1924, trans. in French, *Les fondements du pouvoir en islam*, Paris: La Découverte, 1994.
He was condemned by the ulema, outraged that the power in Islam was the subject of critical historical and scientific investigation. He was excluded from the El-Mansoura High Court where he was a judge. In his book, Ali Abdel Raziq did not betray the thought of his master, for whom religious power did not exist. This idea is clearly formulated in "*al-islam wa l-naçraniyya*", in M. Abduh, *Al a'mal al kamila lil Imam Muhammad Abduh*, op. cit.
- 34 The simultaneous claim to Abduh by the Islamists and by the secular modernists was calculated on both sides. The Islamists referred to him to show their attachment to modernity and their opponents invoked his authority to continue to align themselves with Islam.
- 35 *La place d'Al Farabi dans la pensée musulmane*, Paris: Les presses modernes, 1934. *L'organon d'Aristote dans le monde arabe*, Vrin, Paris: 1938, *Fil falsafa al islamiyya: minhaj wa tatbikuhu*, Cairo: Samirku, 1968.
- 36 'Uthman Amin developed the idea of "an internal spiritual force" that is dynamic. It is grasped by the intellectual intuition that 'Uthman designates as consciousness. This establishes a balance between spiritual life and the empirical dimension of nature.
- 37 We cite, among others, *The Myth of Metaphysics* (1953), *The Positivist Logics* (1959), *Towards a Scientific Philosophy Vers une philosophie scientifique* (1959), and *The Rednewal of Arab Thought* (1971).
- 38 Albert Hourani, *La pensée arabe et l'Occident*, Paris: Naufal, 1991, p. 151.
- 39 The history of Turkey, ancient birthplace of the Ottoman Empire, is different from that of Arab countries, where nationalism has a weak ideological and cultural anchoring.
- 40 Once the leadership of the modernizing nationalism passed into the hands of the military, it had dug its own grave. Lacking culture, the Arab soldiers were fascinated with the power that they used to prevent the emergence of a civil society. Raised in a feu-

dal culture which they never overcame, these soldiers were convinced that society depended on the state. This is why rentier state mechanisms were established, including in countries that did not have hydrocarbon like Egypt or Syria.

- 41 For the ideological limitations of Arab nationalism, see Lahouari Addi, *Radical Arab Nationalism and Political Islam*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017.
- 42 Saïd Ramadan al-Buti, *Kubra al yaqiniyyat al kawniyya*, Damascus: Dar al fikr, 1969, p. 222, On al-Buti, see Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: the Sunni ulama from coup to revolution*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013
- 43 Sayyed Qutb, *Fi Zilal al qur'an*, Beirut: Dar ech-chourouk, 1982, v. 6, t. 6.
- 44 Anouar Abdel-Malek, *Idéologie et Renaissance nationale. L'Egypte moderne*, Paris: Anthropos, 1969, p. 403.
- 45 If we observe the European experience, the source of modernity was not Christian theology as assumed by Carl Schmitt and Karl Löwith (see the annex at the end of the book). The Church was harassed and forced to adapt under pressure from social groups that were uncomfortable with the official religious discourse. The Catholic Church firmly resisted, and it was not until Vatican II (1962–1965) that it accepted the world as it is. Vatican II was a necessary aggiornamento for the church in order not to cut itself off from Western European society that, culturally, did not recognize itself in a symbolic ritual that had dried up a long time before. In Islam, such a reform (accepting the world as it is) would drive any exalted imam to rally many believers behind him, convinced of defending God from impious persons.

The Crisis of Muslim Religious Discourse

The Necessary Shift from Plato to Kant

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