

THE ISLAMIC ORIGINS OF MODERNITY

Think of the child as European knowledge whose father is Greek knowledge, and whose Arab mother contributed also to the nurturing, yet only the father is appreciated.¹

Imam Bayezidof, 'Islam and Civilization' (1892)

Such is this great philosophical ensemble, which is commonly called Arab, because it is written in Arabic, but in reality it is Greco-Sassanid. It would be more accurate to say Greek; because the truly fertile element of all of this came from Greece . . . The superiority of Syria and Baghdad over the Latin West came solely from the fact that the Greek tradition touched them more closely.

Ernest Renan, 'Islam and Science' (1883)

Introduction: The Dissonant Present

Islamic history, as the arc of time and place that stretched from the revelation of the Quran to the Prophet Mohammad in western Arabia through the vast Abbasid empire, illustrated Islamic modernists' understanding of the past and Islam's place in it. Islamic history was the unfolding of Islamic essence in context, governed by the laws of progress, which explained change over time, and the oscillation between periods of harmony and periods of dissonance.

¹ Bayezidof, *Islam ve Medeniyet (Islam and Civilization)*, 12. Bayezidof's refutation of Renan together with his article 'Islam' in *İlimlerle İlişkisi* (Islam's Relationship to Science), were translated from Russian to Ottoman by Olga de Lebedeva and published in the Ottoman journal *Tercüman-ı Hakikat* in 1892 by managing editor Ahmet Cevdet. For a recent translation of Bayezidof's *Islam ve Medeniyet*, see Baiazitov, *A Tatar Akhund's Refutation of Ernest Renan's Lecture on Islam & Science* (1883). All translations to English are my own, unless otherwise noted.

Islamic modernists' quest to identify the laws of progress, and to chart Islamic history as its expression through time, was equally an attempt to understand the causal relationships between harmony and progress, dissonance and decline. They sought to account for ways in which the relationship between essence and context either promoted or hindered civilisational progress. Islamic history was a site of the exploration of the past and its intersection with the future. If Islamic modernists could understand the causes of civilisational progress in Islamic history, they could use this understanding to evaluate the very real problems of civilisational 'decline' that they observed in their own nineteenth-century context. Deeply embedded in modernists' description of Islamic history were prescriptions for alleviating the challenges of the present.

Above all, modernists grappled with the thorny question of comparative development. If Islam was indeed superior to Christianity, as they insisted it was, then what accounted for the contemporary torpor of Islam and Islamic societies' 'backwardness' vis-à-vis European powers? Were Islamic achievements in the past really due to Islam, or was progress achieved despite Islam, as European scholars of Islamic history averred? If, as Islamic modernists countered, Islam as essence was not the cause of the present backwardness of Muslim societies, then what accounted for it? As Afghani succinctly demanded: 'What is the cause of the . . . distress of the Muslims, and is there a cure . . . ?'²

Islamic modernists, like other religious modernists, were caught between a commitment to the enduring validity of Islam, and a need to account for the contemporary stagnation and inertia of Islamic institutions (scholarship, law, education) and practices (rituals, worship). They were determined to demonstrate the truth of Islam and to 'rescue' this truth from the misperceptions that surrounded it – to extract Islam as essence from history as context and by so doing, to regenerate Islam and reclaim the torch of progress. Islamic history became the medium that modernists employed to answer these questions, as well as to articulate possible solutions.

Historicism and the rewriting of Islamic history enabled modernists to carry this programme forward. Islamic history provided a compelling explanation of the causes of civilisational progress, an explanation that enabled modernists to insist that contemporary 'backwardness' was neither inevitable nor necessary. Islamic history illuminated the elaboration of 'Islam' as essence over time manifest in institutions, ideas and practices, and revealed the conditions in which these practices had been both productive and prohibitive of progress. Only by understanding the contours of a particular context could scholars evaluate the efficacy of Islamic institutions *in situ* as manifestations of Islamic essence.

As discussed in Chapter 2, historicism, as the premise of context, lay at the heart of Islamic modernists' construction of Islamic history and in the laws

² Afghani, 'Commentary on the Commentator', 127.

of progress that governed it. Historical context both defined and reflected societies at particular levels of civilisation. Context was both particular – the unfolding of Islamic essence in a series of specific historical contexts – and universal – the location of this ‘unfolding’ within human civilisational progress. Modernists defined Islam in relationship to context, as an essence; neither a product nor cause of context, but transcendent and ahistorical. The genius of the Prophet lay in his ability to appropriately articulate essence in context – to put Islamic ideals into practice via particular laws and prescribed behaviours. Yet these practices were themselves necessarily contextual, and thus contingent. They reflected their context and were constrained by it. As context changed, practices demanded recalibration and rearticulation. Harmony and dissonance, thus, were the products of these calibrations and articulations – the motors, or alternately, obstacles, of progress.

For Islamic modernists, Islamic history clearly demonstrated that it was not Islam, as essence, that was to blame for periods of harmony or dissonance, but rather whether or not the enactment of Islamic essence was appropriate for particular historical circumstances – in other words, whether essence operated in harmony with context. The issue then, was to evaluate how and why practices began to diverge from the ideals embedded in Islamic essence – when and why did dissonance replace harmony? What prevented practices from being rearticulated and reworked in new contexts? How could the disparity between the triumphs of the Abbasid period and the failures of the present be accounted for?

The diagnosis, according to modernists, was complex. At the concrete level, the ‘Golden Age’ of Abbasid harmony came to an end with the Mongol conquests. The demise of the Abbasids spelled political ruin accompanied by economic, cultural and intellectual decimation. Yet the fall of the Abbasid dynasty was, in and of itself, insufficient to account for the modernist perception of a ‘backward’ present.

It was not the passage of chronological time, *per se*, that led to dissonance following the Abbasid period up to and including the present, but rather the passage of historical time – of civilisational levels. Had the world remained at the Abbasid-era level of civilisation, the solution would be to restore Abbasid institutions. Yet the world had not remained civilisationally static. Modernity, understood as a civilisational level, had been ushered in by Europe. A new civilisational threshold had been breached, yet Islamic societies retained institutions that had been calibrated according to an earlier, more primitive, civilisational level. Practices, once harmonious, had become dissonant, not necessarily through their decline or dissolution, but from their inability to change apace with civilisation. The challenge, thus, was to become modern – to generate modern civilisation – to recalibrate practice in light of modern context.

The most pernicious obstacle to such a recalibration, Islamic modernists believed, was Islamic ‘tradition’. In their view, the predominance of dogmatism and its ossification into tradition foreclosed possibilities of intellectual

freedom, interpretation and reinterpretation. The power of orthodoxy and the methodology of precedent that it enshrined, inhibited the hermeneutic, interpretive and institutional flexibility that was necessary to accommodate changing contexts. As Jamal al-Din al-Afghani explained, progress, like science, was never ending: 'just as the germs of plants and animals are transformed from a state of imperfection to perfection', so too must philosophy and science continue to develop.³ Islamic essence had been prevented from adapting to different contexts, which in turn led to an ever growing disparity between Islamic essence and its institutional enactment. For Islamic modernists then, the shackles of tradition were the root cause of present-day Islamic intellectual stagnation.

This chapter focuses on Islamic modernists' deployment of history – as scientific method and empirical (historical) evidence – in order to achieve two related objectives. First, to demonstrate the imperative of religious reform. From their exploration of the historical causes of dissonance, Islamic modernists concluded that the problem centred around the emergence and ossification of tradition. Only Islamic reform could free Islam from the bondage of the past and allow it to be recontextualised into the present. The harmonisation of eternal ideals with the circumstances of the age involved the reformulation of Islam.

Second, to insist on the possibility of an indigenous, Islamic modernity. Islamic modernists rejected European claims to have generated modernity, instead offering an alternative genealogy of the modern. By constructing an argument for the Islamic origins of modernity, Islamic modernists rejected the imitative model of modernisation as westernisation, and imagined an authentic modernity, one not defined by Europe.

The Ossification Argument

Islamic modernists' identification of intellectual freedom, and conversely, intellectual stagnation, as the root cause of contemporary power disparity with European great powers was an interpretation they shared with Orientalist scholars, such as Armand-Pierre Caussin de Percival, William Muir, Edward Gibbon, Louis-Amélie Sédillot, Ernest Renan and Gustav Le Bon.⁴ Some European scholars suggested that the anti-intellectualism of

³ Afghani, 'The Benefits of Philosophy', 116.

⁴ Syed Ameer Ali relied on many European scholars, in addition to Islamic 'primary' sources including al-Tabari (d. 923), Ibn Ishaq (d. 767) and Ibn Sa'd (d. 845). See Armand-Pierre Caussin de Perceval, *Essai sur l'histoire des Arabes avant l'Islamisme, pendant l'époque de Mahomet*, 3 vols (1847–9); William Muir, *The Life of Mohammad From Original Sources*, 4 vols (1861); Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–89); Louis-Amélie Sédillot, *Histoire des Arabes* (1854). Bayezidof cited Gustave Le Bon extensively on the achievements of the Abbasid period: Le Bon, *La Civilisation des Arabes* (1884), cited in Bayezidof, 'Islam'in

Islamic societies was innate to Islam, others that it was simply a historical phase that could, in principle, be overcome. In either case, however, Europe was claimed as the origin and originator of modernity. Sole heir to the unique combination of Hellenic civilisation and Christianity, Europe, exceptionally, had generated modernity; non-European societies were doomed to imitation, and thus replication, of European modernity. At best they could produce derivative modernities. At worst, they would remain stagnant, forever stationary and increasingly left behind, as modernity moved forward. This, very succinctly, was an argument for European exceptionalism.

Despite their common identification of Islamic tradition as responsible for contemporary power disparity between Christian Europe and Islamic societies, Islamic modernists and Orientalists differed greatly in their explanations of how and why Islamic tradition developed. For Islamic modernists, Islamic history, and the Abbasid period in particular, served as empirical evidence that Islam, as essence, had historically served as a motor of progress. Intellectual stagnation was not inherent in Islam, they argued, but a casualty of the emergence and subsequent ossification of tradition. It followed therefore that the present-day power disparity was neither necessary nor inevitable. Islamic essence could, they insisted, be rescued from tradition.

Islamic modernists, despite important differences amongst themselves, largely concurred with European scholars who posited that the gradual decline of intellectual and cultural florescence of the Abbasid period was primarily due to the emergence and gradual ossification of Islamic tradition. Science – as method and content – ground to a halt with the triumph of tradition – also understood to consist of both method and content. According to both Syed Ameer Ali and Afghani, the zenith of the Abbasid Golden Age was enabled by the harmonisation of Islamic essence and the manifestation, or expression, of this essence in Islamic institutions. Over time, the harmony of essence and context gave way to dissonance as a consequence of the emergence and solidification of tradition. The rise of tradition was not identified as primarily responsible for the downfall of the Abbasids – that dishonour fell to the Mongols – but increasing dissonance was indirectly responsible for the subsequent inability of Islamic societies to reclaim harmony. Tradition was the anchor that prevented change and adaptation to new contexts – it fixed institutions in an increasingly anachronistic context, preventing progress, and leading inevitably to the present state of ‘backwardness’.

İlimlerle İlişkisi, 51–5. Arguments concerning the ossification of Islamic tradition were first articulated by nineteenth-century European scholars of Islamic history and later reinforced by scholars of Islamic law, e.g. Ignaz Goldziher (b. 1850) in *Muhammedanische Studien*, Joseph Schacht (b. 1902) in *Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (1950), and, a generation later, Joseph van Ess (b. 1934), *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*. This narrative remains hegemonic to this day, although work on the impact of colonialism on Islamic law is beginning to destabilise it. See Hallaq, *Shari'a: Theory, Practice, Transformations*.

Historical explanations of the emergence of Islamic tradition varied amongst Islamic modernists. Two of the most salient accounts were put forward by Ali and Afghani. Ali embedded the emergence of Islamic institutions within his larger paradigm of the perpetual battle between backwardness and civilisation. For him, this dichotomy explained the variant understandings and applications of Islam. Unsurprisingly, he dated the beginning of the institutionalisation of Islam to the Umayyad period. In a rendition that resonated with his Shiite background, he described Caliph (and first Shiite Imam) Ali b. Abu Taleb as the champion of the ideals of Islam – a beacon of rationalism and enlightenment in the darkness of irrationality and ignorance. Rationalism, he insisted, was the hallmark of the true Islam of the Prophet, juxtaposing its antithesis as ‘false’ – a deviation. Although Islamic institutions of law and theology began to form in the Umayyad period, they were only fully developed in the Abbasid era.

Syed Ameer Ali: The Hijacking of ‘True’ Islam

According to Syed Ameer Ali, ‘conformity’ and ‘casuistry’ were neither necessary nor inevitable results of the development of Islamic institutions, but were products of particular historical forces. ‘The insistence of a church upon conformity,’ he stated, ‘varies in proportion to the forces with which it has to contend.’⁵ Accordingly, what he called ‘the superstructure of the great Sunni School’ was a product of the ‘formation of a hierarch whose preponderating [sic] influence under weaker [Abbasid] monarchs stifled growth and barred all avenues of progress’.⁶ These institutions only solidified in the Abbasid period.

Ali recounted that Ma’mun’s (Abbasid) caliphate, which he deemed ‘the most glorious epoch in Saracenic history’, was distinguished by ‘liberty of conscience and freedom of worship’. This was the high point of civilisation, the apogee of Islamic intellectual creativity and production. Ma’mun, described as ‘the grandest and most liberal-minded of the Saracenic sovereigns, and one of the most farseeing monarchs of any age’, supported the Mu’tazilites, whom Ali defined as ‘Rationalists, Utilitarians and Evolutionists’.⁷ Ma’mun and his two successors championed this methodology and attempted

⁵ Ali, *Saracens*, 252.

⁶ Ali, *Saracens*, 252.

⁷ According to Ali, Mu’tazilites were ‘decided Rationalists, on account of the great predominance they allow to Reason, in every question regarding the progress of man; they are Utilitarians, in adopting the doctrine of general usefulness and the promotion of happiness of the many, as the criterion of right and wrong; they are Evolutionists, in regarding every law that regulates the mutual relations of human beings’. See Ali, *Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, 305–6.

to infuse this rationalistic spirit which animated them and a portion of their subjects, into the whole Moslem world. Unfortunately for Islam it was found . . . that the Jurists of Bagdad were more powerful than the Caliphs; and the triumph of patristicism [sic] under [Caliph] Mutawwakil, was one of the chief causes of the downfall of the Caliphate.⁸

With the demise of rationalism, Islam now approximated 'the spectacle of orthodox Christendom'.⁹

Ma'mun's caliphate witnessed the highpoint of rationalism, but it also marked the beginning of the degeneration of Islamic institutions into a self-perpetuating state of dogmatism and intransigence. The 'genius' of Caliph Ma'mun was in foreseeing the development of dogma and rigidity of 'the Church'. Ma'mun understood that 'adherence to those doctrines was worse than treason, for their tendency was to stifle all political and social development, and end in the destruction of the commonwealth. He foresaw the effect of swathing the mind of man with inflexible dogmas.'¹⁰ Dogmatism was both unable and unwilling to accommodate changing contexts.

The problem, as Ali understood it, was that the development of Islamic institutions fell victim to the triumph of formalism and traditionalism over rationalism. 'It has been justly remarked', he asserted,

that as long as Islam retained its pristine character it proved itself the warm protector and promotor of knowledge and civilization – the zealous ally of Intellectual freedom. The moment extraneous elements attached themselves to it, it lagged behind in the race of progress. Let us hope that the time is approaching when Islam, freed from the blind idolatry of letters and apotheosis of dead men, will regain her true character and, joining hands with the Christianity of the devoted Prophet of Nazareth, will march on together in the work of Civilization.¹¹

As a consequence of the defeat of rationalism, Islam became trapped in the institutions that emerged to articulate it – Islam as essence thus was unable to develop or evolve to suit new contexts. It became a prisoner of traditionalism, restrained within particular institutions which emerged in a particular context.

⁸ Ali, *Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, 306–7. Ali, in noting the triumph of the imperatives of law over theology, prefigures Islamicist Joseph van Ess' theory that 'the kalam phenomenon reached its zenith very early; its most creative period did not occur after it had come of age, but well before, at a time when signs of tedium and paralysis had not yet appeared'. See van Ess, *The Flowering of Muslim Theology*, 4.

⁹ Ali, *Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, 647.

¹⁰ Ali, *Saracens*, 275.

¹¹ Ali, *Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, 345–6.

Ali, by providing the historical context of the emergence of Islamic tradition, sought to explain current intellectual 'stagnation' which he and many other modernists agreed was the root cause of contemporary power disparity between Islamic societies and Europe. The solution to dogmatism in Ali's view – 'secularising the state and emancipating the human intellect from the shackles which doctors and jurists [had] placed upon it'¹² – was embedded in his account of Islamic history. These 'shackles', evocative of Renan's 'iron band', were products of historical development – neither necessary nor intrinsic to Islam, and certainly not representative of the Islam of the Prophet Mohammad – the 'true' Islam.

Ali clearly distinguished between the development of dogmatism and 'true' Islam, insisting that the latter was inherently liberal and rational. He situated the 'established Church', Islamic canon, orthodoxy and the institutions that sustained them, in contradistinction to 'human reason' and 'in direct conflict with the teachings of the Koran [sic] and of the Prophet'.¹³ Some Islamic schools of thought maintained the 'truth' while others diverged from it. The history of Islamic schools of thought was a history of the battle between forces of rationalism and irrationalism, progress and backwardness. Sometimes the rationalists were dominant. Other times they lost ground to the forces of irrationalism, dogmatism and orthodoxy.

Ultimately, due to particular historical circumstances, the forces of dogmatism triumphed, and 'rationalists were expelled from public offices, and lectures on science and philosophy were interdicted'.¹⁴ As a consequence, the intellectual brilliance that rational thought generated, which had produced religious tolerance, scientific and cultural achievements and civilisational progress, dimmed. 'Conformity was insisted upon as essential to orthodoxy', Ali explained, which 'imparted a rigidity to the dogmas of the Church' that 'hampered efforts at reform in later times'.¹⁵ For him, the inherent rationalism of Islamic essence was overwhelmed by both the legal imperatives of governance, and the incapacity of the general population to grasp rationalism – as either content or method. Law was essential, but dangerously prone to ossification. Ali was caught between insisting on the centrality of law as the genius of the Prophet, and on law's historic role in inhibiting change.

Al-Afghani: Dogma as an Intellectual 'Cage'

Jamal al-Din Al-Afghani offered a somewhat different account of the emergence, and subsequent ossification, of Islamic tradition. For him, religion as faith was fundamentally inimical to science as reason. Taking a phenomenological position, Afghani posited that

¹² Ali, *Saracens*, 275.

¹³ Ali, *Saracens*, 276.

¹⁴ Ali, *Saracens*, 289.

¹⁵ Ali, *Saracens*, 306.

religions, by whatever names they are called, all resemble each other. No agreement and no reconciliation are possible between these religions and philosophy. Religion imposes on man its faith and its belief, whereas philosophy frees him of it totally or in part.¹⁶

Yet historically, Afghani believed, this 'imposition of faith' initially had produced salutary effects.

In his refutation of Renan's 'Islam and Science' article, Afghani described the emergence of orthodoxy as a natural outgrowth of religion, one that was initially productive of progress. He explained that 'obedience that was imposed in the name of the supreme Being to whom the educators attributed all events, without permitting men to discuss its utility or its disadvantages' enabled civilisational evolution out of an era of primitivism. 'Whether it be Muslim, Christian or pagan', he wrote, 'all nations have emerged from barbarism and marched toward a more advanced civilization.'¹⁷ Orthodoxy, as the limitation of possible interpretations, was buttressed by the emergence of canon, both of which were perpetuated and replicated in educational institutions. Afghani concurred with Syed Ameer Ali that the gradual institutionalisation of Islam offered a degree of normativism in theology and law, which served social and legal needs, but that invariably also led to the solidification and ossification of Islamic tradition.

Over time, according to Afghani, the costs of orthodoxy began to outweigh the benefits. Institutions designed to sustain and perpetuate orthodoxy were unable to accommodate change. As contexts changed over time, the dissonance between institutions and context grew. While initially progressive, the nature of orthodoxy inhibited change. 'Obedience' to dogma, as tradition, became an intellectual cage, restraining 'free investigation' and 'philosophy' that lay at the heart of 'science' – science both as fields of knowledge, but more importantly, as scientific method. The gradual ossification of Islamic tradition narrowed the possibility of intellectual criticism and traditionalism, and the maintenance of precedent became hegemonic. Islam transitioned from an avenue of promoting science and thus civilisation, to a roadblock that hindered it. Tradition prevented adaptation to new contexts and thus, inhibited evolution. Religion, described by Afghani as a 'a slave to dogma', relinquished its ability to serve as a motor of progress.

Islamic modernists were concerned to refute European assumptions concerning the immutability of Islamic tradition. They firmly maintained that the rejection of tradition (as content, and traditionalism as method), with the concomitant firm embrace of modernity (as content and method), were both possible and necessary.

¹⁶ Afghani, 'Answer . . . to Renan', 187.

¹⁷ Afghani, 'Answer . . . to Renan', 183.

Comparison as a Method of Refutation

Comparison with Europe was unavoidable, and not surprisingly, ubiquitous, in Islamic modernists' histories. Islamic modernists drew on European scholarship on Islamic history, as well as on Christian and European history more generally. Moreover, they deployed comparison between Christianity and Islam extensively and systematically in their works on the Prophet Mohammad and Islamic history. There were three, intersecting reasons for their extensive use of comparison. First, the adoption of a comparative framework was a natural outcome of the universal, phenomenological and inherently comparative epistemology of historicism. Islamic modernists, in seeking to locate Islam in the universal taxonomy of essentialised religions, were necessarily and explicitly comparative. Likewise, any exploration of the essence of Islam in history and its capacity to generate progress and civilisation involved comparison with the capacity of Christianity in history to do the same.

Second, as a result of the increasing power disparity between European great powers and other countries in the world, Europe was widely perceived as having achieved 'modernity' – of having 'become modern'. European great powers provided empirical proof of the capacity of modernity to generate power, and thus served as possible models of modernity. Third, European historical and religious studies scholarship, operating within a dominant Protestant paradigm, claimed that European modernity was the exclusive consequence of European (implicitly Christian) agency.

These three imperatives intersected with and reinforced each other. Islamic modernists, in order to assert Islam's capacity to serve as a motor of civilisation and progress cum modernity, were bound to refute European exceptionalism. Islamic modernists' deliberate use of comparison as refutation enabled them to destabilise European claims to exclusive ownership of modernity, and to assert an alternative Islamic genealogy of modernity.

The depth and breadth of engagement with European scholarship varied amongst Islamic modernists. All evinced familiarity with European claims to superiority, whether expressed in European scholarship and/or by way of political, economic and cultural contacts. Islamic modernists themselves were deeply engaged with European Christian (largely Protestant) scholarship and frequently compared Christianity with Islam as well as Christian with Islamic history. Their profound awareness of the political power disparity, of European claims to modernity and of the consequent urgency of religious reform, animated their scholarship.

Namık Kemal frequently cited European scholarship in his *The Complete History of Islam (Büyük İslam Tarihi)* in order to substantiate his claims to Abbasid civilisational achievements. Imam Bayezidof, in his two essays on Islam, alluded to Ernest Renan's works, suggesting a familiarity which extended beyond Renan's 'Islam and Science' article, which Bayezidof explicitly refuted. Jamal al-Din Al-Afghani too, as a result of his extensive peregrinations, evidenced a familiarity with European and Muslim scholar-

ship ranging from the central Middle East, to Egypt, Central Asia, Russia and the Indian subcontinent. None of the Islamic modernists dealt with in this book, however, were more familiar with European scholarship than Syed Ameer Ali.

Ali was widely read and broadly educated. In his works he drew heavily on 'canonical' Islamic sources on Islamic history such as Ibn Ishaq, al-Tabari, Ibn Athir, ibn Sa'd and Shahrestani, as well as the Hadith (to a limited extent) and the Quran (to a large extent). Ali also demonstrated an extensive and wide-ranging familiarity with European 'secondary' scholarship on Islam and Islamic history, as well as Christian history. His use of comparison as refutation was systematic and extensive. Comparing and contrasting the Prophet with Jesus, Islam with Christianity, and Islamic history with Christian history was an integral component of his inquiry into universal religious evolution as civilisational progress, and his assertion of the possibility of an Islamic modern.

Christianity and Christian history were not a simple foil to Islam and Islamic history, but at a more profound methodological level, symptomatic of Ali and other Islamic modernists' firm embrace of historicism. The laws of progress were universal. Truth was universal. Comparison is implicit in the modern intellectual epistemology of historicism. The premise of historicism, that history is made up of sequences of discreet, self-reflexive contexts, together constituting the universal civilisational progress of mankind, itself begs comparison. The epistemology of historicism, therefore, was inseparable from historicism as method – of the historicisation of context, and its location in universal history. Civilisational progress was always measured comparatively and relatively. This also meant that the nature and concept of comparison was bound up with notions of history, time and civilisational progress. Ali and other Islamic modernists focused their comparisons on two distinct historical periods: antiquity and the Abbasid period – the 'Golden Age' of Islamic civilisation.

Antiquity

Antiquity, while not delineated by specific chronological brackets, was conceived of as a civilisational level. All societies belonging to that civilisational level were characterised by a similar level of consciousness of the Divine expressed as paganism and similar 'barbarous' practices such as polygamy, slavery, religious intolerance and physical brutality. In Syed Ameer Ali's conception, despite a relatively wide degree of chronological and cultural diversity, early attempts at wrenching antiquity from paganism to monotheism all belong to this same civilisational level. The classical societies of Greece and Rome formed a general canvas on which he painted in the various religious reformers – from Zoroaster to Mohammad – who attempted to move their societies, and mankind more generally, into monotheism. Monotheism constituted a civilisational leap forward.

One after the other, Zoroaster and the Abrahamic prophets attempted to cross a civilisational threshold; to usher their societies from pagan primitivism into the more progressive civilisational age of monotheism. As discussed in preceding chapters, Ali, in *The Life and Teachings of Mohammad* and in *A Short History of the Saracens*, detailed ways in which the laws of progress did and did not permit this divinely ordained civilisational jump. In each case, Divine intervention in the form of revelation to a prophet provided the causal agency necessary for civilisational progress. Yet time and time again, prophets failed to lead their societies out of the primitivism of paganism, or succeeded, but only temporarily – the inertia and power of ignorance, never fully conquered, gradually dragged their societies back into the morass of primitivism.

Antiquity thus was the civilisational origin, and thus location, of the essence of the Abrahamic monotheisms. Comparison of these origins enabled Ali to contrast the essence of each of the three religions with each other. As discussed in Chapter 1, he located Judaism as the least evolved of the three Abrahamic religions, and devoted the majority of his energy to a comparison of the essences of Islam and Christianity in order to assert Islam's superiority.

Ali's extensive comparison between Mohammad and Jesus, discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, was a comparison of essences – of the essence of Islam, most perfectly expressed by Mohammad, compared to the essence of Christianity, most perfectly expressed by Jesus. In his rendition, the essences themselves were largely equivalent. Unlike Zoroaster and Moses who preceded them, Jesus and Mohammad were both the recipients of a similarly evolved Divinely inspired truth. They shared a comparable essence.

It was not the essence of Christianity, therefore, that was inferior to the essence of Islam, Ali argued, but rather its expression in history, or lack thereof. Jesus' failure to implement the truth bestowed by God meant that the essence of Christianity was never actualised, never manifest in history – it never translated itself into 'a system of positive morality embodied in effectual laws'.¹⁸ Instead, Christianity, following the historical laws of progress, was fatally poisoned by the latent primitivism that Jesus failed to vanquish. Directly quoting European historian Henry Hart Milman, Ali recounted that after Jesus, Christianity 'sank downward into the common ignorance, and yielded to that worst barbarism – a worn out civilization'.¹⁹ The Christianity of history, therefore, was not an expression of its true essence, which was irretrievably lost upon Jesus' death.

Ali seized on Ernest Renan's admission of Christianity's deviation from the truth of Jesus, to argue that the essence of Christianity could never be reclaimed. Citing European scholars in support of his argument, he argued that the essence of Christianity was not retrievable from the Gospels. 'The traditions which record the sayings of Jesus have gone through such a

¹⁸ Ali, *Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, 3.

¹⁹ Ali, *Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, 15, quoting Henry Hart Milman, *History of Latin Christianity* (1855), vol. I, 4.

process of elimination and selection', he explained, 'that it is hardly possible at the present moment to say which are really his own worlds and which are not.'²⁰ Citing Milman he continued, arguing that

Milman himself admits that the traditions regarding the acts and sayings of Jesus, which were floating about among Christian communities, were not cast in to their present shape till almost the close of the first half of the second century. 'Necessarily, therefore, the ancient collectors and modelers of the Christian Gospels . . . must have exercised a discretionary latitude in the reception of the traditions' . . . Hence a great many additions were made, though unconsciously, to the sayings and doings of Jesus.²¹

Although both Jesus and Mohammad had been enlightened via Divine revelation, only Mohammad managed to translate that essence into practice. Indeed, Ali went some way towards claiming that Islam was closer to the essence of Jesus, than Christianity ever had been. 'The glory of Islam', he insisted, 'consists in having embodied the beautiful sentiment of Jesus into definite laws.'²² It was only with the Prophet Mohammad, he asserted, that monotheism as a more advanced level of civilization, prevailed. The Prophet was the torch-bearer of universal civilisational progress.

The practices enjoined by Mohammad, expressed as prescriptions of piety and law, carried forward the ideals of Islam and were able to shape both the level of religious consciousness and the associated religious and cultural practices, such that Islamic society achieved a civilisational jump from pagan 'barbarity' to the more advanced level of monotheism. Islamic laws and practices served as the motors of civilisational progress and managed to protect civilisational advances, although not entirely, from the perpetual challenge of 'forces of primitivism' and 'ignorance'. Laws were barricades against the perpetual tide of primitivism.

According to Ali, the history of Christianity was not the expression or manifestation of Christian essence in history; the Christianity of history had no essence to harness as the motor of progress. Rather, Christianity was the ongoing expression of unvanquished primitivism. As revealed in the comparison between the Christian 'Dark Ages' and the Islamic Abbasid 'Golden Age', Christianity actively hindered progress whereas Islam carried forward the torch of progress and civilisation ignited by Mohammad.

The Abbasid 'Golden Age' Versus the European 'Dark Ages'

Just as comparison between the origins of Christianity and Islam in antiquity revealed their respective essences, comparison between the Abbasid

²⁰ Ali, *Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, 272.

²¹ Ali, *Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, note II to Chapter XVI, 286.

²² Ali, *Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, 183.

Golden Age and the European Dark Ages revealed their respective histories – the impact of essence in historical context. Islamic modernists consistently emphasised the superiority of the Islamic Abbasids compared to their European contemporaries who were mired in the ‘Dark Ages’. The Abbasids ushered in a Golden Age, the zenith of Islamic civilisation, and they did so as a result of Islam, not despite it.

European scholars of Islamic history largely concurred that the Abbasid period experienced a civilisational ‘Golden Age’, and were extensively cited by Islamic modernists as further attestation of the superiority of the Abbasids to their European contemporaries. European scholars, however, suggested that Abbasid cultural and scientific fluorescence had occurred before the ‘ossification’ of Islamic tradition, and thus could never be repeated. They also predominantly maintained that despite the achievements in culture and science under the Abbasids, the Abbasids had primarily been caretakers of the Greek scientific tradition, not innovators or contributors in their own right. European scholars recognised the Abbasids as transmitters of classical Greek texts and knowledge, but suggested that it was only in the hands of Europeans that this knowledge developed into ‘modern’ sciences. Europeans acknowledged the Abbasids for their safekeeping of classical heritage, but refused to recognise their contributions to knowledge itself. In so doing, Europeans jealously guarded ‘classical heritage’ as their own patrimony, rather than acknowledging a shared classical heritage and their debt to Abbasid scholars. Christian exceptionalism, as the innate capacity to generate modernity, was articulated despite the Abbasid scholarly and scientific contributions, a historical interpretation that Islamic modernists adamantly contested.

Islamic modernists deployed historical arguments to refute assertions of Christian exceptionalism. For Namık Kemal, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Imam Bayezidof and Syed Ameer Ali, to mention only a few, Abbasid history demonstrated that Islam was intrinsic to civilisational progress not incidental to it. One of the most vehement articulations of European exceptionalism was expressed by Renan, an important religious studies scholar and a committed Catholic modernist. Presumptions of Christian exceptionalism undergirded Renan’s *Life of Jesus*, but were most infamously articulated in an 1883 lecture he delivered at the Sorbonne entitled ‘Islam and Science’ which was published in the Parisian *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires* shortly thereafter.²³ Islamic modernists were sympathetic to Renan’s historicist project of the revivification of religion and his commitment to religion’s centrality in the modern. Ali, Afghani, Bayezidof and Namık Kemal all demonstrated familiarity with Renan’s scholarship. Despite, or possibly because of their advocacy of comparable religious modernist projects, they took umbrage with Renan’s arguments for Christian exceptionalism and penned refutations to Renan’s ‘Islam and Science’ article.

²³ Renan, ‘Islam and Science’, *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires*, 30 March 1883.

Renan was not alone in insisting that European progress was a product of historical development (as changing context) together with the causal agent of 'the essence of Europe' – itself a unique combination of Christianity tempered with Indo-European 'Aryan' creativity. Renan, following accepted philological theories, attributed this creativity to a semi-racialised notion of language that had emerged in the scholarly field of philology. Languages were indicative of the essence, the 'genius of each people'.²⁴ Indo-European languages, philologists insisted, were, by dint of their grammatical structures, inherently conducive to creativity and rational thought which in turn enabled intellectual, religious and scientific progress. Non-Indo-European languages (and here Semitic languages played the principal role of the dichotomous 'Other') were less flexible and doomed their users to dogmatism, inflexibility and passivity.²⁵

In 'Islam and Science', Renan argued that Islam was a metaphoric 'iron band' crowning the heads of Muslims that prevented rational and scientific thought and which therefore accounted for Islamic societies' backwardness vis-à-vis Europe.²⁶ He stated:

Liberty has never been more profoundly damaged than by a form of social organization where religion dominates civil life absolutely . . . Islam is the indistinguishable union of the spiritual and the temporal, it is the reign of dogma, it is the heaviest chain that humanity has ever had to bear.²⁷

Islam, as inherently inimical to freedom of thought and intellectual inquiry, prevented scientific thought, which was the core ingredient of progress. 'Anyone a little knowledgeable about the affairs of our time', Renan proclaimed confidently,

sees clearly the present inferiority of the Muslim countries, the intellectual nullity of those races that have received their culture and education solely from that religion. All those who have traveled in the Orient or in Africa have been struck by the fatally enslaved spirit of the true believer, by that sort of iron band that encircles his head, rendering it completely closed to science, incapable either of learning anything or of working with any new idea.²⁸

²⁴ Étienne Bonnot de Condillac (1715–80), French philosopher and epistemologist, connected language to the essential character of a 'people'. See Olender, *Languages of Paradise*, 5–6.

²⁵ On the role of philology and other 'classificatory sciences' on the construction of the European self and related civilisational taxonomy of difference, see Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*.

²⁶ See Ringer and Shissler, 'The Al-Afghani-Renan Debate, Reconsidered', xxviii–xliv. See also Norman, 'Disputing the "Iron Circle"', 693–714.

²⁷ Renan, 'Islam and Science'.

²⁸ Renan, 'Islam and Science'.

Succinctly summarised, Renan's argument hinged on two assertions. First, that Islam was innately and inherently incompatible with science as intellectual creativity; and second, that Abbasid cultural, political and scientific achievements had occurred despite, not because of Islam. He concluded, on the basis of these twin assertions, that Islam had been and would always remain incapable of serving as a motor of progress and civilisation. Contemporary Islamic societies were not capable of modernity.

Islamic modernists concurred with Renan concerning the centrality of science to modernity. Science, in their understanding, consisted of scientific method, which was productive of sciences as content (as in the specific fields of scientific endeavour and inquiry). Sciences included not only what today we might term the 'hard' sciences, but also history, which Islamic modernists believed applied similar methods of rationalism and empiricism. History – the determination of laws of progress in context over time – was scientific in method and content. For them, historicism was a scientific method, and the findings of history were scientifically valid. They concurred with Renan that creativity, vibrancy, innovation and strength all derived from the building blocks of science. For Islamic modernists, science as method and content was the *sine qua non* of modernity.

Science, according to Islamic modernists, was one crucial element in a cluster of characteristics or values that were central to modernity and that characterised modern civilisation. Islamic modernists consistently identified these ideals as: women's rights, religious tolerance, the equality of subjects regardless of race, the discouragement of polygamy and slavery, as well as political unity, representative government, and so forth. Islamic modernists measured civilisation – past and present – according to these 'modern' yardsticks, and in so doing, claimed these yardsticks as universal, eternally applicable, and transcendent of time and place – ahistorical.

At the same time, these 'modern' and universal ideals were the very same that many Islamic modernists claimed comprised the essence of Islam. They asserted that modern ideals – the banner of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* – were quintessentially Islamic (the same Islamic ideals that animated Ali's *Rashidun* 'Republic'), as well as quintessentially modern and universal. The ideals of the French Revolution of 1789, claimed as defining European modernity, were also claimed as synonymous with Islamic essence.

Islamic modernists marshalled historical evidence to demonstrate that modern values, consistent with Islamic essence, had led to the civilisational achievements of the Abbasid period – the Abbasid Golden Age. Islam, in their analysis, did not inhibit science, but was productive of it. For Islamic modernists, the undisputed scientific and cultural florescence of the Abbasid Golden Age unequivocally demonstrated that Islam was intrinsically 'modern' and could again be harnessed to achieve modernity.

The question of whether Islam promoted or hindered science was at the heart Islamic modernist and European scholars' contested claims to the modern. For Islamic modernists, the ideals of Islam were directly responsible

for civilisational progress. It was not simply that Islam was 'compatible' with science, cultural progress and intellectual achievements (not to mention their derivatives of political power, just rule and proper governance), but that Islam enabled these achievements by animating Islamic institutions. Islam was the motor of civilisation and progress.

After all, Islamic modernists argued, it was the revelation of the Quran to the Prophet Mohammad that had enabled Muslims to reject the primitivism of the *jahiliyya*, and to effect the civilisational jump from paganism to monotheism. Namik Kemal described how Islam, which he defined as a set of religious precepts based on the Quran, wrenched Arabian society out of the shackles of paganism. Like Ali, Namık Kemal adopted an evolutionary conception of history as denoting civilisational progress over time. He explained that Islam 'showed people the correct path' and that as a result, society abandoned uncivilised practices of 'idol worship, theft, adultery, slander and the burial of infant daughters' and instead 'committed to telling the truth and being trustworthy'.²⁹

Bayezidof, in a pair of articles entitled 'Science and Arts in Islam' and 'Islam and Civilization', similarly contended that the adoption of Islam as a set of moral and legal precepts had generated civilisational progress. He explained that

in the *jahiliyya* period there was continuous warfare and conflict. The Prophet changed everything; brought peace and an end of conflict; cleansed the entire Arabian desert of idols and their sites of worship; inaugurated a new era; the Prophet's religious message brought everyone together as fellow countrymen.³⁰

In similar ways, Islam was the motor of progress in the Abbasid period. The Abbasid empire's capacity to draw on, engage with, and ultimately produce new cultural, artistic and intellectual achievements was a direct consequence of the implementation of Quranic precepts. The 'Abbasid caliphs', Bayezidof explained, 'made every effort to further civilization, and [established] religious centers of learning in several cities, where youth would be trained in sciences'.³¹ Caliphs 'worked to spread and expand Islamic governance and civilization in Iraq, Syria and Iran . . . [resulting in] the establishment of universities, madrasas, mosques, *vaqfs* (foundations), and hospitals'.³² 'If we follow the last ten centuries of Arab literary and intellectual progress', Bayezidof noted, 'we will be obliged to recognize how [high] their degree of humanitarianism and excellence [was]. On the issue of the furthering of politics, piety, and thought, the Arabs, following in the way shown by the Prophet, took many scientific and artistic questions in hand and spread

²⁹ Kemal, *Büyük İslam Tarihi*, 31.

³⁰ Bayezidof, 'İslam' in *İlimlerle İlişkisi*, 46.

³¹ Bayezidof, 'İslam' in *İlimlerle İlişkisi*, 47.

³² Bayezidof, 'İslam' in *İlimlerle İlişkisi*, 49.

Arab-Islamic literature throughout the Islamic world.³³ For Bayezidof, Islam was instrumental, not incidental, in the process of generating civilisation:

[Islam is] one of the most rational theological systems, or religious forms, available to the human mind at various stages of its development. Islam, more than any other system, reconciles within itself the spiritual needs and physical nature of man.³⁴

Bayezidof and Namık Kemal both cited numerous passages of the Quran and Prophetic hadiths as evidence that the essence of Islam (and the Prophet's understanding of this essence), valued intellectual inquiry and the pursuit of science.³⁵ Bayezidof argued that 'from the examples of the history of Arab civilization, Quranic verses, hadiths and passages taken from Arabic literature, it is clear that Islam was not an obstacle against the teaching of civilization and intellectual advancement. Quite to the contrary, it encouraged and widened them.'³⁶ Islamic modernists located the 'essence' of Islam in the Quran, an essence which was understood and manifested by the Prophet in his speech and actions. The cause of Abbasid greatness was the essence of Islam, properly manifest in Islamic institutions.

Renan, in 'Islam and Science', insisted that the very real intellectual accomplishments of the Abbasid period had not, in fact, derived from Islamic precepts. The great scholars of the period could not in good conscience, he insisted, be considered Muslim. According to Renan, Caliph Ma'mun and the luminaries of the Abbasid period were only nominally Muslim – their intellectual capacity was a product of their Aryan Persian, Christian or pagan background. It would be a mistake, Renan asserted, to assign any credit for Abbasid achievements to Islam.

In response to Renan's assertion, Namık Kemal and Bayezidof argued that Renan's racially essentialist position distorted the historical evidence. They insisted that it was precisely Islam's message of universalism and equality that enabled the participation and interaction between many cultures and peoples. The Abbasid *pax Islamica* accurately expressed the 'ideals' of Islam in institutions of political unity, assimilation and inclusion, and produced the intellectual and cultural fruition of the Abbasid period. Islam enabled the creation of an ethno-linguistic melting pot – the absorption and assimilation of many peoples and traditions. In so doing, it facilitated cultural and intellectual synthesis, creativity and innovation.

In a passage that reads as a refutation of Renan's characterisation of Islam as inescapably Semitic, Namık Kemal explained:

³³ Bayezidof, 'Renan-a Reddiye', 12.

³⁴ Baiazitov, 'A Refutation', 23.

³⁵ Baiazitov, 'A Refutation', and Kemal, *Renan Mudafaanamesi*.

³⁶ Bayezidof, 'Islam' in *İlimlerle İlişkisi*, 51.

It should have become apparent by now, that Islamic civilization means Arab, Turkish and Iranian civilization. Or it would be true to say that besides these, Byzantine and Nestorian [Syriac] and other civilizations also contributed to it. In today's widening world, we are not able to think of a civilization that is unaffected by interaction with others. Islamic civilization, from the standpoint of law, was established as a system of indulgence and tolerance, and shows respect for the principles of religion and society . . . the religious principles of fraternity and equality held closely, became a standard that within a short period of time, opened the way for an expansion from the borders of India, to the Atlas ocean.³⁷

Bayezidof similarly contended that Islam facilitated the productive and creative cross-fertilisation of many cultures. He explicitly denounced European claims to be the sole heirs of classical knowledge, arguing that Islamic science was not simply a conveyor belt for transmitting classical knowledge to Europe, but had been a significant contributor to new knowledge. Sciences build on one another, Bayezidof wrote of Abbasid scientific progress, and share Greek, Iranian, Indian and other roots. Offering up an unusual metaphor, Bayezidof urged his readers to imaging knowledge as having both a mother and a father:

are we not able to declare that Greece serves as the father of the intellectual sciences, while Arabia, or Islam, takes the place of their nurturing mother? If we admit this comparison is apt, then we can conclude that Europe owes a great debt of gratitude to Islam.³⁸

Prefiguring the 'Sabra thesis', Bayezidof and Namık Kemal both insisted on recognising Islamic science as a full-fledged contributor to Greek science.³⁹ They both also extended the genealogy of 'modern' science to include Persian and Indian contributions, further problematising European constructions of a linear genealogy hailing directly and uniquely back to the Hellenic past. As Bayezidof explained:

Truly, all honor belonging to the initial form of these sciences should be bestowed not only upon the Greeks, but also to Egypt and India, from whence came the wave of Reason. But why deny the existence of Arab or Muslim sciences during that seven-century period of great intellectual progress?⁴⁰

According to Islamic modernists, a historical comparison of the Islamic Abbasids with their Christian European contemporaries demonstrated

³⁷ Kemal, *Büyük İslam Tarihi*, 462.

³⁸ Baiazitov, 'A Refutation', 33.

³⁹ Sabra, 'The Appropriation . . . of Greek Science in Medieval Islam', 223–43.

⁴⁰ Baiazitov, 'A Refutation', 25.

unequivocally that the Abbasids had championed 'modern' ideals. Ali, Afghani and Bayezidof directly inverted European claims to modernity, suggesting that it was Christianity, not Islam, that had hindered science, progress and civilisation. Ali cited European scholarship to demonstrate that Christianity, not Islam, had continually transgressed 'modern' values of religious tolerance, women's rights and rational governance. He contrasted Christianity with Islam regarding their positions on women, noting that Christianity taught that women were inferior, 'a necessary evil', whereas Islam included 'respect for women [as] one of the essential teachings of the creed'.⁴¹ Bayezidof concurred – women's rights and religious tolerance figured prominently in his characterisation of the 'essence' of Islam. He wrote:

If we construct a parallel between Christian Europe and Asiatic Islam during the time that Renan discusses, we will see a strange contrast. On the one hand, Islam searched everywhere for philosophy and sciences, and the Caliphs generously awarded scholars. On the other, Christian Europe stood idly by during the intellectual movements of the Arabs and was completely disinterested in these movements of thought . . . Islam in its incipient form searched everywhere for science while science was searching for Catholic Europe and found it only with difficulty through the Muslim Arabs.⁴²

Refuting Christian claims that Islam was inherently inclined to violence and persecution, Ali argued that Islam had long been the champion of tolerance and reason, in direct contradistinction to the historical record of the Christian church:

Islam 'grasped the sword' in self-defense; Christianity grasped it, in order to stifle freedom of thought and liberty of belief. With the conversion of Constantine, Christianity had become the dominant religion of the western world. It had thenceforth nothing to fear from its enemies; but from the moment it obtained the mastery, it developed its true character of isolation and exclusiveness. Wherever Christianity prevailed, no other religion could be followed without molestation. The Moslems, on the other hand, required from others a simple guarantee of peace and amity, tribute in return for protection, or perfect equality – the possession of equal rights and privileges, on condition of the acceptance of Islam.⁴³

Persecution was not simply contingent to Christianity as expressed by Christian tradition, Ali suggested, but inherent in it – an intrinsic, immutable component of the Church's failure to correctly manifest the truth of Jesus:

⁴¹ Ali, *Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, 244.

⁴² Baiazitov, 'A Refutation', 30.

⁴³ Ali, *Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, 216.

Every act of violation was sanctified by the Church . . . From the first slaughters of Charlemagne, with the full sanction of the Church, to the massacre and enslavement of the unoffending races of America, there is an unbroken series of the infringement of international duties, and the claims of humanity. This utter disregard of the first principles of charity led also to the persecution of those followers of Jesus who ventured to think differently from the Church. The rise of Protestantism made no difference.⁴⁴

In contrast, 'the spirit of Islam', Ali explained,

is entirely opposed to isolation and exclusiveness . . . By the laws of Islam, liberty of conscience and freedom of worship were allowed and guaranteed to the followers of every other creed under Moslem domination. The passage in the Koran, 'Let there be no forcing in Religion', is the grandest testimony to the principle of toleration and charity . . . Mohammad did not merely preach toleration; he embodied it into a law.⁴⁵

Christian Europe, Ali suggested, could not claim to have originated 'modernity'. Rather, it was the civilisational influence of the Islamic Abbasids, which gradually, over time, succeeded in effecting Christian Europe. In addition to the 'modern' values of toleration and respect, Ali declared that Islam had generated 'modern' sciences. 'The Saracenic race', by which he meant Arabs,

by their elastic genius as well as by their central position – with the hoarded treasures of dying Greece and Rome on one side and of Persia on the other – and India and China far away sleeping the sleep of ages – were pre-eminently fitted to become the teachers of humanity. Under the inspiring influences of the great Prophet, who gave them a code and a nationality, and assisted by their sovereigns, the Saracens caught up the lessons of wisdom from the East and the West, combined them with the teachings of the Master, and started from soldiers into scholars.⁴⁶

Despite European claims to the contrary, Ali credited the Abbasids with having generated 'modern' scientific methods. 'The deductive method, hitherto proudly regarded as the invention and sole monopoly of modern Europe, was perfectly understood by the Moslems', he insisted.⁴⁷ Similarly,

⁴⁴ Ali, *Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, 205, citing Milman, *History of Latin Christianity*, vol. I, 352, and William Edward Hartpole Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe*, first published in 1865, 'chapter on persecution'.

⁴⁵ Ali, *Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, 206–7, citing the Quran 2:256: 'There is no coercion in religion.'

⁴⁶ Ali, *Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, 296. Ali does not give the specific reference of who he is quoting.

⁴⁷ Ali, *Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, 323.

he argued that 'the Moslems certainly deserve the gratitude of the modern world, for having introduced the method of experimentation into the domains of the exact sciences in place of the theorizing of the Greeks'.⁴⁸ Along the same lines, Ali noted that 'the science of historic evidence, unknown or at least unappreciated in Europe till the middle of the last century, was perfectly known to the Moslems'.⁴⁹ Islam deliberately promoted science, both in content and method:

While Christian Europe had placed learning under the ban of persecution . . . the Vicegerents of Mohammad allied themselves to the cause of civilization, and assisted in the growth of Freethought and Free-enquiry – originated and consecrated by the Prophet himself . . . The cultivation of the physical sciences, – that great index to the intellectual liberty of a nation, – formed the day-dream of the whole life of the Moslems.⁵⁰

A more accurate historical perspective, Ali insisted, would rectify European claims to have originated modern science, and modern values more generally – to have carried forward the torch of civilisation. He described a grand sweep of history, which bears quoting at length:

Moslems went out into the world, not to slaughter like the Israelites of old, but to teach and elevate, to civilize and refine. Afflicted and down-trodden humanity awoke to new life. Whilst the barbarians of Europe, who had overturned an effete empire, were groping in the darkness of absolute ignorance and brutality, the Moslems were occupied in the task of civilization. During the centuries of moral and intellectual desolation in Christian Europe, Islam led the vanguard of intellectual progress . . . Christianity had established itself on the throne of the Caesars, but it had utterly failed in the object of regenerating the nations of the earth. From the fourth century of the Christian era to the twelfth century, the darkness of Europe grew deeper and deeper. During these ages of ignorance Ecclesiasticism barred every access through which the light of knowledge, represented latterly by Moslem civilization, could stream in. But though jealously shut out from this land of fanaticism, the benignant influences of Islam in time made themselves felt in every part . . . The first outburst of Rationalism in the West, occurred in the province most amenable to the power of Moslem civilization. Ecclesiasticism crushed this fair flower with fire and with sword, and threw back the progress of the world for centuries. But the principles of the Liberty of Thought, so strongly impressed on Islam, had communicated their vitality to Christian Europe.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Ali, *Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, 328.

⁴⁹ Ali, *Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, 337.

⁵⁰ Ali, *Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, 341.

⁵¹ Ali, *Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, 338–9.

Ali, Bayezidof and Namık Kemal, in equating Islamic essence with the generation of 'modern' scientific method, proffered an alternative genealogy of modernity – one that originated in Islamic lands, not Europe. 'Islam', Ali asserted, 'introduced into the modern world civilization, philosophy, the arts and the sciences, everything that ennoble the heart and elevates the mind. It inaugurated the reign of intellectual liberty.'⁵² He even went so far as to posit that while Islam was generative of 'modernity', Christianity had actively hindered it. 'The two failures of the Moslems, one before Constantinople, and the other in France', Ali declared, 'retarded the progress of the world for ages . . . The Renaissance, Civilization, the growth of intellectual liberty would have been accelerated by seven hundred years.'⁵³ Had Islam triumphed, he continued, the world would have been spared the Inquisition, the 'massacres of the poor Aztecs and Incas', the Thirty-Years War and other religiously sanctioned violence. Indeed, even 'the reformation of the Christian Church would have been accomplished centuries earlier'.⁵⁴

Universalising Islam – Becoming Modern

Namık Kemal, Imam Bayezidof, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Syed Ameer Ali explicitly contrasted Abbasid civilisation with the European Dark Ages in order to emphasise the former's comparative superiority. At the same time, they also implicitly compared Abbasid civilisation to contemporary European civilisation. Their measures of civilisational progress were those of their own modern time period: women's rights, religious tolerance, political unity, representative government, and so forth. Modernists assessed civilisation according to 'modern' yardsticks, and in so doing, claimed these yardsticks as eternally applicable and transcendent of time and place. In this way, the ideals of *Liberté*, *Égalité*, *Fraternité* – those very Islamic ideals that animated Ali's 'Republic' – were universalised. The ideals of the French Revolution of 1789, hailed as the beating heart of European modernity, became synonymous with eternal, ahistorical Islamic ideals. In equating the essence of Islam with universal modern ideals, Islamic modernists thereby proposed an alternative genealogy of modernity, one that originated in Islam, not in Europe.

According to this genealogy, modern values originated in Islam, and only later were adopted and developed in Europe. The Spanish Umayyads, and to a greater extent, the Abbasids, as expressions of the most advanced civilisations of their time, reclaimed their place as the crucible of subsequent European progress. European modernity, rather than the child of Christian and classical Greek parents, Ali stated, had actually been fathered by Islam.

⁵² Ali, *Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, 345.

⁵³ Ali, *Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, 343.

⁵⁴ Ali, *Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, 345.

The claim to an Islamic origin of modernity was simultaneously a claim to agency – an argument for the capacity of Islam to generate progress and civilisation and to participate in the modern on its own terms. This permitted more than the construction of an alternative authentic modernity, it enabled modernity itself to be claimed as indigenous.

In Ali's rendition, European modernity was derivative – it was dependent on having been infused with Islamic essence. Islamic modernists turned claims to European exceptionalism on their head, marshalling historical evidence that while Islam had generated progress, Christianity had actively resisted it. Europe had become modern not because of Christianity, he maintained, but despite it. Christianity was the 'iron band' that inhibited modernity. The development of modernity in Europe, therefore, was the story of the suppression of the Christian Church, the forcing of Christian dogma and tradition into submission by a secular state. In making this assertion, Ali clearly distinguished between the 'essence' of Christianity as found in Jesus, and the Christianity of history, which, he argued, preserved very little, if anything, of its original essence. Islamic history revealed the essence of Islam, which could be recontextualised into the present: the essence of Christianity was forever lost.

The Abbasid Golden Age provided empirical evidence that Islam had and could again serve as the motor of progress and civilisation. A historicisation of Islamic history confirmed that the current state of 'backwardness' prevalent amongst contemporary Islamic societies was historically contingent, not the inevitable consequence of the 'essence' of Islam. Contemporary dissonance between the inherently 'modern' essence of Islam and the methods, values and content expressed in Islamic societies was due to the emergence and subsequent ossification of tradition. Tradition limited the possibility of adapting to the changing 'circumstances of the age'. Tradition was the anchor holding society back even as civilisation sailed forward.

The descriptions of the emergence of Islamic tradition and the rise of traditionalism as methodology that lay at the heart of modernist Islamic histories must be read as prescriptions for the rejection of tradition and the embrace of modernity. Islamic modernists argued that Islam was not only compatible with modernity, but necessary to it. They firmly believed that the essence of Islam, cleansed of tradition, could be replanted in the 'moral desert' of present backwardness to regenerate the 'garden' of modernity.⁵⁵

For Islamic modernists, historicism enabled them to determine the contours of particular historical contexts. Yet historicism – as contextualisation – did not primarily conceive of time chronologically. Historical time was quintessentially civilisational. The evolution of humanity occurred in chronological time certainly, but was located, imagined and expressed as the

⁵⁵ Ali noted in reference to the effect of Islamic governance of Umayyad Spain, 'What had once been a moral desert, was transformed into a garden.' See Ali, *Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, 149.

passage of civilisational time. Modernity was conceived of as a civilisational level, with associated religious, intellectual and institutional characteristics. The presumption of modernity having 'arisen' or 'begun' did not hinge on the existence of a precise date or watershed moment, but on the march of civilisational progress.

History, as the story of civilisational progress, was recalibrated and no longer coterminous with chronological time. The rupture of chronological time from historical time meant that societies were conceived of in relation to civilisational progress, regardless of their location in chronological time. The equation of historical time with civilisational development led, as Reinhart Koselleck noted, to the non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous, and vice versa.⁵⁶ In other words, comparable civilisational levels could be achieved at different chronological moments, whereas in the same chronological time, different societies exhibited different levels of civilisation.

Modernity, like antiquity, was a civilisational level, with associated religious, intellectual and institutional characteristics. Just as paganism was the religious expression of primitivism, modern Islam was the religious expression of modernity. There were several crucial implications of this deeply historicist conception of the modern. First, that just as not all societies in pagan antiquity were identical, not all societies in modernity were identical. Participation in a civilisational level entailed the sharing of certain essential characteristics indicative of a similar level of consciousness of the Divine, but did not necessitate identical cultures. There were many possible moderns; being modern was firmly disassociated from imitation or replication of European modernity.

Second, conceiving of modernity as a civilisational level meant that it was, in principle, universal. Modernity, like paganism, was not circumscribed to one place or owned by one society. Modernity was not, as some European Christian Orientalists argued, the exceptional expression of European progress – the unique combination of Christianity and classical Greek culture as united and nurtured in Europe. In asserting that Islam was 'incapable of transforming itself or including any element of civil or profane life', Renan doomed Islamic societies to a future of imitation – the adoption of European models.⁵⁷ Renan effectively associated particularism, passivity and historical

⁵⁶ Here I am following Koselleck's notion of the disconnect between historical time and natural time. I believe that the concept of chronological time, however, best describes this phenomenon, since natural time suggests natural rhythms (sunrise, sunset, seasons) which I do not believe are disengaged from concepts of historical time the way that chronological time (suggestive of the sequence of dynasties or rulers that was the stuff of much pre-modern history) was. Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 95. Some translators have preferred the terms 'simultaneous' and 'non-simultaneous', but I prefer 'contemporaneous' and 'non-contemporaneous'.

⁵⁷ Renan, *Averroès et L'Averroïsme*, vol. 111, 13.

contingency with the Orient, and linked the European 'Self' with universalism, agency and a historically transcendent essence. In the view of Islamic modernists, however, modernity was universal, not culturally contingent. Modernity was severed from any exceptionalist claims and accessible to all who could cross the civilisational threshold. Islamic societies, if they could reinstitute harmony and regenerate Islam as a motor of progress, could affect the civilisational leap to the modern, not via imitation of Europe, but as a return to an indigenous origin – the return to 'true' Islam.

At a theoretical level, claiming modernity was not a chronological claim to exist in the present, but an assertion of participation in modern civilisation – a civilisation which not all contemporary societies could lay claim to. To be modern was to adopt a set of values, intellectual methods and sociopolitical commitments, and to reject the values, methods and commitments associated with tradition. Crossing the civilisational threshold necessitated a civilisational rupture – a rejection of the dissonant present and the concomitant embrace of the modern future.

This rupture was negotiated via language, with the emergence of definitions of modernity and its antithesis – tradition. Islamic histories defined and constructed tradition in a binary relationship with modernity, the one shaping and necessitating the other. Tradition was the source of dissonance and backwardness; modernity the possibility of harmony and civilisational progress. Modernity and tradition were each other's 'Other' – their necessary constitutive binaries. Definitions of 'tradition' and 'modernity' signalled the claims themselves. The emergence of the Ottoman terms for 'progress' (*terakki*) and 'civilisation' (*medeniyet*) as well as their Arabic, Persian and other linguistic synonyms, was symptomatic of the assertion of this civilisational rupture, symptomatic of claiming modernity which was integral to 'becoming' modern.

Claiming participation in the modern depended on the existence of a rupture between modern and pre-modern 'eras' as civilisational levels, and a successful transition from one to the other. Dividing human history into three distinct breaks – between past harmony, present dissonance and future (modern) harmony – added value to these ruptures and posited them as civilisational thresholds. The present became a discrete period of time, sandwiched between periods of harmony – one which existed in the past, the other as a promised future. It allowed for the 'modern' to set itself apart, historically and by definition, from the non-modern present which was cast as an interregnum, a deviation – the equivalent of the 'Dark Ages' in European historical thought.⁵⁸ The path to the modern thus travelled via the past. Modernity was claimed as a resumption or restoration of harmony through a rejection of the dissonant present. Regardless of disputes surrounding precisely where to locate the 'modern' chronologi-

⁵⁸ On the politics of periodisation in the construction of the European 'Middle Ages', see Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty*.

cally, the adoption of this tripartite periodisation was a blueprint for entry into the modern; it represented a break with an imagined 'traditional' – the 'backward' present – and the promise of resuming, or reinstating, a period of harmony.

The attempt to position modernity as a rejection of tradition was also an attempt to release the present from its current historical time, to enable it to progress to the next level of civilisation. The terms 'primitive' and 'backward' became coterminous not only with less progressive levels of civilisation, but also with previous historical time. This explains modernity's claim to be somehow further along in time relative to the non-modern, which is rejected as 'backward'. As each historical time was unique contextually, the past also became 'othered' and 'estranged'.⁵⁹ The idea of modernity as the speeding up of time, of the rapid movement through history as time, was experienced as ruptures in time, a temporal and historical distancing of the present from the past. The acceleration of history can be understood as claims to the increasing frequency of civilisational cum historical ruptures.⁶⁰ Modern history embraced this project of accounting for how and why societies did nor did not progress, as well as for how and why the torch of civilisational progress moved from one society to another.

At a concrete level, to become modern was to embrace modern values, commitments, sensibilities and dispositions – the *habitus* of modernity. Modernity required a subjective 'becoming' – the embodiment and self-consciousness embrace of modern values and practices. In other words, 'becoming modern' was performed through the rejection/embrace of traditional/modern ideas, values and methods, respectively. Islamic modernist accusations that European historians had not accurately or impartially employed historical methods in their interpretation of Islamic history was equally an accusation of their failure to fully embrace modernity. Bayezidof, for example, called Renan to account, insisting that had Renan actually applied scientific methodology to the study of Islam, he would have come to very different conclusions. Bayezidof attributed Renan's scholarly failures to his prejudice against Islam, which made him fall short of applying internationally accepted 'scientific' scholarly methods: 'Why would this educated French man, giving his speech at a gathering of the French Scientific Association . . . not wish to use the generally accepted method of impartial and precise analysis of the topic about which he was speaking?' Bayezidof lamented.⁶¹

Similarly, Ali and Bayezidof highlighted European scholars' frequent tendencies to apply historicism only when it suited their purposes. Bayezidof

⁵⁹ Zammito, 'Koselleck's Philosophy of Historical Time(s) and the Practice of History', 323.

⁶⁰ Zammito, 'Koselleck's Philosophy', 133.

⁶¹ Baiazitov, 'A Refutation', 24.

pointed out that 'to attribute the Arabs' scientific stagnation exclusively to their religion and claim this decline as a result of their religion, while attributing other peoples' decline to non-religious reasons, is not entirely fair'.⁶² Ali facetiously decried the hypocrisy of European scholars, whom, he accused, only applied historicism to Christianity:

The Christian biographers of the Prophet of Arabia, probably under the influence of that fine sentiment called 'Christian verity', have denominated the punishment of criminals, 'assassinations', 'Murders', or 'barbarous deeds', which to the general reader convey such an idea of horror as to revolt him, before he has time to reflect on the candour of the historian . . .⁶³

Proposing an alternative, more fully historicist reading, Ali noted that, first, 'this was accepted punishment for criminals' and not 'assassination or murder' and second, 'as to the cruelty of the punishment, he forgot that Christian England hanged men and women for stealing a few shillings up to the middle of the 18th century; he forgot the terrible tortures of the rack and the stake which destroyed myriads of innocent beings in Christian Europe'.⁶⁴ We see this too in Ali's noting of European scholarly hypocrisy on religious matters. It was not just that European scholars failed to universally apply historicism, but that even as they insisted on the superiority of Christianity as testified by the miracles of Christ, they themselves evidenced more primitive religious sensibilities. Ali observed that 'Patristic Christianity held, and still holds, to the miracles as a proof of the divinity of Jesus',⁶⁵ beliefs which were shared, Ali notes, by many European historians.

These claims were not simply Islamic modernist assertions of historical fallacies committed by the leading European historians of the day, but equally claims to adhere more closely to the strictures of historical scientific method and more advanced conceptions of the Divine than did their European colleagues – proof of their fidelity to modernity. Their greater commitment to historicism than their European counterparts was illustrative of their greater embodiment of modernity.

Claiming the modern thus, was not only a project that depended on a rupture in time and the construction of the civilisational other as 'traditional' – it also required the cultivation of new, modern sensibilities and dispositions. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, Islamic modernists' project was to retrieve Mohammad from historical context, to cleanse him of the distortions of tradition and to showcase him as the modern embodiment of the essence of Islam. Islamic modernists' quest for the historical prophet was essential for the identification, divorce and retrieval of essence from context, of truth

⁶² Baiazitov, 'A Refutation', 31.

⁶³ Ali, *Life and Teachings of Mohammad*, 124.

⁶⁴ Ali, *Life and Teachings of Mohammed*, 124.

⁶⁵ Ali, *Life of and Teachings of Mohammad*, note on 103.

from tradition as the solidification of layers of particular context-bound interpretation. Such decontextualisation paved the way for the final step – the recontextualisation of Islamic essence in the present.

ISLAMIC
MODERNISM
AND THE
RE-ENCHANTMENT
OF THE SACRED IN
THE AGE OF HISTORY

♦ ♦ ♦

MONICA M. RINGER

EDINBURGH
University Press

For my parents

Edinburgh University Press is one of the leading university presses in the UK. We publish academic books and journals in our selected subject areas across the humanities and social sciences, combining cutting-edge scholarship with high editorial and production values to produce academic works of lasting importance. For more information visit our website: edinburghuniversitypress.com

© Monica M. Ringer, 2020

Edinburgh University Press Ltd
The Tun – Holyrood Road
12 (2f) Jackson's Entry
Edinburgh EH8 8PJ

Typeset in KoufrUni by
Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire,
and printed and bound in Great Britain

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4744 7873 1 (hardback)
ISBN 978 1 4744 7876 2 (webready PDF)
ISBN 978 1 4744 7875 5 (epub)

The right of Monica M. Ringer to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 and the Copyright and Related Rights Regulations 2003 (SI No. 2498).