



An Islamic Reconfiguration of Colonial Modernity

MUHAMMAD ‘ABDUH

Life takes precedence over religion in Islam.

‘Abduh, *A‘mal kamilah*

Since I am critical of unreasoned obedience (taqlid) to al-Ash‘ariya creed, why would I then champion that of the Mu‘tazila? I do not abide by any authoritative consensus (*taqlid al-jami‘i*) for the sake of abiding by authority. I defer only to reasoned evidence.

‘Abduh, *Tarikh al-Imam*

[I]f I am to be REALLY saved—what I need is *certainty*—not wisdom, dreams or speculation—and this certainly is faith. And faith is faith in what is needed to my *heart*, my soul, not my speculative intelligence. For it is my soul with its passions, as it were with its flesh and blood, that has to be saved, not my abstract mind.

Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*¹

Introduction

In contrast to the scholarly consensus reached regarding ibn ‘Abdul Wahhab’s “blatant” fundamentalism, Muhammad ‘Abduh is by and large depicted as a liberal humanist, a liberal *salafi*, and sometimes as an agnostic who cloaked himself in the mantle of religion for political expediency. And although he might occasionally be referred to as a traditionalist, he is never regarded as a fanatic or a fundamentalist in spite of his insistence on the letter of the Qur’an and the shari‘a, the two defining features of “fundamentalism” in this literature. What demarcates ‘Abduh from the

“fundamentalists,” most argue, is his tolerance for and general amenability toward European progressive principles and culture.² In this regard, many highlight his noble yet futile attempt to introduce rationality and Enlightenment humanist concepts into an essentially immutable religion.

A good example is the orientalist Vatikiotis’s celebration of ‘Abduh’s “Islamic humanism.” ‘Abduh, notes Vatikiotis, “underlined the essence of Muslim humanism” by preaching an Islam “free of rigid traditional formulation and invigorated by rational and historical methods of criticisms.”³ ‘Abduh’s Islamic humanism is seen as advocating “belief in Man as a part of the greater belief in God, on the assumption that human values are largely formulated by earthly experience.”⁴ ‘Abduh is praised here for being a unique kind of Muslim. Unlike the romantic who sought solace in mysticism, the conservative with his defensive and dogmatic posturing or the unreconstructed secularist who alienated the masses by adopting wholesale Western ideas, ‘Abduh sought to create a rational Islam grounded in a novel notion that Islam is fundamentally a social religion—a religion, to be exact, that complied with “an ethical system favorable to progress and strongly influenced by rational processes.”⁵ In spite of all these commendable qualities, ‘Abduh’s attempt to render Islam modern was destined to fail because, according to Vatikiotis, “humanism of any kind in Islam” faces insurmountable obstacles inherent in the religion itself.⁶

Vatikiotis’s account of ‘Abduh’s vain quest for a humanist Islam is a familiar one since it represents the traditional orientalist view that Islam is irredeemable, that intrinsic qualities, such as the fusion of religion and politics, will inevitably prevent its rehabilitation for the modern world.⁷ What is clearly embedded in this view is the assumption that modernization will inevitably lead to the retreat of religion from the public into the private nonpolitical domain, as it did in the Western hemisphere. Hence, any criticism of this exclusivist vision of modernity was interpreted as a rejection of modernity *toute courte* and, by extension, as a retreat into the nonrational, traditional past. Equating modernity with this particular vision of secularism is what Muslims, including ‘Abduh, I argue, found most troubling. Questioning this singular humanist secular image of modernity was in fact a central feature of ‘Abduh’s reform project. Delineating the boundaries of secularism and determining how far religion can be

extricated from the domains of polity and economy without dismantling its authority altogether was a crucial issue for 'Abduh and continues to be today for contemporary Islamists.

Viewing 'Abduh through the prism of this exclusive European version of secularism led Albert Hourani, in his often-called masterpiece, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, to give 'Abduh the enigmatic label of a "liberal salafi"—that is, one who combined a liberal sensibility and an openness to Western positivist thought with a salafi temperament and a yearning to retrieve the purity of early Islam. Aware that there was no escape out of the modern age, 'Abduh, in contrast to other Muslim scholars, was less concerned with whether "Muslims could accept the institutions and ideas of the modern world" and more with how to convert Islam, a revealed religion, into a valid framework of life for the modern world. To Hourani, 'Abduh differed from other traditional Muslims because he was interested less in proving to Muslims "the truth or falsity of Islam" and more in wanting or wishing them to be modern.⁸ While admiring 'Abduh for his attempt to reconcile Islam and modernity, Hourani argues that 'Abduh's effort was destined not only to result in eclecticism but, more seriously, to also lead him to distort the "authentic" Islam for future generations. 'Abduh's eclecticism generated more confusion in following generations as disparate and conflicting positions emerged. Whereas some of his followers (like Rashid Rida) used his work to stress a more fundamentalist and rigid line, others (like 'Abdul Raziq) adopted some of his positions to promote a more secular vision of society.

Hourani judged 'Abduh as an unsystematic and muddled thinker for selecting some Islamic ideas and discarding others not because they made sense but because they served his political ends.⁹ His eclecticism, Hourani argues, led many of 'Abduh's close friends and critics to suspect him of agnosticism and of feigning a commitment to Islam for the sake of expediency. As Hourani put it,

there were some, even among those who knew him well and liked him, who doubted whether he was himself convinced of the truth of Islam. Such statements, taken literally, cannot stand against the evidence in his own writing and of those who knew most intimately the movement of his thought. . . . But in another sense the doubts had certain validity. They point to an aspect of his thought which, for his critics, might very well be a sign of weakness: a sort of eclecticism.¹⁰

From Hourani's perspective, even more reprehensible than the suspicion of 'Abduh's feigning commitment to Islam is his invention of a fictitious Islam, one that essentially stripped the religion of its true and authentic meaning. Conjuring new meanings and attaching them to old Islamic concepts, 'Abduh, according to Hourani, infused Islam with liberal and democratic qualities that it simply never had. Traditional religious concepts like *maslaha*, *shura*, and *ijma'* in 'Abduh's hands came to falsely embody the modern political meanings of utility, parliamentary democracy, and public opinion. Rather than seeing 'Abduh's engagement with the past as a constitutive and necessary element of Islamic revivalism, Hourani read it as a fabrication of what is truly Islamic:

It was, of course, easy in this way to distort if not destroy the precise meaning of the Islamic concepts, that which distinguishes Islam from other religions and even from non-religious humanism. It was perhaps this of which his conservative critics were uneasily aware: there was bound to be something *arbitrary in the selection and the approximation*. Once the *traditional* interpretation of Islam was abandoned, and the way open to private judgment, it was difficult if not impossible to say what was in accordance with Islam and what was not.¹¹

Ironically, Hourani's statement (even if unintentional) seems also to echo Lord Cromer's famous remark that "Islam cannot be reformed; that is to say, reformed Islam is Islam no longer; it is something else."¹² In retrospect, however, Hourani was bound to arrive at this conclusion, considering the analytical framework he utilized—that of an inverted version of the "invented tradition," an analytic moreover that came to acquire great popularity and authority in postorientalist scholarship on Islam. Although this more recent scholarship tries in general to break away from the classical orientalist polarity of modern/traditional by making the claim that the Islamists are a product of the modern age, this approach remains implicitly, if not explicitly, committed to the notion that changes in the tradition are inventions of the original and not truly "authentic."¹³ Assuming a break from an authentic depiction of the past might also explain the continual popularity of *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* among contemporary scholars loyal to the invented-tradition analytic in spite of Hourani's disavowal of it later in life.¹⁴

Departing from these views, I read ‘Abduh as neither a traditionalist nor a liberal, but as a Muslim reformer who was critical of both traditionalist religious authority and colonial modernity. As a Muslim reformer, ‘Abduh, like ibn ‘Abdul Wahhab before him, was seeking to reconfigure Islam in order to both challenge and accommodate the changes in his age—in this case, to ensure the continuity of Islamic authority in the context of an overpowering colonial modernity. Accordingly, he sought out the Islamic discourses to assess the past and make it relevant to the present by rethinking on the basis of Islamic criteria what is and what is not of value in Europe’s project of modernity. Taking into account the colonial context, ‘Abduh’s concerns were bound to differ from those of earlier reformers, including ibn ‘Abdul Wahhab, because ‘Abduh was confronting the task of securing control over a reality increasingly taken over and regulated by the more powerful discourses centered in Europe. Deeply imbricated in the struggle against Europeanization, ‘Abduh’s project of revivalism can hardly be understood outside the context of colonial aggression and its project of transforming Egyptians into “non-Muslim” Muslims. Though motivated by the British takeover of Egypt, ‘Abduh’s reform project was at the same time firmly grounded in the Islamic discursive tradition and was not undertaken simply for political or ideological reasons, as a scam to appeal to a traditional sector of society, nor as a defensive reactive measure against European power. In fact, ‘Abduh took for granted that the spirit of Islam was consonant with and amenable to change. He took issue with the orientalist assumption that Islam is incompatible with “progress,” which he differently construed as advancement (*ruqqiy*) in the material and moral sciences. For him, the Islamic revivalist project was crucial to guaranteeing the continual survival of the Muslim community in a changing world, and it was a way to effectively ward off European colonial aggression and expansion without necessarily rejecting all it offered.

By situating ‘Abduh’s reform project within an intellectual genealogy of *tajdid-Islah*, a form of reasoning internal to the Islamic discursive tradition, I demonstrate that ‘Abduh’s rationalism was indigenous. By tracing his engagement with colonial modernity, I show that ‘Abduh’s thought was situated within the historical parameters of his time. This duality—the Islamic basis of his thought and its construction within colonial modernity—is clearly illustrated in his conceptualization of “degeneracy”

as both *taqlid* (unreflective following of consensual precedent) and *taghrib* (Europeanization). This duality is also evidenced in his engagement with the Islamic question of *'aql* (sound human reason) and its relationship to *ijtihād* (reasoning independent of precedent). The dual nature of his critique of degeneracy distinguishes 'Abduh from ibn 'Abdul Wahhab. Although both utilized the same concept, Islamic degeneracy unfolding in nineteenth-century colonial Egypt no longer was thought of, nor did it function, in the same way as in the tribal context of premodern Arabia. Degeneration under colonial modernity, in other words, came to acquire a totally different meaning.

Aside from the difference in their historical settings, the distinction between the two reformers is quite evident in the way in which each approached the Islamic discourses and hence the different ways in which they came to conceptualize orthodoxy. 'Abduh's conception of orthodoxy, different from ibn 'Abdul Wahhab's, was translated into a *mean* (balance) between *taghrib* and *taqlid*. And whereas ibn 'Abdul Wahhab sought ibn Taymiya's doctrine of *tawhid* to reorder orthodoxy, 'Abduh's reliance on al-Ghazali's doctrine of the mean (*mizan*) and the Mu'tazila's notion of *'aql*, along with ibn Taymiya's right to *ijtihād*, enabled him to reconfigure orthodoxy as a space within which he could integrate elements of colonial modernity (e.g., the nation-state and agents) and remain within the parameters of the Islamic tradition. Far from a simple process of emulating earlier historical moments and discursive arguments or fabricating a new Islam, 'Abduh drew on multiple tendencies and arguments within the tradition in order to establish a counter-discourse that could vie with established Islamic orthodoxy, on the one hand, and Europeanization, on the other.

This conception of orthodoxy as a relation of power (rather than a commitment to fixed, essentialized tenets) will help us rethink the conventional view on this topic. In reconfiguring orthodoxy, 'Abduh was trying to subvert the status quo rather than break away from the tradition. In probing the question of what constitutes a Muslim, 'Abduh brought forth the importance and significance of disagreement within Islam—an issue generally ignored or disregarded in mainstream scholarship. In fact, throughout the history of the religion, by using reasoned arguments different Muslims have disputed one another over strategies and practices most effective for sustaining a moral community of believers.

Abduh's Project of *Tajdid*

It is simply not possible to arrive at a proper understanding of 'Abduh's reformist project outside the Islamic discursive tradition of corrective criticism and renewal. Like all other traditions, including liberal humanism, the Islamic tradition consists of a set of authoritative texts, beliefs, and practices from within which Islamic forms of reasoning are usually made. It is from within these discourses, which embody particular arguments and forms of thought, that a Muslim is able to make reasonable and persuasive arguments. In this sense, 'Abduh did not actively shun speculative or abstract thought nor did he seek to retrieve the pristine past. Rather, he sought new insights to contemporary questions and concerns from within the set of discourses that frame Islamic reasoning.

In saying this, I want to refute in particular the popular view that 'Abduh's reasoning originated in Enlightenment thought or that his rationalization for reform was, as Hourani describes, "constructed on a framework of Comtean positivism."¹⁵ Such a claim is flawed because it is grounded in an invalid oppositional construction between the sacred as nonrational and the secular as rational and the assumption thereof that Islamic discourses are inherently nonrational. Instead, we need to recognize that forms of reasoning different from those of the Enlightenment govern Islamic discourses and that Muslims like 'Abduh can make reasonable claims only within the confines of this tradition-informed rationality. Accordingly, 'Abduh's arguments for Islamic reform originated not in Comtean positivist logic but rather in a long-standing argument internal to the Islamic tradition. This argument engages the place of human reasoning (*aql*) and independent judgment (*ijtihad*) in relation to revealed knowledge (*nass*) and the authority of consensual precedent (*taqlid*). 'Abduh asserted that the primacy of the authoritative texts was compatible with human reasoning and revelation, rejecting *taqlid* in favor of *ijtihad* as the basis for revival and the restoration of religious authority.

Because my approach rests on the premise that an Islamic-bounded inquiry seeks coherence by making reference to a variety of authoritative arguments and texts, 'Abduh's thought here is not judged by Western liberal standards of rationality as much as by how they relate to Islamic rationality. Indeed, the rational merits of his arguments do not rest on facts or the merits of proof (positivist rationalism), but rather on how his

views engage with historically extended, socially embodied arguments that have their own standards of coherence.

Within this analytical framework, it would be of little value to consider 'Abduh a "liberal" for he never saw a need to break from the Islamic tradition, nor did he ever seek an alternative to or replacement for religious authority. To the contrary, his main goal for reform, as he asserted repeatedly in his writings, was to restore Islamic orthodoxy by reordering Islamic knowledge for the sake of informing and regulating social practices under the new modern condition. Put differently, the two defining polarities (liberal and conservative) within the political spectrum of liberalism have little bearing on his thought or the coherence of his arguments, because 'Abduh saw himself engaging with Islamic discourses that seem to be founded on radically different presuppositions, some of which were even incommensurable with Western liberal values.

A good case to exemplify this point is the presumption within the liberal tradition that tradition and modernity and religion and reason are incompatible, a presupposition utterly unreasonable from the perspective of 'Abduh and his Islamic reformist project. 'Abduh's position is not unreasonable considering that the opposition between the modern and the traditional, as the German conceptual historian Reinhart Koselleck argues, is ideological rather than descriptive. The conceptualization of history as always moving, and moving forward toward the future and away from the past, presupposes a natural, rather than a naturalized, opposition between the modern and the traditional. A recent development, this progressivist ideal originated between 1760 and 1780 with the articulation by European Enlightenment thinkers of the uniqueness of historical process and the possibility thereof of progress. This new concept, as Koselleck explains, is very much connected to the act of breaking away, both intellectually and materially, from the "traditional" past and its theological conception of the world. In this sense, the European or Western understanding of history becomes inseparable from the notion that tradition and modernity, religion and reason, are irreconcilable.¹⁶

Although 'Abduh's reform project was firmly rooted in the tradition of Islamic revivalism, his project was also contemporary, rooted in the social setting within which his ideas for reform came to materialize. More specifically, 'Abduh's project originates in the 1870s, a politically active period in Egyptian history marked by the expansion of European imperial

power and the rise of indigenous oppositional groups intent on obstructing the extension of European colonization over the region. In the aftermath of Muhammad 'Ali's military defeat (1840), Egypt was integrated into the world economy as a primary producer of raw goods and cash crops, mainly cotton. Its integration required that Egypt intensify the modernization of its economy as well as the rationalization of its institutions. However, lack of necessary capital to implement these changes forced the Egyptian government to borrow money from Europe at a high interest rate. Eight years after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1868, the government, its treasury coffers practically empty and on the verge of bankruptcy, conceded to a settlement that provided the European powers the "legitimate" pretext to expand their control over the finances and economy of the country. Under the agreement, an Anglo-French financial control team was set up to monitor Egypt's treasury, while other Europeans were placed in the various ministries, a guise to safeguard their own financial interests. During this period, there emerged overlapping oppositional groups, consisting primarily of middle-class intellectuals (both secular and nonsecular Muslims), who saw a subservient khedive acceding to the loss of Egypt's political and cultural independence, constitutionalists calling for measures to curb the khedive's absolutist power, and Egyptian army officers angered at their exclusion by the Turco-Circassian ruling bloc from high positions in the army. This multifaceted oppositional movement culminated in the well-known popular revolt of 1881–82, the 'Urabi revolt, which in turn gave the British the excuse they were looking for to justify a military takeover of Egypt, which they carried out in September of that year.¹⁷

'Abduh was one of the leading Muslim nationalist intellectuals of this period. Although trained in al-Azhar, 'Abduh's ideas on reform and his wide knowledge of the Islamic tradition started, as he put it, when he unlearned all he had learned at al-Azhar. His education took place in discussion circles around al-Azhar and in the hands of various mentors, the most prominent among them being Jamal al-din al-Afghani. 'Abduh's career as a public critic started in al-Ahram, but his intellectual mark was not felt until he became the chief editor of the *Official Gazette* (*al-Waqai' al-misriya*). The *Gazette* became his platform for disseminating his ideas about reform. In various articles, he described the degenerate and ignorant state of Muslims and the ways that this state made them easy prey to

Western aggression. He held accountable for this state of vulnerability an established religious authority that, because it was imbued with taqlid, was rendered powerless in the face of the forceful rearrangement of society and polity under colonial modernity.¹⁸

His writings emphasized the importance of modern sciences and technology to the advancement of Egyptian society. He advocated public education and the refurbishing of Islamic courts as a way of promoting social reforms, which included the improvement of women's status and changes in current family and marriage practices. Although he was critical of the 'Urabi revolt, he nevertheless lent his support to it, calling on all Egyptians to put aside their differences and to unite to resist the British military assault and later occupation. After the collapse of national resistance against British occupying forces, 'Abduh was jailed for three months and then exiled for three more years. During his exile, 'Abduh's influence did not abate. He, along with his mentor, al-Afghani, formed a secret society in Paris and published *al-'Urwa al-Wuthqa*, a journal that continued to publicize the idea of Islamic revival as central to fending off European aggression and as a necessary condition for the progress of Muslim societies. However, although both 'Abduh and al-Afghani agreed that reform was essential for the advancement of Muslims, they disagreed over the means to that end. Whereas al-Afghani hoped by political means to unite all Muslim countries under one Islamic state, 'Abduh doubted that political strategies from the top down would bring the desired results. This is where he broke ranks with his mentor. As a reformer, he depended more on methods of persuasion and the slow transformation of Muslim subjects through education and the law than on political agitation and revolution. After his fallout with al-Afghani, 'Abduh settled in Beirut and began teaching Islamic theology in one of the local schools founded by the Muslim Benevolent Society. As in Cairo, his home became a meeting ground for discussion and debate, attracting young scholars and writers of Muslim, Christian, and Druze background.¹⁹ Upon his return to Cairo in 1888, 'Abduh became a judge in the native courts, set up by the British in 1883 to "dispense the new codes of positive law." This experience strengthened his recognition of and commitment to the need to reform the legal system without the abandonment of its Islamic foundation. From 1899 until his death in 1905, 'Abduh occupied the highest and most prestigious religious rank a Muslim scholar can attain, that of the mufti of Egypt.

Transpiring within the context of European colonialism, 'Abduh's project of regeneration, though deeply entrenched in the struggle against British colonial rule, with its Europeanizing and secularizing mission of Egypt, was simultaneously embedded in the Islamic discursive tradition. The Muslim communities, as described by 'Abduh, were not just undergoing moral degeneracy but were also suffering from cultural and material stagnation, which made the Ottoman Empire (of which Egypt was a province) vulnerable and easy prey to European aggression and expansion. In this sense, 'Abduh's reformist project was not simply a "defensive retrenching" movement, attempting to retrieve the essence of Islam, nor was he an agnostic using Islam as a mantle merely for political expediency. Instead, 'Abduh is approached here as a Muslim reformer, one committed to the idea of uplifting Muslims from their calamitous state of moral and social decline in order to fend off further Europeanization. And because 'Abduh's beliefs are constitutive of his tasks, as stated in an earlier context, it would not be possible to identify his actions prior to, or independent from, his intentions or beliefs. Nor, for that matter, can one detach his beliefs, intentions, and actions from the particular historical context from within which all these combined elements came to operate.

Taqlid and Taghrib: Two-Sided Features of Degeneracy

'Abduh's project of renewal was double-faceted, engaging an internal front as well as an external one. The internal involved reconstituting Islamic orthodoxy by reordering Islamic knowledge to inform and regulate modern social practices; the external was to fend off the colonizing and Europeanizing mission of Europe and its singular vision of modernity. Within the tradition of Islamic revivalism, 'Abduh saw himself as a reformer with a duty to revitalize a morally decadent, socially stagnant Muslim community on the verge of collapse under pressure from an invasive colonial Europe. From his perspective, the Muslim community was left unattended by an unreflective traditional religious authority immersed in taqlid and unwilling to confront the new problems and concerns arising from the extension of capitalist modernity through colonization and taghrib (Europeanization)—an Arabic concept with a double-edged

meaning: (1) the adoption of European ways of life; and (2) estrangement, alienation (*tanfir*), and repulsion from one's own.²⁰

One theme pivotal to 'Abduh's renewal project, which engaged both the internal and the external fronts, is his critique of the concept and practice of taqlid, or "unreflective obedience to authoritative consensus."²¹ 'Abduh condemned taqlid in whatever form it might take: whether blind following of "traditional religious authority" or Europeanization (*taghrib*) and unreflective acceptance of all Western norms and values. He deemed "unreasoned following of authority" the "enemy of Islam" regardless of whether that authority was Islamic or European. His criticism of taqlid, of both religious and Western authorities, became the vehicle through which he defined his Islamic revivalist project. In essence, it became the framework from within which he debated Muslims and Europeans over what was and was not orthodox and authoritative in Islam and what was and was not appropriate in European modernity. This was evident in all his writing, including his most commonly cited work, *The Unity of Theology* (*Risalat al-tawhid*), in which he described his objective as one of "freeing the minds of Muslims from the chains of belief on authority," because God, as he explained, "has not created humankind in order to be led by a halter."²²

Considering that 'Abduh located his arguments for reform within the discourse of revivalism, it is not surprising that he would condemn taqlid and commend ijtihad and the right thereby to make rulings and set norms free from earlier precedent. One of his arguments against those who practiced taqlid was that they failed to factor in the element of current historical time and of changing social circumstances that created concerns neither encountered nor addressed by previous generations. In making the Qur'an consensual precedent rather than the primary source for his inquiry, 'Abduh's motivation was to free the religion from the dead weight of earlier accretions, which were, as he described, cumbersome and less essential to Islamic practices in his age. Freeing the religion from earlier accretions, however, did not mean dropping all precedent but to sift through this large body of knowledge by maintaining only those elements that were of relevance and discarding those that were irrelevant.²³ Ijtihad, he further argued, was a necessary and constitutive feature of this discursive discourse of revival because Muslims at all times need this investigative form of reasoning to cope more appropriately with new problems as

they arise in different historical times and contexts. That is why he regarded the unreflective acceptance of the authority of others a disease that had “vitiating the *din*,” infecting the hearts and minds of Muslims and making the religion immaterial and useless.²⁴

‘Abduh’s crusade against taqlid, though not sparing the larger community, targeted mostly the established ‘ulama, whom he accused of “wasting the best of the *din*” with their endless quibbles “over superfluous semantics and obsolescent phonetics,” leaving unattended a community in a dire state of degeneration and stagnation. ‘Abduh made the claim that the Islamic tradition “abhors and forbids *taqlid*,” charging those contemporary scholars who championed it with committing virtual blasphemy, because they acted not out of ignorance (as digressers do) but willfully and deliberately. His novel Commentary on the Qur’an, in particular, and his other work, in general, abound with scathing criticisms and denunciations, presenting a religious authority that had deviated from orthodoxy, misleading the community into a downward path of peril. Imparting a new interpretation of verses (168–69) from *surat al-Baqara* (“O Mankind! Partake of what is lawful and good on earth, and follow not Satan’s footsteps: for, verily, he is your open foe”), ‘Abduh invokes the image of Satan to describe scholars who by ascribing to this “reprehensible practice of *taqlid*” issue quasi-religious ordinances of their own that end up misleading the lay public to the wrong path. These verses, he warned Muslims at large, made it abundantly clear that taqlid and following forefathers and customs sanctioned not by conviction and reason but by ancient usage are forbidden as well as dangerous.²⁵ Further on in his commentary, he says that whereas the Qur’an forbids Muslims from submitting to taqlid, the ‘ulama commands them to

follow their words blindly; and if one follows the Qur’an and the Hadith, they oppose him with denial, supposing that in so doing they are preserving the religion. On the contrary, nothing else but this has vitiated the religion; and if we continue to follow this method of blind acceptance, no one will be left who holds this religion. But if we return to reason to which directs us in this verse, and other verses like it, there is hope that we can revive our religion.²⁶

In his war against taqlid, ‘Abduh was engaging his contemporary interlocutors, the heads of the four legal schools, who forcefully attacked ‘Abduh for violating authorized precedence (taqlid) and for reinventing

the practice of *ijtihād*, because it had not been practiced since the third Islamic century. One of ‘Abduh’s most aggressive interlocutors was his ex-teacher and contender from his al-Azhar days, Sheikh Muhammad ‘Ilish (d. 1882), who sanctioned *taqlid* precisely because he considered it to be the most compelling and effective mechanism to fight against Europeanization. In response to the argument used by ‘Abduh that the Qur’an unequivocally condemned the following of the forefathers in error, ‘Ilish drew on the work of the famous Maliki jurist al-Shatibi (d. 790 A.H./1388 A.D.), who made a distinction between the legal definition and the Quranic reference to *taqlid*. Whereas the intent of the Quranic verse was to warn against the following of corrupted inherited customs of forefathers who had deviated from the right path, the legal purpose of *taqlid* was to constrain jurists from ruling on a whim and under the influence of worldly desires and interests. From a legalistic perspective, therefore, *taqlid* was meant to be a preventive measure against the corruptions of worldly power. In his disputation with ‘Abduh, ‘Ilish rested on this view that *taqlid* is the only safe mechanism by which contemporary Muslims can maintain the fabric of their community and guard against the corruptions of power produced by Europeanization and colonial modernity.

To undermine ‘Abduh’s credibility, ‘Ilish accused ‘Abduh of innovating and bastardizing Islam. To discredit the legitimacy of practicing *ijtihād*, ‘Ilish—in his capacity as the mufti of the Maliki school—passed a legal opinion (*fatwa*) rejecting unequivocally the claim made by Muhammad ibn ‘Abdul Wahhab that Muslims were allowed to go back to the Qur’an and sound hadith to arrive at their own rulings, which in turn challenged the infallibility of authorized consensus (*ijma’*) of the early jurists. No one, he opined, has that right, except for “God and those who were thoroughly versed in religion,” meaning the early Muslim community and the founders of the four legal schools, because they had direct access to the Prophet and his companions and were therefore able to interpret the Qur’an without danger of falling into error. His opinion, moreover, warned of the dangers posed by untrained laymen practicing *ijtihād*, especially in the context of contemporary times and the dangers posed by Europeanization, and concluded with the legal opinion that it was “not permissible for a layman to abandon *taqlid*.”²⁷

As the disputation between ‘Abduh and his nemesis ‘Ilish makes clear, the issue of whether *taqlid* or *ijtihād* is the more authoritative is far

more complex than is commonly granted, with a long-standing history that is not reducible to a simple choice of either one or the other. When approached genealogically, it is clear that these two concepts are inseparable and completely dependent on one another for their definition. This, however, does not mean that their meaning and function over time do not change. For example, taqlid, as the acceptance of legal precedence (i.e., consensus) and the adherence to a legal authority (*madhhab*, or school of thought), rather than being a “sign of declining glory of Islam” as ‘Abduh maintained, was a sign of growth and development of the Islamic legal system, “a development that was not ineluctable . . . but rather symptomatic of a more fundamental and monumental event, namely the rise and final coming to maturity of the *madhhab*.”²⁸ As the “reenactment of *ijtihad*,” taqlid, as the legal expert Wael Hallaq demonstrates in his latest work, *Authority, Continuity, and Change in Islamic Law*, denoted “an intelligent application of principles.”²⁹ The transition from a case-by-case style of ruling—founded on forms of *ijtihad* reasoning—as was the practice in the early stages of Islam, to rulings based on taqlid, or principles and methods of generalization, was conceived within the Islamic discourses as an expression “of the internal dynamics that came to dominate and characterize the *madhhab* as both a doctrinal entity and a hermeneutical engagement.”³⁰ In its highest form, taqlid, Hallaq argues, “did not simply signify a reiteration of older statements or rulings” but was rather “a creative activity” involving a rigorous evaluation and contemplative examination of a practice before it was authorized. Put differently, *ijtihad* and taqlid, as categories of analysis, were not always considered as antagonistic or oppositional as they came to be visualized and represented in the modern age. Far from being a blind following of authority, as modern reformers contend, taken historically taqlid represented the emergence of a new style of discourse, which though different both in kind and quality from its predecessor was a note of maturity in the legal system.³¹ The practice of taqlid, as Hallaq also demonstrates, did indeed change in meaning and significance as it evolved over time in response to different circumstances and contexts. By the nineteenth century, however, rather than the creative activity it was meant to be, taqlid, as ‘Abduh maintained, became defensive and unreasonable, inept and ineffective in the hands of his contemporary jurists.

Revisiting the question of the ‘ulama’s ineffectiveness in his short essay *al-fiqh wal-fuqaha*’ (“Jurists and Jurisprudence”), ‘Abduh points out

how leading jurists of his time in addition to wasting “their mental effort on inconsequential linguistic problems” had managed to pass rulings founded on *taqlid* that breached the fundamental principles of the law.³² This was exemplified in a ruling on prayer, which, although unanimously approved by the leading jurists of all four schools in Egypt at that time, blatantly violated the principles laid by the Qur’an and the *hadith*. The ruling accepted prayer as a religious injunction even when it was performed, “without humility without mental and spiritual perspicacity. This is certainly an invalid rule as it violates every Quranic verse relating to prayer.”³³ These jurists justified their ruling under the rubric of intention. Some even backed it up “by distorting the *hadith* that says: ‘actions are valid only through the intentions’ . . . when the Prophet meant that acts should be unaffected and genuine . . . Do they mean when I get up to walk, what I do intend in fact is to sit and not walk? What kind of nonsense is this?”³⁴

What the *hadith* meant, he explained further, was actually the opposite of what these schools had concluded, as proper intention is necessary in order for prayer to be valid, and proper intention must include the “seeking of God’s face,” which can be accomplished only through the virtue of humility and with complete devotion of mind and heart to the worship of God. Those who do not seek God, he explained, are deemed hypocrites and their prayers are to be rejected. The abuse of religious knowledge and the falsification of its stipulations were rampant because “jurists and theologians have brazenly made their books the final authority on principles of the religion and have shamelessly enforced their rulings even when these blatantly contradicted the Text and the Sunna.”³⁵ This laxity and state of degeneracy was created by “Muslims who turn away from the Qur’an and the Hadith, following instead jurists who are in the habit of making poor arguments and authorizing incorrect rulings.”³⁶

In this same article, ‘Abduh advances a two-pronged attack on the leading jurists and scholars of his age for their sloppy prescriptions, on the one hand, and their obtuse and formalistic rulings, on the other. Again, he attributed these extremes to ignorance and a lack of understanding of the true spirit of Islam. Below I give two examples of cursory and unreflective rulings that ‘Abduh criticized as inessential to the *din* and incongruous with modern norms. The first targeted a prominent Azhari scholar,

al-Anbabi, for a “preposterous” ruling on what was and was not permissible in the enactment of ablution:

What would inspire a [hard working] commoner to waste precious time to learn intricate convoluting rules of ablution and other such rituals from convoluted and loquacious works as those taught at al-Azhar? What need is there for these obsolete and rambling works that describe in minute details what water to use for ablution in preparation for prayer? Why not follow the path of the Prophet who explains in few simple words what he meant by “Pray as you see me pray.” . . . Any drinking water would do to cleanse and wash the body for ablution.

Where did they come up with the idea that rose or orange blossom water is not permitted in ablution? . . . Why would they forbid cologne water when [as a purifying substance] it is known to kill germs? Shaykh al-Anbani declares cologne impure because it contains alcohol (medicinal spirits) and alcohol causes inebriation. This is such a weak and unreasonable argument because no sensible human being would drink that stuff knowing for certain that it will cause physical harm such as the serious burning of the throat.³⁷

One of his strongest arguments against taqlid and the “unreasoned” following of authoritative opinions, one can surmise from ‘Abduh’s criticisms, was that these practices failed to consider the social circumstances and changes (place and time) that invariably occurred, producing problems and issues that had not yet been considered or ruled upon previously. Accommodating new circumstances was not, after all, a novel or unfamiliar idea to the legal Islamic tradition, as Wael Hallaq, its most prominent contemporary scholar, discloses. Muslim jurists considered as agents of change within the legal Islamic system recognized that “change was a distinct feature of the law,” expressed through such maxims as *taghyur al-fatawi bi-taghyir al-Zaman* (legal opinions change with changing times) and the rubric of “necessity (*darura*)” and “custom (*urf khas*).”³⁸ The early-generation Muslims (*salafiya*), as ‘Abduh also recognized, considered *ijtihad* not only admissible but a public duty (*fard kifaya*) incumbent upon all learned Muslim scholars.³⁹ Thus, contrary to what the ‘ulama of his day claimed, *ijtihad* was an indispensable tool to investigate and address more effectively the problems facing Muslims in a changed and changing world.

‘Abduh’s arguments against taqlid hinged on the practice of *ijtihad* to reconfigure Islamic norms and practices through the prism of historical time and in light of the societal and structural changes produced within

colonial modernity. As circumstances changed, he argued, so did the habits and practices of Muslims, a condition denied by the leadership at that time, to the detriment of both society and religion. On occasion, 'Abduh ironically posed the following question to his interlocutors: "what are we to do when there is no precedent to follow? Are we to stop the clock so that your books and rules remain valid?" Because suspending time is impossible, "people, commoners and rulers alike, are instead compelled to abandon Islamic practices in favor of other practices that are equally unacceptable," meaning European.⁴⁰

In contrast to an "unyielding Islam" espoused by the established authority, 'Abduh presents one that is far more flexible and responsive to particular societal needs. Drawing on the works of the twelfth-century al-Ghazali and the fourteenth-century al-Shatibi (the scholar invoked by his opponent, 'Ilish, to refute him), 'Abduh posits that Islam was designed to benefit humanity and to facilitate man's welfare and happiness on this earth and beyond. In the prologue to his commentary (tafsir), he stressed that the principal purpose (*maqsad*) of the Qur'an was to "lead mankind to the path of happiness by offering guidance and benevolence (*hidaya wa-irshad/hidaya wa-rahma*)."⁴¹ His commentary stressed over and over again that the Qur'an was the guiding light to religious practices and the primary source for all believers seeking to attain happy and virtuous lives in this world and the afterworld.⁴² Bypassing the Qur'an, he repeated, was a reprehensible act because it elevated jurists and scholars above the authority of the Qur'an and the Prophet.⁴³ The vitality of the Qur'an to the good life, he said, was not wasted on the early master jurists when they ruled that "the Qur'an is the final authority (*hujat*) for all believers until the Day of Judgment," nor did they misconstrue, as contemporary jurists did, the meaning of the Prophetic hadith on which they based the following ruling: "the Qur'an is the final arbiter for you and against you."⁴⁴

'Abduh's statement that "life takes precedence over religion in Islam" revisited the view within the tradition that considered Islam to have been created for the benefit and preservation of humankind and in turn was more concerned with people's lives (how people live and conduct themselves on a daily basis) than with fixed abstract statements detached from human action and condition. For Islam to be a way of life, a diligent and continuous rethinking was vital to keep Islam viable and accessible for Muslims to follow. It was over this question that 'Abduh came to clash

with the 'ulama of his age, for the jurists in power had failed to carry out their public duty (*fard kifaya*) that involved the reordering of Islamic knowledge to satisfy societal needs and ward off, at the same time, the further Europeanization of culture.

'Abduh argues the impotence of the establishment and the detrimental effect of the establishment's inflexibility by making reference to a particular case on usury (*riba*) on which it ruled in the context of the Egyptian Treasury's declaration of bankruptcy. He compared the response of an early generation of the Bukharan Muslim community to an economic crisis with the Egyptian jurists' response to a similar crisis in Egypt. Unlike the Muslims of Bukhara, who ruled in favor of a generally forbidden practice, *riba* (usury), to mitigate the economic suffering of their community, the jurists' response to the 1870s crisis in Egypt was to

irrevocably prohibit rich Muslims from lending money [to their government] on the basis that if they permit it, it might weaken further an already weakened religion. The Egyptians instead were forced to borrow from foreigners who lent them the money at exorbitant [interest] rates with the long-term effect of bleeding the country dry and turning over its wealth and natural resources to foreigners to exploit. These jurists should be held responsible before God not only for incurring distress upon the people of Egypt, but also for violating Islamic law. What they have not done is take into account the particular circumstances and present state of affairs [in Egypt] to pass reasonable judgments that people can respect and abide by. . . . What they could have done is to set up counseling or advisory associations (*jam'iyyat*) or committees where jurists come to investigate and probe more thoroughly [issues of this kind] so that jurists may be able to reach sensible decisions [that people can] conform to. . . . [Such inquiries] might have alerted our jurists that forbidden acts under special circumstances are sometimes permitted even though in general and as universal principles [*al-hukm laysa 'amm*], they remain reprehensible.⁴⁵

Drawing on the works of earlier Muslim jurists, 'Abduh refers to a prevailing concept within the Islamic legal discourse, that of suitability (*maqсад*), which states that the aim of Islamic jurisprudence has been to constantly and consistently promote benefit (the good) to the exclusion of harm (*munkar*). This concept was derived from the Quranic vision of a world created for human benefit, enjoyment, and temptation. Unencumbered by the Christian doctrine of original sin and its extended view that a religious life demands a categorical rejection of this "fallen" world, Islam

holds the view that the primary intention of Revelation is the protection and the preservation of humankind in both this world and the afterworld. Consequently, one of the principal goals of the Islamic shari‘a under this suitability clause, according to the medieval jurist al-Ghazali, was to protect “life, property, mind, religion and offspring.”⁴⁶ The concept of suitability, as Wael Hallaq vividly illustrates, was later elaborated on and extended by al-Shatibi so that it included the practice of alleviating hardships under particular circumstances in which actions generally and universally prohibited are in turn deemed permissible under the rationale of suitability.⁴⁷ It is clear from the above quote that ‘Abduh is making an argument parallel to al-Shatibi’s: usury in the Bukharan case, he asserted, was deemed valid under this legal principle of suitability and for the specific reason of alleviating hardships that would have endangered the welfare of the community (*maslaha*). According to this legal argument, a universally prohibited act (*kulliyat*, or universal categories) may be permissible only in partiality (*juzi’iyat*), that is, within a particular context, time, and place with the stated condition that its practice be confined to this limited time and circumstance to ensure that it will not infringe on its universality and disable it permanently as a forbidden act. To persist in the practice of *riba* beyond its particulars, in other words, would constitute a violation of a universal Islamic principle. Put differently, Islamic law allows for the modification of prohibited acts by making them valid only under a specific circumstance (e.g., to mitigate hardships) and for a limited period of time. Were these practices to persist, then and only then would they be regarded as a violation of shari‘a principles.

‘Abduh blamed the jurists not only for bringing the country to its knees economically but also for its colonization, which resulted in the legalization of *riba* (interest) by the British, thus leading Muslims to commit a graver sin than they would have had they been initially permitted to do so within the confines allowed by the shari‘a under the clauses of alleviating hardship and suitability.

Mizan and Islamic Orthodoxy

‘Abduh embedded his definition of orthodoxy within the doctrine of the mean as put forth by the Ash‘ariya, a school of which al-Ghazali

was among the most convincing theorists. Al-Ghazali conceived of orthodoxy as attaining equilibrium between undue difficulty (*'usr*) and extreme ease (*yusr*) and viewed the goal of the law as the enactment of this golden rule through the creation of a balance or a synchrony between these two extremes. Identified in Arabic as *al-mizan* (the scale), the middle-of-the-road doctrine (*al-wasat*) was viewed as integral to the principle of justice (*'adl*), labeled by al-Ghazali as the balance of all virtues.⁴⁸ Within this analytical framework, a Muslim community was regarded as healthy and virtuous only when it was in a state of balance and equilibrium; otherwise, it was diseased and degenerate. The mean (*wasat*), according to al-Ghazali, was the “straight path” (*Sirat al-mustaqim*) and the orthodox way, as this balance would be impossible to attain without divine intervention.⁴⁹ Muslims seek out this straight path, he maintained, in order to reach happiness and virtue, a condition that, contrary to the Greek philosophers’ belief, was not simply a natural phenomenon but a continuous effort on behalf of the individual and community to strive toward a balance that is informed by and in conformity with the revealed commands (*shar'*).⁵⁰ That is also why al-Ghazali recognized, as did Aristotle, that the *mizan* was only a relative mean because it was dependent on the circumstances (time, place, and context) and the moral conditions (on a scale to perfection) for its definition, with the difference from Aristotle’s view being that al-Ghazali believed that this balance was unattainable without divine guidance.

One might say that 'Abduh sought out al-Ash'ariya's doctrine of the mean, not because he was fundamentally traditional, as Malcolm Kerr has argued, but because of its relevance to 'Abduh's times. Orthodoxy, in his view, was striking a balance between two extremes. The two extremes that he and his age were struggling against were *taqlid* and a religious establishment hostile to change, on the one hand, and Europeanization (*taghrib*) or the embracing of all the norms and values of European modernity, on the other. The *mizan* analytic, one can even argue, enabled 'Abduh to reconfigure a discursive terrain that would allow for linguistic and structural changes dictated under colonial modernity without abandoning the boundaries necessary to maintain an Islamic community. I suggest that it was the search for a balance between *taqlid* and *taghrib*, and not, as some claim, a nostalgia for a pristine past, that drove 'Abduh to seek out the Islamic doctrine of the mean.

Moreover, his appeal to and selective reference to specific arguments within the Islamic tradition is not read here as either a distortion of the “authentic” or the product of an eclectic mind, as selectivity of arguments is a typical practice in and a fundamental feature of all traditions, including Islam. As argued in an earlier context, scholars from all traditions, including liberalism, at one point or another go back to earlier authoritative works to harvest particular arguments that are useful to resolve or address contemporary conflicts. Every tradition at each stage of its evolution, as Alisdair MacIntyre has argued, is bound to face new challenges and problems that need addressing. Sometimes the resolution of a genuine crisis involves improvising and amending concepts and practices, but without abandoning fundamentals. No living tradition can forever remain closed and unchanging because revisions and adjustments of arguments and norms are constantly needed in order for a tradition to stay alive. This is what I would suggest happened in the early stages of the Islamic tradition. Through the process of injecting and rejecting different knowledges, cultures, and practices that accompanied the opening of new lands to Islam, the tradition was able to both survive and remain Islamic.

From the perspective of many Muslims, including ‘Abduh, *bara’it al-ash‘ariyyun* (the innocence of the Ash‘aris), the advent of the Ash‘ariya was a successful creative outcome of a crisis rather than a bleak moment in the history of the tradition, as it is often narrated by orientalists. Within the tradition, the Ash‘ariya is viewed as a synthesis of early Islamic beliefs and Mu‘tazila thought and practices rather than an ending of rationality. By redefining Islamic orthodoxy as a compromise between these extremes, al-Ash‘ariya was able to transcend the crisis and gain prevalence. A similar resolution occurred in the classical age. By al-Ghazali’s period, the Islamic tradition was confronting another conceptual and spiritual predicament due to the popularity of new ideas and practices (Greek philosophy and Sufism), defined by the religious authority then as alien (*bid‘a*) and forbidden. Instead of rejecting all forms of philosophical knowledge as utterly un-Islamic, the Muslim theologian al-Ghazali Islamicized Greek logic and extended its usage to Islamic law and theology, thus making logic an integral part of Islamic reasoning. He also integrated some Sufi beliefs and practices into the mainstream orthodox discourse, thus transcending a split between two strong opposing currents threatening to rip

apart the tradition. The author of the *Incoherence of the Philosophers* was not opposed on principle to any possibility of learning from other traditions and bodies of knowledge. Just the contrary, al-Ghazali's willingness to profit from and engage with non-Islamic thought and practices enabled the Islamic tradition to overcome incoherence and reassert its religious authority.⁵¹

Like 'Abduh, al-Ghazali engaged in reform at a time when most established theologians were antagonistic to all foreign imports, referring to them as forbidden innovations and *bida'*. Going against the current of his time, al-Ghazali made the argument for innovation by drawing on the Shafi'i school of thought that made a distinction between "good and permissible" (*bid'a mubaha*) and reprehensible and forbidden innovation (*bid'at dalal*). The integration of new practices and concepts as amendments and additions to the religion was acceptable when their purpose was to promote the good within the confines of what was authorized. Although he criticized the philosophers, al-Ghazali nonetheless appreciated the exactness of logic and its efficacy in reconstructing the religious sciences on firmer ground. He also utilized logic in his refutation of some Sufi practices and beliefs as heretical and unauthorized (e.g., self-mortification) while using the same logic to lend his approval to other practices, including the interiority of faith (*zuhd*), which helped to enhance faith by facilitating a more intense and disciplined religious experience.

In 'Abduh's age, the Islamic tradition was experiencing a different crisis and perhaps a more serious predicament, conceptual and circumstantial. In al-Ghazali's time Muslims were at the peak of their power; in 'Abduh's times, by contrast, Islamic discourses were experiencing difficulty retaining control over a (social, political, and economic) reality being rapidly taken over by more powerful discourses centered in Europe and armed with stronger modalities of power. Egypt conscripted to Europe's colonizing and modernizing project was undergoing dramatic transformation, including the reorganization of its political and social structures. Along with these new arrangements, a new idiom articulating this change emerged denigrating earlier forms and social structures as old, nonrational, and nonmodern and the newer norms and ways of life (market economy, secularism, nation-state, nuclear family, etc.) as rational, progressive, and modern. With this new articulation, religion came to be

defined as primarily nonrational and inconsequential. It is in the context of colonialism and Europe's prescriptive definition of the modern as the site of universal rationality, progressive history, and emancipatory politics and of tradition as the locus of autocratic religiosity and backwardness that 'Abduh's reform project came to unfold and acquire its particular meaning and significance.

In light of what has been said thus far, it would be difficult to conceive of 'Abduh as a liberal humanist intent on breaking away from both tradition and orthodoxy. 'Abduh's scathing criticisms of the 'ulama and his condemnation of their authority, as I have argued so far, were driven by the desire to reaffirm religious orthodoxy rather than find an alternative to it. In place of the European vision of *reform* as the replacement of religious authority with secular liberal humanism, I suggest instead that 'Abduh's conception of reform hinged on giving religion a substantive role, albeit a different one from earlier eras, in regulating moral and social relations in the modern age. In order to do so, like all reformers 'Abduh had to seek out the authoritative sources and to utilize Islamic arguments and forms of reasoning in the effort to redefine norms and practices in light of modern arrangements.

An Islamic Critique of Taghrib and Secularism

It is my argument that the concept of equilibrium or the doctrine of the mean proved germane to Muslims, including 'Abduh, because it opened a discursive terrain to amend and revise Islamic norms and practices in light of modern knowledge and power. The concept of orthodoxy as a moderation between two extremes allowed 'Abduh to reassess in Islamic terms what was and what was not of value in colonial modernity, thus integrating certain features of European modernity considered beneficial to the community and discarding others that were harmful and incongruent with the authoritative sources. 'Abduh accepted the modern nation-state and its disciplinary and regulatory forms of power, yet he rejected outright the binary construct that consigned religion to a world of the past and perceived Islam as uniquely nonrational, tyrannical, and antihumanist.

These views were implicit in his writings in general and explicitly stated in two renowned replies. The first, which came to be known as *Islam*

and the Reply to Its Critics, was in response to an article, published in a French journal and written by Gabriel Hanotaux, the French minister of foreign affairs, which criticized Islam as backward, despotic, and insistent on the inseparability of state and religion. The second, *Islam and Christianity and Their Respective Attitudes Toward Learning and Civilization* (*al-Islam wal-nasraniya bayna al-'ilm wal-madaniya*), responded to the essay written by a Europeanized Christian Arab, Farah Antun, the chief editor of the Arabic magazine *al-Jami'a*, which described a backward Islam intolerant of philosophy and science as against a Christianity that encouraged learning and knowledge and opened the gate for the birth of an enlightened and civilized Europe. In these replies, 'Abduh criticized the polar analytic used by both authors to describe a backward, despotic, and intolerant East in contrast to a progressively humanist and tolerant Christian West. The potent and incisive replies to the two outspoken defenders of Europe's modernizing mission with its prescription of liberal secularism won 'Abduh fame throughout the Muslim world as well as Europe. These articles also generated passionate arguments and counterarguments engaging the front pages of various Arabic and non-Arabic newspapers and journals. The fiery response was, in fact, not surprising, considering the Eurocentric and racist content of the articles, which were produced at the height of the imperial age and deeply implicated in the rationalization of Europe's civilizing and colonizing project.

On the whole, Gabriel Hanotaux's article, which endorsed the view that the backwardness of the East was due to an inherently despotic and antihumanist Islam, reiterated the orientalist binary constructions prevalent in that era to justify French colonizing practices in Algeria.⁵² Drawing on the racist discourse then prevalent, Hanotaux attributed the differences between the Islamic and the Christian "civilizations" to an essential difference between the two religions, one Semitic and the other Aryan. The two oppositional but interrelated features that produced the difference between the religions were (1) the immanence of the Christian God in human life as against a transcendental God in Islam; and (2) the presence of the notion of free will in Christianity and its absence in Islam, where "predetermination" prevails. These doctrinal features, he maintained, contributed to the development of opposed cultures and attitudes, marked by self-reliance and independence in the West as against

dependence and blind submission in the East. Additionally, the unity of politics and religion that is characteristic of Islam, he further opined, rendered the progress of the East impossible.⁵³

Upon reading the translated version of the article printed in *al-Mu'ayid*, 'Abduh was outraged by its content, which he considered to be a frontal and explicit assault on Islam. He wrote a potent and incisive response that was printed in the same newspaper. His powerful reply elicited a response from Hanotaux followed by a rejoinder from 'Abduh.⁵⁴ In his long reply, which stretched over six articles, 'Abduh, though essentially agreeing with Hanotaux's description of the current inferior state of Muslims, contested, nonetheless, its attribution to Islam. He criticized Hanotaux for his lack of knowledge of Islamic history as well as for concocting an Islam foreign to most Muslims. That Muslims were antagonistic to sciences and scientific forms of knowledge clearly did not resonate with Islam or its history, as Muslims had made tremendous contributions to humanity in this field. He disclaimed Hanotaux as a *muqalid* (labeling him both an imitator and amateur) for displaying ignorance and repeating unfounded claims akin to those made by Muslim scholars whom he vilified as perilous imitators (*muqallidun*).⁵⁵

In his powerful rhetorical response, 'Abduh points to Hanotaux's uneducated claim that Europe's present civilization and culture was purely Aryan, which by implication imparts a potent critique of the prevalent binary and racist analytic—a Semitic East versus an Aryan West—utilized by Hanotaux and many orientalist and colonial administrators of his age.⁵⁶ Hanotaux, according to 'Abduh, seemed to overlook that even his forefathers, the Greeks, had to borrow from earlier great cultures and build on the knowledge and arts of other civilizations in order to construct their own. All civilizations and nations, he judiciously reminded Hanotaux, borrow from one another according to need. The Muslims were not any different, for they, too, were inspired by the Persians, the Greeks, and other civilizations, incorporating some of their arts and sciences and rejecting others in the process of making them their own. So Aryan Europe could not have ascended to its greatness had it not borrowed and built on the knowledge, cultures, and experiences passed on to it by earlier civilizations, including the Islamic, or so-called Semitic, civilization.⁵⁷

His most potent criticism, however, was reserved for Hanotaux's assertion of the egregious fusion of religion and politics in Islam and its

contribution to Muslims' backwardness. He reminded Hanotaux not only of his ignorance of Islamic history but also of his own history by pointing out that Europe's trajectory toward secularism was primarily a product of a long-standing war among Christians, rather than a constitutive feature of human progress. In historicizing the specificity of Europe's path to secularism not only does 'Abduh criticize Hanotaux's assessment of his own history; he also challenges Europe's prescription of secularism as a necessary condition for Muslims' advancement. Though agreeing with Hanotaux's appraisal of the benefits accrued to Europe as a result of the separation of state and church, 'Abduh dismissed Hanotaux's advice that Muslims follow the same trajectory for "their own good." Why do Europeans insist that Muslim societies follow their path, he constantly asked, when Muslims have never experienced theocracy as Christians did, and when the separation of worldly and religious powers in Islam had already been put into effect long before the arrival of the Europeans? Muslims, he explained, "never encountered at any stage in their long history something that resemble[s] the power wielded by the Papacy of Europe, nor were they ever exposed to a Pope-like figure who could and did exert power to remove Kings and banish princes, extract taxes and decree Divine laws, all on behalf of the Christian communities."⁵⁸ And contrary to Hanotaux's contention, temporal and religious powers under Ottoman Islamic jurisprudence have always been delineated as two separate entities, with allocated tasks assigned to each:

As accorded by the shari'a, the rights and obligations of temporal and civic power are vested in the figure of the *Khalifa* or *Sultan*, and not in the figure of the *Qadi*, the representative of religious authority. The sultan is in charge of managing the internal as well the international affairs of the empire. He is responsible for its defense, for waging wars and for its foreign affairs. The [sultan] has no say over religious matters other than hiring and firing. Those in charge of religious affairs wield no power over any of his affairs nor can they ever intercept or seize political power. Religious authority can only lend advice to and oblige the sultan to abide by the laws and rulings commanded by the *shar'*.⁵⁹

As 'Abduh pointed out, there was no way to predict or guarantee that the separation of the two powers would necessarily induce progress. In spite of the historical separation in Islam, contemporary Muslims had yet to advance and show progress. Perhaps, he mockingly remarked, the

reverse might have served Muslims of his day, for they might have been better off “had their rulers combined the two powers of state and religion because these [political] rulers would not have been able to openly breach the religion in acts of oppression, excess and prodigality that brought woe to Muslims and deprived them of their dearest possession—their independence.”⁶⁰ In another context, ‘Abduh again ridiculed the notion that the separation of state and religion would lead to the advancement of Muslims as too simplistic by pointing out that the British colonists had already created a legal system made up “of Mixed and National courts that are unattached to religion (shari‘a), and where civic law reigns uncontested exactly as Hanotaux proposed; yet this arrangement has yet to shepherd progress or improve the condition of Muslims. The reverse seems to have transpired instead.”⁶¹

In disputing the orientalist discourse of power, I want to suggest that ‘Abduh shrewdly turned these arguments on their head by proposing that the causes for the sorrowful condition of Muslims lay in a weakened rather than a strong-holding Islam, thus rerouting the argument back to an internal condition of incoherence that lies primarily within the Islamic discursive tradition. Locating the disease of backwardness in the moral degeneracy of the Muslim community, ‘Abduh deemed a revived Islam (rather than its demise or confinement) a constitutive feature to Muslim advancement. As against the Europeans and Europeanized Arab intellectuals who were adamant that breaking away from Islam, in particular, was necessary to become modern and find equal footing with Europe, ‘Abduh maintained that a reconfigured Islam in light of the confusion produced by colonial modernity was the only solution for faithful Muslims seeking advancement.⁶² The Islamic reform movement, he further insisted, was not simply a political tool created to wage a war against the Christian West and its values but an internal revivalist movement intending to summon Muslims to reform themselves and their present condition through the only means that would secure success, namely, a renewed Islam. The aim of Islamic revivalism starting from the mid-eighteenth century on, he reminded Hanotaux and his Europeanized allies, was meant to

correct the faith by removing the errors that have crept into the religion. Freeing the fundamental principles of the din of all these harmful innovations (*bida’*) will free Muslims from disorder and confusion. . . . Seeking true and proper

knowledge, both religious and secular, is the only path open for Muslims to regain their moral “good character” (*malaka salima*) and once again be virtuous and enlightened members; only then could the “good” flow through to the community as a whole.⁶³

‘Abduh delved once again into the issue of whether political power should be civic (*madani*) or religious in nature in his engagement with yet another of his interlocutors, a Europeanized Egyptian by the name of Farah Antun (1874–1922). A Francophile Christian Arab intellectual, Farah Antun defended Europe’s civilizing mission, especially its secular rationality. He owned and edited *al-Jami‘a al-‘Uthmaniya*, which propagated French Enlightenment and its secular views, especially universal reason, opposition to superstitions (equated with religion), and the French revolutionary notions of liberty and equality. In one article, Antun claimed that the twelfth-century Spanish Muslim philosopher ibn Rushd (1126–98 A.D.), known as Averroes, was a nonbeliever because his central theory was founded on the efficacy of secondary causes, condemned as un-Islamic by authoritative Islamic discourse. Antun maintained that all religions are essentially alike and the prophets were no more than mere philosophers born with special gifts at conveying the “truth” through religious symbols. He proclaimed prophecy obsolete because rational individuals no longer need prophets and religion to access the truth once they can attain it on their own by using “reason.”⁶⁴

Essentially, Antun’s article recapitulated Hanotaux’s views by making the claim that the fusion of state and religion in Islam made it intolerant of philosophy and scientific knowledge, leaving Islamic civilization festering in stagnation and backwardness. In contrast, Christian tolerance and openness toward philosophers and scientists allowed for the triumph of learning over religious persecution in Europe, setting in motion the emergence of the greatest of all civilizations, namely, modernity. ‘Abduh disputed Farah Antun’s remark that the separation of temporal and religious powers that inheres in Christianity’s notion of “Give Caesar what is Caesar’s and give God what is God’s” has no equivalence in Islam. ‘Abduh argued that Islam did not ever champion political sovereignty nor did it need to seek political power because, unlike the Christian Church, the Qur’an categorically prohibited coercion (*ikrah*) in anything that pertains to faith, as is evidenced in the two following verses: “There Shall be no

coercion in matters of faith,” and “And say: the truth [has now come] from your Sustainer: let then, him who wills, believe in it, and let him who wills, reject it.”⁶⁵ All Muslim jurists without exception held the view that forcible conversion (through political power) was under all circumstances null and void and that coercion of faith as such is regarded a grievous sin. Islam as a way of life, he argued, provides moral guidance rather than seeking political power. Religious authority “lies not in its political power but in its moral guidance and in calling upon the faithful to summon the good and prevent harm. God has bequeathed this moral authority equally to all Muslims regardless of their social position in society. He bequeathed the lowest in status to rebuke those above him as He bequeathed the highest in status to correct those beneath them.”⁶⁶

He reiterated again the fact that there never was a religious sovereign power in Islam that might parallel the power of the Christian Church, in which a pope proclaiming divine right ejected kings, disinherited princes, and decreed divine laws. In Muslim societies, a Muslim political ruler represented worldly power and never ruled by “divine right”; therefore, it was wrong of Antun to “confuse an Islamic caliphate form of government with theocracy, a divinely derived government.”⁶⁷ Drawing a distinction between worldly power and religious authority would not necessarily mean that temporal power should automatically accompany a separation of *din* and *sharʿ*. Political sovereignty did not, nor should it ever, exert its power beyond those civic tasks assigned to it, which also meant that temporal power should also refrain from exerting its control over the tasks assigned to religion.⁶⁸

What becomes distinctly clear from these writings was that ‘Abduh objected less to secular forms of power than to the Europeans’ insistence that Muslims follow the same trajectory of secularization (*al-ʿilmaniya*) as theirs when that historical experience itself was alien to Muslims. The relegation of religion to the nonpolitical sphere in Europe, as ‘Abduh recognized and Western scholars have recently confirmed, was, after all, the outcome of a particular history that belonged to Europe. More specifically, one of the more important events in that history was the papacy’s forced abdication of its political and divinely legitimized power after a century of violent religious wars that ended only with the peace of Westphalia in 1648. Out of these circumstances, religion came to be seen by the ensuing generation of Europeans as the source of unruly passions, an

institution to be neutralized to safeguard the well-being of the communities.⁶⁹ Because of these circumstances, religion came to be slowly stripped of its power in Europe and relegated to the private sphere. 'Abduh, in fact, was not ignorant of that violent history, nor was he unaware of the long bitter wars that ensued between absolutism and the papacy.⁷⁰ In response to Antun's claim of a tolerant Christian Europe, 'Abduh mockingly remarked:

Is it valid to characterize surrender to the victorious tolerance? Is it correct to equate powerlessness with leniency? Are we to liken the prohibition of "evildoing" by sheer force with munificence and kindness? Is it right to describe the cohabitation in one town of both the Pope and the King of Italy and the presence of these two seats of power, that of the King and the Pope, in the same capital, a sign of Papal tolerance (*tasamuh*) towards sovereign power? Is it not more plausible that the King is likely the one to be the more tolerant [of the Pope] given that his political worldly power and military might which secured him supreme authority [over the land] could [easily] strip the papacy of the skeletal [*thumala*] power left in its name? Wouldn't it be more truthful to explain the [present state of] tranquility between science and religion as the upshot of political toleration of religion rather than religious [or Christian] tolerance of temporal political power and scientific forms of knowledge? [Would it be honest to] call the triumph of science over Christianity after what happened between them and after the monarchical usurpation of power in most of Europe's kingdoms and religion's acquiescence to trail behind, tolerance?⁷¹

Contrary to Antun's conclusion, 'Abduh argued, it was the intolerance of Christianity (the Catholic Church) that ultimately led to its disempowerment and not the other way around. He substantiated his analysis with evidence drawn from European history that demonstrated the intolerance of the Church to both science and philosophy, contrary to the claims made by Antun.⁷² The separation between the two powers and the privatization of religion as a result emerged out of a particular history of Christianity, one that was confined to Europe. As with Hanotaux, 'Abduh again questioned the wisdom behind the suggestion that Muslims follow Europe's prescribed path when their history and experience of religion was strikingly different. Muslims had neither been exposed to anything like the religious violence experienced by the Christians of Europe, nor had they encountered an institution as formidable as the church that ruled Europe by combining temporal and divine powers for centuries on end.

It is important to note that ‘Abduh was not rejecting the secular authority (*al-sulta al-madaniya*) of the modern state, as some might conclude, but was putting forward the idea that it was for Muslims to define the boundaries of civic power as they saw fit and in accordance with their needs and historical experience. In other words, he raised the issue of the social and historical particularity of Muslim societies. For change to be effective, he maintained, it had to take into account the history and culture of the region, thus making the point that secular power (*al-‘ilmaniya*) was historically and culturally specific rather than predetermined or universal. In the case of Muslims, who did not see a contradiction between the preservation of a social role for religion and the modern condition, the more pertinent question was how to limit an intrusive secular power that intended on regulating all features of life, including morality. This, I would argue, is not by any means an unreasonable position considering that even in the Western hemisphere, as recent scholars of Europe have postulated, secularism was neither self-evident nor universal. The view of religion as antithetical to European Enlightenment has been revised if not reversed in this recent literature, which suggests not that the resurrection of religion in eighteenth-century Europe was an outcome of the limits of European modernity but rather that religion was at the “heart of the project of modernity itself [and] a constitutive element of its very shaping.”⁷³ Moreover, the extent of separation between state and religion tended to vary from one Western society to another, depending on the particular historical context and social arrangements within each, which, in turn, formed how these different communities came to negotiate and define the boundaries of the separation most suitable to their conditions. The different forms of secularism, in other words, were the product of historical processes and the outcome of arrangements arrived at by different societies and not an inevitable or uniform outcome of modernity.⁷⁴

For ‘Abduh, then, the burning question was how to safeguard religion as the defining authority on morality in the context of an all-intrusive modernizing colonial state seeking to reshape the norms and beliefs of Muslims in accordance with post-Enlightenment humanism and the principles of progress and reason, which were conceived as irreconcilable with attitudes and practices founded on religious beliefs. It is clear that ‘Abduh objected to the coercive universalization of European modernity and to an all-encompassing modernizing state insisting on governing all

features of human life, including the functions previously governed by religion, those of morality and law, as will be discussed in the following chapter. What he was searching for was a discursive terrain with a more balanced boundary between worldly power and religious authority and where the latter, rather than being marginal and ineffectual, continues to authorize norms that govern Muslims' lives. This explains why 'Abduh opposed the wholesale Europeanization of society as propagated by a class of Western-educated Egyptian intellectuals, the likes of Farah Antun, who became indifferent toward religion as they came to acquire European secular values and norms. Although he accepted the need for Egypt to change, he objected to the colonial rearrangements of norms and values along the ideological bifurcation of the world into modern and nonmodern and the denigration by extension of religion. He also recognized that the key to maintaining the authority of religion in a changing world lies in the restructuring and reforming of the one institution he considered most pivotal to the revival of the Muslim community and most crucial for warding off Europeanization, al-Azhar.

al-Azhar: 'Abduh and His Interlocutors

'Abduh believed that the task of rejuvenating Egyptian society lay in the reform of the Islamic educational system, starting with al-Azhar. This was not surprising, considering that al-Azhar, the university that trained and graduated Muslim scholars, judges, teachers, and preachers for Egypt and beyond, was the seat of religious knowledge, authority, and orthodoxy. He regarded the reform of al-Azhar and the revival of the religion as two features of the same activity. The reform of al-Azhar, he once remarked, "would be the greatest service to Islam; its reform signifies the reform of all Muslims as its decadence is a clear sign of their depravity."⁷⁵ It was also necessary because reordering the religion in light of the modern condition would be an impossible task without reorganizing and restructuring the site of religious power that defined and authorized what was Islamic and what was orthodox. This issue—who claims the right to define what is truly Islamic—was a matter of contention from the early nineteenth century in Egypt, causing the rift between the established 'ulama of al-Azhar and those reformers before 'Abduh who spearheaded

the revivalist movement. This movement began with the famous scholar Hasan al-ʿAttar (1776–1834) whose modernizing suggestions, to borrow the words of the historian Afaf Marsot, were “the first breeze of the wind of change that was to blow half a century later.”⁷⁶ The endeavor was pursued by the next generation that included Rifaʿa Rafiʿ al-Tahtawi, al-ʿArusi, and al-Mahdi, among others, and culminated by the end of the century in the reform headed by ʿAbduh himself.

More specifically, the rift between the old ʿulama and this new generation of reformers can be historically traced back to the social, economic, and political restructuring of Egyptian society starting from the late eighteenth century all the way up to ʿAbduh’s age and beyond. Egypt’s reorganization in the nineteenth century mandated the creation of a unified system of education that expanded knowledge beyond the religious to include “useful” and “applied” secular scientific and technological forms of knowledge, which were deemed necessary to the modernizing project under way. These changes in turn induced a shift in societal attitudes toward what constitutes “useful” and “authoritative” Islamic knowledge and how best to propagate it. The logocentrism of the old system of disseminating Islamic knowledge through recitation and memorization of classical texts, once accepted as creative, was now dismissed as disorderly, ineffective, and moribund by a younger generation of scholars socialized under the new order.⁷⁷ To these young Muslims keen on change, the “decline” and vulnerability of Muslims were blamed primarily on this sterile arcane system of Islamic learning centered on memorization of medieval scholastic texts that were neither relevant to the *din* nor applicable to Muslims’ lives. Considering that Islam “is a way of life” was more the reason why many of these reformers came to lament what they perceived as the chaotic and dilapidated state of Islamic learning and its remoteness from the daily experiences of Muslims.

That explains why for these upcoming Muslim reformers, including ʿAbduh, the restructuring of al-Azhar and its instructional and pedagogical approach became their platform for revival and the ground on which they came to challenge the established ʿulama of al-Azhar over what is and what is not “useful” and “authoritative” in Islamic knowledge, and by implication what is and what is not orthodox in Islam.⁷⁸

ʿAbduh, to recall our earlier discussion, accused the religious authority seated at al-Azhar of being steeped in unreasoned traditionalism

(taqlid), condoning the blind following of earlier precedence at a time when the Muslim tradition was facing a crisis and was in dire need for a dynamic and knowledgeable team of scholars, jurists, and teachers unafraid of using *ijtihad* and the Qur'an to sensibly evaluate what was not of value in Western modernity.

As described by reformers, al-Azhar university, once the leading center for enlightened learning and the archetypal mosque for training refined and learned Muslims, had now lost its vitality and was reduced to such a state of decadence that it could hardly play any role in the regeneration of the Muslims at this time. The poverty of knowledge, opined 'Abduh, was clear in a program reduced to a stifling repetition of the transmitted sciences (*al-'ulum al-naqliyya*) and medieval scholastic dogma that had little relevance to the new and changing realities. While theology, jurisprudence, and Sufi orders were the primary topics of study, philosophy, Islamic logic, rhetoric, and astronomy were invariably relegated to the background. In addition, no secular subjects like history or algebra were allowed, nor were any of the modern sciences, as they were considered worldly subjects that could veer students away from the study of religion.⁷⁹ Even the original authoritative sources were hardly studied, instead substituted with medieval sources whose content was reproduced by more recent explanatory works and pedantic arcane commentaries carried to the extreme. This was especially the case with theology, a subject that was primary to the training of Azhari scholars.

The study of theology, as 'Abduh and other critics noted, consisted mostly of a couple of mutun (manuals) that students were expected to memorize. 'Abduh recalled an incident during his student days at al-Azhar that is worth retelling as it captures the apparent "intellectual atrophy" of the institution, as experienced by the younger 'Abduh. The story goes as follows: as the new young instructor at al-Azhar, 'Abduh introduced to students in his reading circle Islamic texts on logic, theology, and history that were not commonly studied or even acknowledged at al-Azhar. One of the readings that happened to anger the master scholars was al-Taftazani's (1322–1389 A.D.) commentaries on Islamic doctrines (*sharh al-'Aqai'd al-Nasafiyya*). When summoned by Sheikh 'Ilish, who accused him of divisiveness and radicalism for advocating Mu'tazila doctrine against Ash'ari orthodoxy, 'Abduh's response, which "made 'Ilish fume with anger," was to deny the accusation on the principle that he would

never condone any creed without reasoned evidence. His exact words were as follows: "Since I do not condone obedience (*taqlid*) to the Ash'ari creed, why would I then champion that of the Mu'tazila? I do not abide by consensus (*taqlid al-jami'*) just for the sake of abiding. I defer only to guided evidence."⁸⁰

Besides complaining about the poverty of education, 'Abduh depicted the institution itself as being in a deplorable state of disorder, faction-ridden with various competing sects (Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki, and Hanbali) as well as Sufi orders, each seeking out the seat of power that would guarantee its discursive dominance. Because the seat of power inhered in the position of the Sheikh al-Azhar, he who occupied that seat in accordance with the old customs now seen impractical favored his sect and supporters, leading to infighting over the discrepancy in the allocation of resources.⁸¹ Put simply, the old ways of organizing al-Azhar rendered the institution in the eyes of the reformers of the nineteenth century a redundant, inefficient, and unruly institution in dire need of reform and order.

When 'Abduh was put in charge of reforming al-Azhar in the 1890s, he was aware that reforms should be effected gradually and continuously and better still with the conviction of influential 'ulama from within the institution.⁸² This sort of change, as he often stated, had to be implemented from below and from within in order to be effective and successful. Although he truly distrusted the efficacy of existing power and its use and abuse from all parties concerned, he did on occasion have to resort to its use.⁸³ In this particular case, however, as quoted by Rashid Rida, his biographer and most trusted friend, 'Abduh did not trust the khedive, the British administration, or, least of all, the old-guard Azharis. He accused them all of corruption as well as of abuse of power to serve their selfish interests:

I intend to reform al-Azhar by convincing the Muslim scholars in charge of the institution of the need for change and not through the powerful hand of the government and its laws. There is really little difference between the corrupt (rotten) rules that govern al-Azhar and the present government, whose rules are passed by a dictator, the Khedive himself.

I would not call on or let a foreign hand infiltrate this institution. I will not permit the government interceding in matters relating to this institution since this government itself is run by a foreign power.⁸⁴

As it transpired, the reform plan was to engineer change over several phases and to include from the beginning several prominent old-guard Azhari scholars to represent the different legal schools on the advisory council, which was set up immediately after 'Abduh took over.⁸⁵

The first measure toward its centralization was the creation of an administrative council (*majlis idarat al-Azhar*) made up of three selected Azhari scholars and two outside officials (one was 'Abduh and the other a friend of his, 'Abdel Karim Salman). The council was to meet twice a month to discuss and recommend measures regarding all affairs relating to the institution, both administrative and pedagogical. At the same time that the council was set up, Hassuna al-Nawawi, a renowned Hanafi scholar open to the idea of reform, was appointed as the rector of al-Azhar. In 1895, to boost the power of the council, al-Nawawi was then appointed chairman.⁸⁶

Briefly summarized, the most important modernizing measures considered by the council were the following:

1. Rectifying the huge discrepancy in wages by regulating the salaries of teachers and staff on the basis of qualification, merit, and length of service.
2. Thoroughly restructuring al-Azhar's principal source of income, the religious endowment funds, which resulted in a quadrupling of its revenues.
3. Rearranging of the curricula and method of teaching, requiring all students to take courses in the primary subjects (*'ulum al-makasid*) of tawhid, tafsir, fiqh, usul al-fiqh, and *akhlaq* (morals) and in instrumental linguistic subjects (*wasa'il*) that included algebra and arithmetic. Secular subjects such as history, geography, philosophy, social economy, and natural sciences were also introduced in the form of electives. To secure a diploma, students were required to pass an examination in all core subjects and some of the electives. The new curriculum was intended to discourage students from studying extensive glosses and commentaries and commended the acquisition of the essentials of religious sciences, stressing the importance of cultivating moral character.⁸⁷
4. Creating a library with branches in the various loggias and in the main mosques in Cairo, Alexandria, and other towns and villages, where preparatory schools were set up.

Other rules were also passed to regulate the loggias, *riwaq*, that housed students surrounding the mosque, securing additional dormitories, improving sanitation, installing a new system of running water, and installing petroleum lights to replace oil lights formerly in use. A physician was placed in al-Azhar and a modern dispensary was created to provide students with medicine free of charge. Later on a hospital was also established.⁸⁸

Notwithstanding the council's ceaseless effort to effect change in al-Azhar, the actual implementation of these measures, especially in the curricula and pedagogy, was by contrast meager. In spite of the plan to reform the institution gradually and through the strategy of including the 'ulama in the planning and implementation of the new program, the old guard, according to 'Abduh and his allies, continued to rebuff ideas of reform. The dispute between the reformists and the old guard spilled over into the newspapers and journals and to the public at large. Both sides turned to the new print media to make their case. The 'ulama linked the reformers to Europeanization (*taghrib*) and condemned them as harmful to the community and to religion. They looked upon the new curricula and the inclusion of secular subjects as being in violation of the spirit of the institution and as a way of alienating the students from the study of religious subjects. The secularization of the curricula, they argued, would subvert the very purpose of al-Azhar because the majority of students, if only for the pragmatic reason of employment, would automatically be driven away from the study of religious subjects and sciences.⁸⁹ The objective of al-Azhar, according to the newly appointed rector of al-Azhar, Sheikh 'Abdul Rahman al-Sharbini, was to preserve the religion through the exclusive dissemination of religious knowledge rather than engage in politics and the study of "worldly subjects." In an interview solicited by the newspaper *al-jawā'ib al-misriya*, he objected to the teaching of secular modern subjects, saying that it "would transform al-Azhar mosque from a great religious institution into a school of liberal arts (*adab*) and philosophy aimed to fight religion and extinguish its light."⁹⁰ He also denounced 'Abduh's attempted reforms for producing "chaos among the students, who are now displaying signs of disrespect and contempt towards their honorable teachers [and,] deceived by what they hear, highly extolling Spencer and his philosophy while concomitantly mock[ing] with contempt what the great early Muslim Masters have to offer."⁹¹

In his rebuttal, 'Abduh responded to al-Sharbini's dismissal of philosophy as a secular subject irrelevant to religious studies by pointing out that not even al-Sharbini himself can avoid touching on philosophical concerns and subjects, such as phenomenology and logic (*'ilm al-mantiq*), when teaching speculative theology (*'ilm al-kalam*), syntax, and rhetoric. The notions of being and existence, or contingent and noncontingent existence, are essential features of Islamic speculative theology and of the doctrine of tawhid. As primary religious subjects, tawhid and theology are closely connected to worldly questions regarding the universe and cosmological truths. 'Abduh accused al-Azhar teachers, including Sharbini, of wasting many of their years on instrumental subjects consisting of superfluous enunciations and obsolete eloquence of language instead of teaching primary religious subjects. Years were spent in detailed investigation of Taftazani's diction (*bayan*) to such an extreme that such works were now placed above the Qur'an. What would al-Sharbini say of the great master theologian-philosophers, including al-Razi, who made it a habit of theirs to engage in worldly subjects, including cosmological sciences, because they were essential to the establishment of religious truths? Why, then, does al-Sharbini reject these "worldly subjects" as unprecedented innovations? Is arithmetic then to be considered a secular subject unrelated to religious knowledge, when in actuality it was an acknowledged component of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), one that is key to the study of inheritance and statutory sciences?⁹² Are we to reject mathematics, he says, "even when the Prophet himself commanded his scholars to teach it as an essential feature of Hadith studies? Is not the science of religious obligations and morals (*'ilm al-adab al-diniya wal-akhlaq*) an essential part of studying [Islam], the true *fiqh* and foundation of all shari'a sciences? . . . Are these the [secular modern] sciences that *al-ustaz* [al-Sharbini] refers to as philosophical subjects?"⁹³

Moreover, 'Abduh wondered how students could avoid the study of the primary religious subjects when the new laws at that time stated that these primary subjects (*ulum al-din*) were compulsory and that students had to spend the maximum time in pursuing these studies, while lesser time was allocated to the instrumental subjects and electives that include the secular subjects. Denying that students had lost respect for their heritage and teachers, 'Abduh refuted al-Sharbini by pointing out the difference between disrespect and the art of criticism. He recalled that

throughout the forty years of his teaching at al-Azhar, although students had been in the habit of criticizing their teachers, they were never disrespectful. Rather than being disrespectful of the tradition, the reform, he reminded al-Sharbini, reintroduced the students to the original works of the early masters: "When have al-Azhar students studied the original works of al-Shafi'i, for example?"⁹⁴

The 'ulama successfully campaigned against the reform by making the claim that these changes were nothing but measures to diffuse foreign ideas, values, and practices, with the aim of corrupting the religion and its symbol, al-Azhar. These changes, they insisted, were Western innovations to undermine the power of the religion in the society. They did not refrain from accusing 'Abduh of hypocrisy and of faking commitment to Islam. They even denounced him for the length of his hair and for wearing European shoes. One of the leading figures opposing his reform, Salim al-Bishri, became the rector of al-Azhar between 1899 and 1903 and during his tenure froze many of the measures passed by the council and suspended the annual exams required by the new program. Opposition groups were formed within al-Azhar under the leadership of Muhammad al-Rafi'i, another influential 'alim who opposed the reform and was now backed by the khedive.⁹⁵ The opposition to 'Abduh intensified as these groups began to put pressure on the government and the British colonial administration to intervene and remove 'Abduh from the council. The fact that Lord Cromer continued to back 'Abduh as a political statement against the khedive was used by the Azhari critics as further evidence of 'Abduh's links to colonial power and its secularizing agenda.

The deep polarization of the al-Azhar community, combined with the dismissal of 'Abduh's friend and supporter, Hassuna al-Nawawi, as rector, and al-Nawawi's replacement with old guard rectors who refused to implement the reforms, forced 'Abduh to resign in 1905 from the advisory council he had created and led. Many read this as a triumph of the old guard and as a setback for reform. But as 'Abduh pointed out to his friend and follower, Mustafa 'Abdul Raziq, the wheels of change are already in motion:

They imagine that by departing from al-Azhar, I have given them a free hand to regard the institution as a fertile pasture for their beasts to graze as they wish; not at all. I have kindled a fire within the precincts of al-Azhar, which no hand

can put off. . . . If it does not blaze forth today or tomorrow it would do so in three decades; and then it would be more than a simple blaze.⁹⁶

The above debates between the established Azhari scholars and Muhammad 'Abduh centered on the maintenance or the reconstitution and reorganization of the institutional apparatus of al-Azhar and the transmission of Islamic knowledge therein. These two oppositional positions represented two different Islamic responses to what was then perceived as the assault of colonial modernity upon religious authority. Both sides engaged the Islamic discursive tradition to make their arguments for or against change as a way of maintaining religion. Thus, whereas the Azhari 'ulama sought to uphold the status quo (through the practice of taqlid, the maintenance of the curriculum, and organizational hierarchy), Muhammad 'Abduh sought to reorder Islamic knowledge and its attending institutional apparatus. Central to this debate, therefore, is the question of orthodoxy. The old guards based their claim on the defense of orthodoxy, which they equated with discursive maintenance of the tradition—for example 'Ilish's defense of taqlid as the best measure to prevent further taghrib. In contrast, 'Abduh sought to reconfigure orthodoxy by drawing from within the parameters of the Islamic discursive tradition and mobilizing the Ash'ari concept of the mean (mizan) as well and ibn Taymiya's concept of ijtihad to negotiate a space between taqlid and taghrib. Drawing on multiple tendencies and arguments within the tradition, 'Abduh was able to generate a counterdiscourse that could vie with the established Islamic orthodoxy, as presented from the viewpoint of the Azhari scholars.

How was this contest to establish discursive dominance over the definition of orthodoxy carried out? The Azhari scholars defending the status quo attempted to undermine 'Abduh's religious authority by making the case that he transgressed the conceptual and institutional boundaries of communal consensus, ijma'. Their smear campaign was also meant to delegitimize his claims to orthodoxy by insinuating his alliance with Lord Cromer and the British colonial authority. 'Abduh also mobilized all the resources at his disposal, making excellent use of the new medium of print to reach a wider Islamic public. Nor did he refrain from utilizing his prominent institutional placements as a judge, Azhari administrative council member, and grand mufti of Egypt to try and institute discursive dominance. The debates as well as the political and

institutional maneuvering of both sides clearly demonstrate how power (political, intellectual, institutional) is central to the constitution of orthodoxy.

The reconfiguration of orthodoxy entails the conceptual rejecting or marginalizing of some elements and the reintroducing or revitalizing of other elements, such as *ijtihad* and *mizan*. More important, it entails the ability to actualize one's understanding of orthodoxy, which is fundamentally related to power. Accordingly, we should dispense with the conventional understanding of orthodoxy as solely an attempt to reproduce the status quo because Abduh's reconfiguration of orthodoxy involved subverting the status quo at multiple levels, at the Azhari level, at the governmental level, and within the Europeanized elements of Egyptian society, all of which were specific to late nineteenth-century Egypt, thus demonstrating that orthodoxy, as a social and historical process, is constituted rather than a given. Conceived as a relation of power, orthodoxy here is not quite the same as the hegemonic and fixed orthodoxy of conventional scholarship. As demonstrated, there were fundamental disagreements among Muslims over the meaning of orthodoxy and, by extension, over the strategies and practices most effective for the preservation of a moral Muslim community in the shadow of colonial modernity.

CHAPTER 3: AN ISLAMIC RECONFIGURATION OF COLONIAL MODERNITY

1. Quoted in Brian R. Clack, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 52. To Wittgenstein, religion is not about speculative thought, it is more about emotions and passions, and religious life is not about the acceptance of a doctrine but about *works*. See also Norman Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

2. This is how a respected postorientalist sociologist in the field delineates the difference between what is and what is not fundamentalist:

Abdu is not normally identified as a fundamentalist but rather as a liberal reformer with a nineteenth-century faith in progress through the enlightenment. The major contrast between Abdu and, say, the Muslim Brotherhood is his liberalism with regard to the application of Islamic law, particularly elements of the penal code and the restrictions on women. . . . What underlies the difference between Abdu and later fundamentalists are their different attitudes to European ideas and models: whereas for Abdu Europe, the oppressor, was at the same time the model for progress and strength, for the latter fundamentalists the West was both oppressive and culturally threatening. . . . While Abdu is clearly not a fundamentalist in the current sense, his construction of the "sacred history" as a model for the modern state was a very important episode in the quest for this Islamic state.

Sami Zubaida, *Islam, the People and the State: Essays on Political Ideas and Movements in the Middle East* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 45–46.

3. P. J. Vatikiotis, "Muhammad 'Abduh and the Quest for a Muslim Humanism," *Islamic Culture* 31 (1975): 126.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., 115.

6. Ibid., 116. According to Vatikiotis, the obstacles that prevent Islam from becoming humanist are (1) the "closeness between the spiritual and temporal, and more so, the political"; (2) the sanctity of the Sacred Law, a shari 'a "codified thousands of years ago into a *corpus juris* of lasting value, and defying change"; and (3) the "ever present anti-rational disposition of orthodoxy as well as the average Muslim" that eventually compelled 'Abduh to insist "on the return to the true religion as the only source of power" (116).

7. Although the field celebrates the death of orientalism, recent events in the Western hemisphere, including the pope's remarks on the antihumanist nature of Islam, demonstrate strongly the persistence and potency of these categories of analysis in contemporary Western discourses. See Chapter 6.

8. Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 144.

9. Ibid., 143.
10. 'Abduh's ingenious religiosity is evidenced by the following: "Cromer thought he was really an agnostic, and Blunt recorded in his diary 'I fear that he has as little faith in Islam . . . as I have in the Catholic Church.' In the same way some of his Muslim critics hinted that he was not scrupulous in performing his religious duties as a Muslim, even that of regular prayer." Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 141.
11. Ibid., 144 [emphasis is mine].
12. Evelyn Baring Cromer, *Modern Egypt* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 2:229.
13. The "invented tradition" as an analytical category is commonly identified with the English Marxist historian E. Hobsbawm, who popularized that term in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
14. See Albert Hourani, "How Should We Write the History of the Middle East?" *International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES)* 23 (1991): 125–36; Donald M. Reid, "Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age Twenty Years After," *IJMES* 14 (1982): 541–57.
15. Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 138.
16. Reinhardt Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Times*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).
17. On the history of nineteenth-century Egypt, see Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, *Egypt and Cromer: A Study in Anglo-Egyptian Relations* (New York: Praeger, 1969); Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, *Egypt in the Reign of Muhammad 'Ali* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Juan Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East: Social and Cultural Origins of Egypt's 'Urabi Revolt* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).
18. I depend largely on two sources that collected 'Abduh's works: (1) Muhammad Rashid Rida's three-volume collection, *Tarikh al-Imam Muhammad 'Abduh*, hereafter cited as *Tarikh al-Imam*. The collection includes, in addition to 'Abduh's writing, Rida's running commentaries on contemporary events, which I found not only amusing, but extremely useful for shedding light on 'Abduh's writings and activities, as well as the political intrigues and social and cultural attitude of that period; and (2) *al-A'mal al-kamilah lil-Imam Muhammad 'Abduh*, compiled and edited by Muhammad 'Imara (al-Qahira: Dar al-shuruq, 1993), 5 vols., hereafter cited as *A'mal kamilah*. All translations are mine except when acknowledged.
19. The Syrian Muslim reformer Rashid Rida was a student in this circle who later followed 'Abduh to Egypt, where he began to work closely with him and to promote and publicize his ideas in his journal, *al-Manar*.
20. The term *taghrib* comes from the stem *gharb* or west.
21. 'Abduh's criticism of taqlid was located in the works of ibn Taymiya and ibn al-Qayim, while his definition of orthodoxy drew on al-Ghazali.

22. Quoted from Charles Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1968), 130.

23. The notion of *din* as embodied practice, commonly translated as “religion” does not have the same meaning as the term *religion* in modern Western Christian traditions. Within the Islamic tradition, the notion of *din* correlates to conduct or a course of action; thus, the word *habitus* conveys more accurately the Arabic meaning of *din* than does *religion*. *Dana bil-islam*, according to *Lisan al-Arab*, is for one to become obedient to Islam, while *din* signifies an active commitment to obedience through the enactment of certain practices and rituals.

24. This is contrary to Rahman’s analysis that ‘Abduh, following in ibn ‘Abdul Wahhab’s footsteps, wanted to liberate Islam from all medieval works. Neither of these authors proposed to do so. In his article “Jurists and Jurisprudence,” ‘Abduh, in fact, deals specifically with this matter by scolding his contemporaries for following outdated works like *al-tanweer* (Illumination) and *al-kinz* (the Treasure) and not *al-Zayla’i*, a medieval Hanafi jurist, in matter of law. See ‘Abduh’s “al-Fiqh wal-fuqaha,” in *A‘mal kamilah*, 3:213. In regard to ibn ‘Abdul Wahhab, see Chapter 2.

25. ‘Abduh, *A‘mal kamilah*, 4:393; see also Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur’an* (Lahore: Matba‘at Jawahar ul-Ulum, n.d.), 34, n. 137. Volumes 4 and 5 of *A‘mal kamilah* are dedicated to ‘Abduh’s tafsir or interpretation of the Qur’an.

26. The translated quote was taken from Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 130. See also ‘Abduh, *A‘mal kamilah*, 3:395, 396–97.

27. See Indira Falk Gesink, “Chaos on Earth: Subjective Truths Versus Communal Unity in Islamic Law and the Rise of Militant Islam,” *American Historical Review* 108 (2003): 718–20.

28. Wael Hallaq, *Authority, Continuity, and Change in Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 85.

29. *Ibid.*, 103.

30. *Ibid.*, 85. Five classifications of analytical categories evolved in the process of creating a positive legal knowledge: *ijtihad*, *takhrij*, *tarijih*, *taqlid*, and *tasnif*.

31. *Ibid.*, 113.

32. ‘Abduh, “Fiqh wal-Fuqaha,” in *A‘mal kamilah*, 3:212–15.

33. *Ibid.*, 3:212.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*, 3:213.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*, 3:214. On encounters between al-Anbabi and ‘Abduh, see Rida, *Tarikh al-Imam*, 1:426, 450, 944. Confirming the ignorance of Azhari scholars, Rida recalls his visit to al-Azhar to see al-Anbabi, where he came across some of

al-Anbabi's friends, including Sheikh al-Zawahiri, who upon Rida's disclosure that he was from Mount Lebanon turned to his friends in ignorance to ask where Mount Lebanon was, in the east or in the west. Ibid., 411.

38. Hallaq, *Authority, Continuity, and Change*, esp. chapters 6 and 7.

39. In *Tafsir juz' 'amma*, 'Abduh makes his case for ijtihad as a duty of every rational believer. Muhammad 'Abduh, *Tafsir juz' 'amma* (al-Qahira: Muhammad 'Ali Subayh, 1967), 169.

40. 'Abduh, "fiqh and al-Fuqaha," in *A'mal kamilah*, 3:214.

41. 'Abduh, *A'mal kamilah*, 4:7. Al-Shatibi is mentioned several times in 'Abduh's work, which clearly indicates that he utilized al-Shatibi's notion of *maslahah* and *istislah*. 'Abduh listed al-Shatibi's work on fiqh as required reading for students seeking higher education in dar al-'Ulum, al-Azhar among others.

42. Ibid., 7–12. In the "Introduction to the Exegesis of the Qur'an," 'Abduh presents his rationale for reinstating the Qur'an as the primary source and his reasons for interpreting the Qur'an anew.

43. This was an argument utilized by many of the eighteenth-century revivalists, including ibn 'Abdul Wahhab and al-Shawkani. See Chapters 1 and 2.

44. 'Abduh, *A'mal kamilah*, 4:9. He reiterates the same argument in his commentary on *surat al-fatihah*: "the Qur'an should be the source (*asl*) to all the Islamic legal schools (*madhahib*). These schools should refer to and seek answers in the Qur'an rather than the other way around where the Qur'an becomes a tool for them to justify and rationalize their dogmatic doctrinal positions. I want the Qur'an to be the primary source and not an auxiliary, to be the judge and not the one to be judged [*kitab allah matbu' la tabi'; hakim la muhkamun 'alayhu*]." Ibid., 22–25.

45. 'Abduh, *A'mal kamilah*, 3:214–15. Many historians attribute the economic crisis of the 1870s to excessive expenditures incurred primarily in the building of the Suez Canal. See Afaf Lufti al-Sayyid-Marsot, *A Short History of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 96–100.

46. Hallaq, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories*, 112.

47. Ibid. On Shatibi, see esp. chapter 5, "Social Reality and the Response of Theory," 162–206.

48. Mizan, according to al-Ghazali, is integral to justice. It defines the normative character of God's wisdom as is indicated in the following Quranic verse (5:7–9): "We have sent you the Book and the Balance, that people may act with justice." Al-Ghazali, *al-Qistat al-mustaqim: al-mawazin al-khamsa lil-ma'arif*, ed. Mahmud Beijo (Dimashq: al-Matba'a al-'ilmiya, 1993), 19–27.

49. The middle-of-the-road rule is found in Aristotle's notion of the golden mean, with the difference that whereas the Greeks considered the "good" as natural, for Muslims the "good" is divinely driven. Al-Ghazali Islamicized Greek philosophy and blended it into the Islamic belief system. For more on al-Ghazali, see

Mohammad Sharif, *Ghazali's Theory of Virtue* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975); al-Ghazali, "The Rescuer from Error," in *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Muhammad 'Ali Khalidi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 59–99.

50. The middle, or *wasat*, is further demonstrated in the Qur'an (17:29): "Make not thy hand tied to the neck, nor stretch it forth to its utmost reach, so that you become blameworthy and destitute." It is also demonstrated in verse 25:57, which states, "Those who, when they spend, are not extravagant and not niggardly but hold a just [balance] between the two [extremes]"; and in verse 7:31, "Eat and drink, but waste not excess, for God loveth not wasters," and in the prophetic saying "the best in all things is the mean." See also al-Ghazali, *al-Qistat*.

51. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 2:180–92; Rahman, *Islam*, 109–11. For a new and refreshing look on al-Ghazali and his contribution to the Islamic tradition and his relevance to the modern period, see Ebrahim Moosa's recent study, *Ghazali and the Poetics of Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

52. Entitled "Face to Face with Islam and the Muslim Question," the article made its first appearance in a French journal, *Journal de Paris*, in 1900. A version of this essay was translated into Arabic and published in the Egyptian newspaper *al-Mu'ayyid*, which supported the Islamists and was owned by Sheikh 'Ali Yusuf. The translated version angered many Muslims in Egypt and beyond, generating a heated debate among Europeans, Europeanized Arabs, and Muslim modernists over the nature of stagnation (*inhibitat*) and its causes.

53. Charles Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968), 86–87; see also 'Abduh, *A'mal kamila*, 3:263–64.

54. 'Abduh wrote six essays on the subject: the first three appeared in *al-Mu'ayyid* and responded to Hanotaux's first two essays. The other three were in response to Hanotaux's interview with the Francophile Egyptian newspaper *al-Ahram* (conducted by Bishara Taqla, the editor) in which Hanotaux had disputed 'Abduh's first response to him, which also appeared in *al-Ahram*. The six essays and Hanotaux's articles and interviews were compiled along with four pieces from his "Theology of Unity" (*risalat al-tawhid*) and were published in a book under the title *Islam and the Reply to Its Critics [al-islam wal-radd ala muntaqiduha]* in 1924. In the first response, 'Abduh notes that Hanotaux's articles were meant to inform French colonial policies in Algeria and their other Muslim colonies. See also 'Abduh, *A'mal kamila*, 3:217–51; Rida, *Tarikh al-Imam*, 2:400–468.

55. For background information on 'Abduh's response to Hanotaux, I suggest reading Rida, *Tarikh al-Imam*, 1:799–802.

56. An example of this racist binary analytic is Lord Cromer's *Modern Egypt*, and a strong critique of it is Edward Said's *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

57. "Islam, Muslims and Colonialism" is the first of the essays in a series of responses to Hanotaux. See 'Abduh, *A'mal kamilah*, 3:222–26.

58. *Ibid.*, 249–50. "Muslim Stagnation and Its Causes" is the fifth essay in this series.

59. *Ibid.*, 250.

60. Translation quoted from Charles Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 89. 'Abduh here is mocking the rulers of Egypt as well as the Ottoman Porte. In the debates on the nature of Muslim stagnation, many, including Islamists, have attributed the decline of Muslims to the Ottomans.

61. 'Abduh, "Muslim Stagnation," in *A'mal kamilah*, 3:250.

62. *Ibid.*, 3:248. 'Abduh makes the point that the revivalist movement started in the mid-eighteenth century, with Muslim reformers appearing in India, Afghanistan, Arabia, and Africa as well as other regions of the Muslim world. Each of these movements defined its goal as the moral reformation of the Muslims in spite of the difference in their approaches regarding the cure (3:247).

63. *Ibid.*, 247–48.

64. See al-Kumi, *al-Sahafa al-Islamiyya fi misr* (al-Mansura: Dar al wafa', 1992), 183. On Farah Antun's motives and politics, see Rida, *Tarikh al-Imam*, 1:805–16.

65. 'Abduh, *A'mal kamilah*, 3:264, 310. In response, 'Abduh cited the two Quranic verses (2:257; 18:29) that he interpreted as forbidding Muslims to combine the two authorities together for fear of coercion.

66. *Ibid.*, 3:308–9.

67. *Ibid.*, 3:308.

68. *Ibid.*, 3:307–9.

69. On the religious wars and the decline of ecclesiastical power in Europe, see Owen Chadwick, *The Reformation* (Baltimore: Pelican Books, 1964), esp. 316–20, 325–47, 375–405.

70. Despite the intense doctrinal disagreements among Muslims, these did not translate into violence and wars among them:

Who ever heard of a war between the early salafi movement and the Ash'ariya despite the deep disagreement among them, or between *ahl al-sunna* and the Mu'tazila despite the irreconcilable differences in their creeds? Moreover, we never heard of Muslim philosophers becoming a sect or ever entering into a violent war between them and the others. Yes, we know of the *Kharajities* and the war against them and the *Qaramita* sect and the war against them, too. These wars,

however, were politically and not doctrinally driven, they held particular views on political sovereignty, and their wars against the caliphs were not over creed but over politics and their desire to overtake political power.

See *A'mal kamilah*, 3:267.

71. *A'mal kamilah*, 3:353–54.

72. 'Abduh goes through the history of the Spanish inquisition and discusses torture and the burning alive of those condemned as a habitual practice by the Roman Catholic Church in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. He discussed the Turin meeting in 1502 and how the Church declared as apostates anyone interested in the philosophical writings of ibn Rushd. He mentions the forced conversions of Jews and Muslims to Christianity and the intolerance of the Church to beliefs and practices other than its own. He gives many historical examples to substantiate how the Church, contrary to Antun's description, was intolerant of scientific knowledge, including medicine and astronomy, among others. Even the Protestant reformist movement demonstrated its intolerance to philosophy: Luther damned Aristotle and his writings, and Calvin, though less vocal in his condemnation of Aristotle, considered him an apostate, as did Luther. In contrast, the medieval Muslim jurists and scholars regarded Aristotle with great respect and considered him their "principal teacher." The Protestant movement was as intolerant of science and learning as was the Catholic Church. It was, after all, a religious movement aiming to reform the Church, not to find an alternative to the religion. See *A'mal kamilah*, 3:286–93.

73. See *American Historical Review* 108 (2003): 1058–1104. Dror Wahrman's "Review Essays: God and the Enlightenment" introduced Sheehan's "Enlightenment, Religion, and the Enigma of Secularization," and Dale Kley's "Christianity as Casualty and Chrysalis of Modernity: The Problem of Dechristianization in the French Revolution." These two articles clearly demonstrate that secularization in the Western hemisphere has never in practice fully separated religion from politics or other social spheres, thus making the point that secularization is neither self-evident nor universal. As Sheehan argues, "religion has never been left behind, either personally or institutionally. Instead it has been continually remade and given new forms and meanings over time. Thinking more carefully about religion is a fundamental step in understanding both the Enlightenment and the enigmas of secularization" (1072).

74. On this discussion, see John McManners, *Church and Society in Eighteenth-Century France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Jonathan Clark, *English Society, 1600–1832: Religion, Ideology, and Politics During the Ancien Regime*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Hent De Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); B. W. Young, "Religious History and the Eighteenth-Century Historian,"

Historical Journal 43 (September 2000): 857; Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Rajeev Bhargava, ed., *Secularism and Its Critics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Philip Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

75. Rida, *Tarikh al-Imam*, 1:425.

76. Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, "Modernization Among the Rectors of al-Azhar, 1798–1879," in *Beginnings of Modernization in the Middle East: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. William R. Polk and Richard L. Chambers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 275.

77. Brinkley Messick, *The Calligraphic State*, esp. chapter 1, on the genealogy of the text; Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 80–94.

78. 'Abduh was not alone in this judgment; many of his generation called for similar reforms. Their anger at the condition of al-Azhar was voiced in journals that included *al-Manar*, *al-tankit wal-tabkit*, *al-uztadh*, and *al-Mu'ayid*, among others. For more information on the reform of al-Azhar and the newspapers that covered this topic, see Kumi, *al-Sahafa*, 15–100, 147–55.

79. Rida, *Tarikh al-Imam*, 1:527.

80. *Ibid.*, 1:133–34.

81. For more information on the internal politics of al-Azhar, see A. Chris Eccel, *Egypt, Islam, and Social Change: Al-Azhar in Conflict and Accommodation* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 1984), 168. Before the 1870s, resolution of conflicts, as reported by Ali Mubarak Pasha, was left for the sheikhs of the arcades or sheikh al-Azhar to resolve. Only when these conflicts exceeded the settlement of the al-Azhar were government agencies called upon (*muhtasib*).

82. When appointed for the job, 'Abduh enjoyed the full support of the khedive, 'Abbas Hilmi, but their cordial relationship ended in 1894, and the khedive withdrew his political backing of 'Abduh, turning against 'Abduh and supporting his enemies, the old guard. In 1899, for instance, the khedive backed the appointment of Salim al-Bishri as the rector of al-Azhar. A defender of the status quo, al-Bishri made sure that those reforms passed while 'Abduh was in charge were shelved and made inactive. He also suspended the annual student examination introduced during 'Abduh's tenure. All these political intrigues are recorded in detail in Rida, *Tarikh al-Imam*, 1:426, 487–95.

83. 'Abduh, *A'mal kamilah*, 3:195, 197. Although 'Abduh used caution when seeking the support of the state, he was constantly caught in the intrigues and political rivalries between the khedive and the British administration, sometimes unintentionally. For instance, when he lost the backing of the khedive and was pressured to resign his position at al-Azhar, he received the backing of the more powerful Lord Cromer, who rejected his removal, leading many (including

Azhari scholars) to conclude that 'Abduh was no more than an agent of the British and an endorser of their project.

84. Rida, *Tarikh al-Imam*, 1:425. This was based on a personal conversation between Rida and 'Abduh, as recorded by Rida.

85. The three distinguished Azhari members on the council representing the different madhahib or legal schools were Salim al-Bishri, a Maliki; Hasan al-Marsafi, a Shafi'i; and Yusif al-Nabulsi, a Hanbali. Rida, *Tarikh al-Imam*, 1:425–27.

86. Hassuna al-Nawawi (1838–1924) became rector following the resignation of al-Anbabi in 1895 and after assisting him for a year or so. A Hanafi reformer, al-Nawawi taught at al-Azhar in the *Dar al-'Ulum* (School of Social Sciences) and the School of Business Administration (*madrasat al-idara*), later to become the School of Law (*madrasat al-huquq*). Aware of the difficulty of teaching conventional fiqh, he composed a simplified version of Hanafi fiqh (the Ladder to Those Who Seek Guidance) for students not trained or in training to acquire knowledge in traditional fiqh. In 1897, al-Nawawi was appointed mufti of Egypt and as a result came to occupy the two most powerful Islamic posts, the rector of al-Azhar and grand mufti of Egypt, until his dismissal by the khedive four years later. Like 'Abduh, he was dismissed for challenging the khedive's power by claiming that the khedive was not above the law and had to abide by its rules. The conflict arose when the khedive tried to appoint lawyers from the national courts to serve in the shari'a courts, thus overriding the authority of the grand mufti of Egypt. Al-Nawawi was reappointed rector of al-Azhar in 1907 and resigned in 1909. See Jakob Skovgaard-Peterson, *Defining Islam for the Egyptian State: Muftis and Fatwas of the Dār al-Iftā* (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 1997), 111–15.

It is worth noting that al-Nawawi, like other Muslim reformers of his age, including al-Abbasi al-Mahdi and 'Abduh, ended up being alienated from the khedive who initially backed their efforts in the hope of enhancing his secular power and not because of a genuine commitment to Islamic reform. In other words, these reformers were bound to clash with the khedive once he tried to undermine the changes attempting to enhance Islamic authority rather than to diminish it.

87. For more, see Rida, *Tarikh al-Imam*, 1:432–33, 440–43, 446–65. As an outcome of these changes, the students in the first four years of training were forbidden from reading glossaries and super-commentaries (*hawashi*) and after that were only allowed to read limited commentaries with their master teachers; reading glossaries, however, required special permission from the council. See *Fatawa al-Islamiyya min dar al-ifta' al-Misriyya* (Cairo: wizarat al-awqaf, al-majlis al-a'la lil shu'un al-islamiyya, 1980), 7:361; also Skovgaard-Peterson, *Defining Islam*, 119.

88. On detailed information of the modernization of al-Azhar, see Eccel, *Egypt, Islam, and Social Change*.

89. One spokesman against the reform of al-Azhar was Sheikh al-Buhayri, who in a heated argument disputed 'Abduh's views on al-Azhar by reminding him that the institution continued to produce men with keen intellect and considerable knowledge, 'Abduh among them. The argument went as follows: Al-Buhayri asked 'Abduh, "Do you not know that you are an Azhari, and yet you have ascended to where you are on the stairs to knowledge and have become a brilliant scholar?" 'Abduh's responded: "If I have a portion of true knowledge, as you mention, I got it through ten years of sweeping the dirt of Azhari knowledge from my brain and to this day it is not as clean as it should be." Eccel, *Egypt, Islam, and Social Change*, 157.

90. Rida, *Tarikh al-Imam*, 1:502. Rida describes al-Sharbini as a leading scholar in al-Azhar, known for his piety and disdain for worldly matters, until his co-optation by the khedive, who offered him the rectorship of al-Azhar (1323 A.H./1905 A.D.) with the condition that he put a halt to the reforms introduced by 'Abduh (501, 512).

91. Rida, *Tarikh al-Imam*, 1:503.

92. Ibid., 1:506. 'Abduh's response to Sharbini was anonymous.

93. Ibid., 1:507. I took the liberty of translating the term *funun* in the original as secular modern subjects because it captures best Sharbini's references to '*ulum al-a'sur* (modern sciences) and *umur al-dunya* (worldly or secular matters), which he accused 'Abduh of introducing to al-Azhar.

94. Ibid., 1:508.

95. In a public gathering of the sheikhs at the palace, 'Abduh denounced the khedive for recommending the name of a sheikh, a favorite of the khedive, for the assignment of the "robe of honor" because it infringed on the regulations governing these assignments as prescribed by the advisory council. He asked the khedive to either amend the regulations to empower him with that right of assignment or else to abide by the principles laid down by the regulations. Later on, the advisory council, under the influence of 'Abduh, turned down the candidate suggested by the khedive, intensifying the animosity of the khedive toward 'Abduh. Rida, *Tarikh al-Imam*, 1:497, 500. The periodicals that voiced the opinions of those who criticized the reform policies of 'Abduh were *al-Mu'ayid* as well as the nationalist newspaper *al-liwa*.

96. The quote is taken from Mahmudul Haq, *Muhammad 'Abduh: A Study of a Modern Thinker of Egypt* (Aligarh: Institute of Islamic Studies, 1970), 75.

CHAPTER 4: GOVERNABLE MUSLIM SUBJECTS

1. T. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 225. In the chapter titled "Reconfigurations of Law and Ethics in Colonial Egypt," Asad criticizes the new scholarship in Islamic studies for mistakenly assuming that "modernity introduced subjective

RECONFIGURING ISLAMIC TRADITION

Reform, Rationality, and Modernity

Samira Haj

STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
STANFORD, CALIFORNIA

Stanford University Press

Stanford, California

©2009 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University.

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system without the prior written permission of Stanford University Press.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free, archival-quality paper

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Haj, Samira, [date]

Reconfiguring Islamic tradition : reform, rationality, and
modernity / Samira Haj.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8047-5250-3 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Islamic modernism. 2. Islamic renewal. 3. Islam and reason.
4. Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, 1703 or 4–1792. 5. Muhammad
'Abduh, 1849–1905. 6. Philosophy, Islamic—History. I. Title.

BP166.14.M63H33 2009

297.8—dc22

2008011825

Typeset by Westchester Book Group in 11/13.5 Adobe Garamond

Chapter 2 is a revised version of “Reordering Islamic Orthodoxy,” *Muslim World*, v. 92 (Fall 2002).