

‘Abduh and the discourse of Islamic reform

Introduction

After his return to Egypt, ‘Abduh assumed various public roles and established his fame both in the country but also in the wider Muslim world. This was also the period when he produced his most influential works that would shape his intellectual legacy and define his reputation as a Muslim reformer, such as his *Risālat al-Tawḥīd* (Treatise on Divine Unity), his Qur’an commentary *Tafsīr al-Manār* (The Lighthouse Commentary) and various apologetic works. As seen in the previous chapter, ‘Abduh also developed and embodied a new model of intellectual leadership in Islam that engaged with contemporary problems Muslim societies faced. This reformed understanding of religious authority was based on intellectual foundations laid earlier in his life and sought to synthesize the diverse heritage of Islamic intellectual life and to make it relevant to the lives of Muslims in the modern world. In addition, ‘Abduh continued to use non-scholarly avenues to disseminate ideas in order to increase the appeal of Islamic knowledge traditions outside of scholarly circles.

Although ‘Abduh distanced himself from the anti-colonial activism of his teacher Afghani, the mystico-philosophical instructions he received as a young man still shaped the doctrinal discourse at this stage of his life. ‘Abduh incorporated Islam’s philosophical heritage to argue for the inherent rationality of Islam and to attack in particular the mindset of *taqlīd*, the blind imitation of scholarly authorities that sidelined the authority of the primary sources of Islam and undercut intellectual independence which ‘Abduh considered crucial for making Islam relevant to the modern world. In his theological works he faced a similar dilemma as in his role of mufti: he had to adhere to a particular restrictive approach to Islamic jurisprudence by implementing the rulings of the Hanafi school as its official mufti. Yet, he also wanted to use his role to provide flexible and pragmatic solutions to contemporary problems

which utilize the broad field of Islamic jurisprudence in its fullness. As a writer in Islamic theology, 'Abduh also realized that his theological discourse had to conform to certain parameters which define orthodoxy in a Sunni context. Despite his references to authority figures in Sunni Islam like Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari (873–936) whose school would define mainstream Sunni theology, his writings still engage with a wide range of intellectual traditions and continue to bear the imprint of Ibn Sina, Ibn Khaldun, Ibn Miskawayh and other philosophers to a significant extent.

In his articles in the journal *al-'Urwa al-Wuthqā*, 'Abduh refers to the pious ancestors (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*) as the historical role model in early Islamic history who embodied the true ethos of Islam. References to the pious ancestors also occur frequently in his writings at this time and were meant to strengthen the orthodox credentials of his reformist project. However, the manner in which he employs this term to describe his approach to Islamic reform includes several ambiguities which previous scholarship has not recognized. The Salafi label disguises the nature of his reforms more than it adequately describes them and obscures his complex engagement with the capaciousness of Islamic intellectual traditions.

'Abduh and the pious ancestors (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*)

In the beginning of his autobiographical remarks, 'Abduh describes the objectives of his reformist project:

First, to liberate thought from the shackles of blind imitation (*taqlid*) and understand religion in the way of the ancestors of the community (*salaf al-umma*) before disagreements appeared; to return in the acquisition of religious knowledge to its first sources and to weigh them in the scales of reason which God has created in order to prevent excess and to lessen delusion and adulteration in religion, so that the wisdom of God may be fulfilled in preserving the order of the human world. Religion in this respect can be counted as a friend of science, investigating the secrets of existence, summoning respect for established truths and demanding reliance on them in one's moral life and in the reform of one's conduct. All this, I count as one matter, and in my advocacy for them, I stood in opposition to the opinion of two great groups of which the body of the community is constituted – the students of the different fields of religious knowledge, and those who are like them, and the students of the arts of this age, and those who are on their side.¹

The primary target of 'Abduh's reformist work is opposing the ethos of *taqlīd*, the blind imitation of previous scholarly authorities that has caused the intellectual stagnation of Islamic scholarship and undermines the authority of the primary sources of Islam. In addition, he emphasizes the centrality of reason in this reformist endeavour. Reason is a human capability bestowed by God and necessary to avoid irrational readings of Islam and to ensure openness towards the insights of modern science. Equally important: such rational underpinning of a rediscovery of the foundations of Islam encourage an ethical reading of the religion whose primary objective is to reform human conduct (*iṣlāḥ al-'amal*).

The historical manifestation of this particular type of Islam are for 'Abduh the ancestors of the community (*salaf al-umma*), an ambiguous term that invites different interpretations. In other contexts he also refers to 'the pious ancestors (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*)',² 'the first ancestors (*al-salaf al-awwalūn*)',³ or just 'the ancestors (*al-salaf*)'.⁴ References such as these to early Muslims have led to the designation of 'Abduh's reform movement as Salafiyya, a term he did not use himself but goes back to his disciple Rida.⁵ To distinguish 'Abduh's school of thought from contemporary puritanical forms of Salafism, that originated in the Wahhabi movement, scholars also refer to it as '*modernist Salafism*'.⁶ Modernist Salafism is characterized by advocating a return to the primary sources of Islam, the Qur'an and the *sunna* of the Prophet, the rejection of *taqlīd* and the essential conformity of Islam with reason and its alignment with modern science.⁷ 'Abduh's description of his reformist project confirms such a reading. However, both the most influential works he produced in this period and his use of the term *salaf* suggest a more complex and ambiguous appropriation of Islam's intellectual heritage which combines different strands of Islamic thought he had studied and engaged with earlier in his life.

The pious ancestors (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*) is understood in Sunni Islam as the designation for the first three generations of Muslims: the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions, their successors (*tābi'ūn*) and the successors of the successors (*tābi' al-tābi'in*). This distinction is based on a hadith attributed to the Prophet Muhammad⁸ and also denotes the period of Islamic intellectual history before Greek philosophy impacted Islamic fields of scholarship. Previous scholarship – with the exception of Haddad⁹ – has not recognized 'Abduh's equivocal use of the term *salaf*. 'Abduh includes quite different groups under the label of *salaf* and uses the term in at least four different ways. In a brief outline of the place of reason and the reception of Greek philosophy in early Islamic scholarship, he presents 'the school of the ancestors (*madhhab al-salaf*)'¹⁰ as those who rejected the use of reason altogether. 'Abduh employs

the term here in reference to the people of tradition (*ahl al-ḥadīth*), the group of early Islamic scholars around Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780–855) which argued against the use of philosophical discourse in Islamic theology and demanded all articles of faith to be based on scriptural evidence alone.¹¹ However, 'Abduh does not subscribe to this approach but presents the theological approach of Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari and his school as a middle position between two extremes: Hanbali scripturalism and the overreliance on reason of theological schools like the Mu'tazila. He is also critical of the scholars of the Hanbali school who declared al-Ash'ari an infidel and demanded his execution.¹² Given his overall broad irenic intellectual approach, it is very difficult to argue that 'Abduh adhered to the strict scripturalism of the Hanbali school of thought in doctrinal matters, as Rida suggests.¹³ One is hard-pressed to find many references to prophetic traditions (*aḥādīth*) in 'Abduh's writings – an important element to qualify as Salafi scholar for whom – next to the Qur'an – the *sunna* of the Prophet and its collection in *aḥādīth* is the most authoritative source to define Islamic doctrines and practices. Important scholarly figures of the Hanbali tradition, such as Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), are also missing as reference points in his writings.

'Abduh also uses the term to refer to different generations of early Muslim scholars and includes the influential scholar Hasan al-Basri (641–728) among the *salaf*. Al-Basri is considered to be part of the second generation after the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions, the so-called successors (*tābi'ūn*). In his other writings, 'Abduh employs the label *salaf* in much broader terms. Bemoaning the poor status of Islamic education, he urges the students of Islamic scholarship to study directly 'the works of the ancestors (*āthār al-salaf*)',¹⁴ which for him includes the Qur'an commentaries of al-Tabari (839–923), Abu Muslim al-Isfahani (869–934) and al-Qurtubi (1214–1273). While all these figures are crucial in shaping exegetical traditions in Sunni Islam, they are not part of the pious ancestors. Likewise, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111) is presented as one of the pious ancestors¹⁵ despite living more than two hundred years after their demise. 'Abduh also includes the theologians Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari, Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (853–944) and Abu Bakr al-Baqillani (940–1013) – figures that shaped Sunni theology substantially but were not of the pious ancestors. 'Abduh's more wide-ranging use of the label *salaf* comprises Islamic scholars of the first sixth centuries of Islam.¹⁶

This more inclusive understanding of the *salaf* might be informed by the more technical distinction between different periods in the development of Islamic theology before and after the thirteenth century that goes back to Ibn Khaldun.¹⁷

Ibn Khaldun refers to theologians until al-Ghazali as ancestors (*salaf* – later also known as *mutaqaddimūn*) and includes figures like al-Ash‘ari who laid the foundation of theology as a discursive discipline in Islamic thought and al-Ghazali who engaged in a critique of philosophy. Theologians that appeared after al-Ghazali Ibn Khaldun designates as successors (*muta‘akhkhirūn*). They sought to broaden the intellectual remit of Islamic theology: it was not just to define, defend and rationalize matters of creed (*‘aqā’id*) but to become the epistemological foundation of all Islamic fields of knowledge, incorporating metaphysics, science and logic. Ash‘ari theologians like Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (1150–1210) represent the latter generation of theologians that moved closer to rationalist approaches in theology like the Mu‘tazila with a metaphorical interpretation of divine attributes and the priority of reason over revelation in providing absolute proof.¹⁸

‘Abduh was sceptical of the conflation of philosophy and theology¹⁹ and suggests that his theology ‘uses the approach of the ancestors (*al-salaf*) in matters of creed (*‘aqā’id*) and does not indulge in the way of the successors (*al-khalaf*) after the disagreement of different schools of thought.’²⁰ ‘Abduh follows here Ibn Khaldun’s specific distinction: he designates as *salaf* pre-Ghazalian theologians like al-Ash‘ari who focussed in their theological discussions on matters of creed. These *salaf* in Islamic theology were not opposed to philosophy as such but limited its epistemological scope in Islamic knowledge traditions. In contrast, their successors (*khalaf*) blurred the boundaries between philosophy and theology.²¹ By claiming to follow the *salaf* in matters of creed, ‘Abduh suggests only to follow early Ash‘ari theologians.

There are at least four different ways in which ‘Abduh uses the term *salaf* in his writings: in reference to the anti-rationalist and scripturalist Hanbali school (*madhhab al-salaf*), very early Muslim scholars like Hasan al-Basri, Muslim theologians and Qur’an commentators until the thirteenth century and pre-Ghazalian Muslim theologians. He dissociates himself from the Salafi approach of the Hanbali school, as his critical remarks of its scripturalism and intolerance illustrate. Even the more technical understanding of the term to distinguish between pre- and post-Ghazalian Sunni-Ash‘ari theology does not entirely apply to ‘Abduh. While he criticizes the fusion of theology and philosophy, ‘Abduh’s theological expositions include elements of Avicennan philosophy and of later Ash‘ari theologians. Ultimately, he undertakes a synthesis of different strands of Islamic thought in his writings to allow for a creative engagement with modern ideas and the rise of a new model of religious leadership.

'Abduh positions himself between two groups: the representatives of traditional Islamic scholarship who remained untouched by the emergence of Western modernity and intellectuals who have studied modern sciences and dismiss Islam as inherently backward. From the time of his early educational career, 'Abduh was uneasy with the first group as his frustration with traditional scholarship and modes of instruction indicated. At the same time, he rejected the blind imitation of European modernity as advocated by European educated intellectuals and members of the ruling elite. The new educated elite outside the *'ulamā'* milieu was 'Abduh's target group of his theological and apologetic writings at the end of his life. Members of this group had benefited from a modern education and viewed traditional Islamic scholarship as obscurantist and irrelevant to the needs of the modern world. Journalism remained one of the instruments to reach out to the new educated Muslim elite. Together with Rida, he published the journal *al-Manār* (The Lighthouse) from 1898 onwards which became one of the chief outlets to disseminate his and Rida's reformist ideas. He also continued to publish regularly in other Egyptian journals and newspapers. In 1899, 'Abduh began to provide a comprehensive commentary on the Qur'an in the form of public lectures at al-Azhar, developing further earlier public lectures he had given in Beirut.²² These lectures were written down and later published in the journal *al-Manār*, giving 'Abduh's commentary the name under which it was known, *Tafsīr al-Manār*.²³ By targeting lay Muslims, 'Abduh made non-scholarly approaches to the Qur'an possible and 'initiated the twentieth-century trend of individual interaction with and interpretation of the Qur'an'.²⁴

A new theology?

The various writings at the final stage of 'Abduh's life are usually seen as central to his intellectual legacy. They are presented as genuine to his reformist ideas and containing his original intellectual contribution. His early mystical and theological writings have often been ignored with the argument that they primarily or solely contain Afghani's philosophical instructions and not 'Abduh's own ideas.²⁵ However, such a reception is implicitly based on the dichotomy between normative and marginal discourses in Islam. The former includes theological and jurisprudential discourses that define 'Sunni orthodoxy' while the latter refers to mystical, esoteric and rationalistic traditions that are often perceived as marginal to normative mainstream (Sunni-)Islam. The works of Bauer and

Ahmed point at these artificial distinctions between genres, discourses and epistemes that are presented as ‘properly’ Islamic while marginalizing others as peripheral.²⁶ Hence, the exclusion of ‘Abduh’s earlier mystical and philosophical writings is based on a particular image created of him as an ‘orthodox’ Sunni reformer. However, his later theological writings contain important continuities to mystical and philosophical tropes that mark his earlier contributions. These writings reveal the same fundamental concerns of mystical philosophy and Islamic traditions of *ādāb* literature and historiography but are couched more explicitly in the language of Sunni-Ash‘ari theology. Given his public role and experience of opposition from conservative religious establishment, ‘Abduh was particularly conscious not to antagonize them further. In reality, ‘Abduh did not just provide a rationalized and modernist reading of Sunni theology but brought together different strands of intellectual traditions to reconceive Islam and its moral, social and political role in the modern world.

This is obvious when considering his most influential work first published in 1897, the *Risālat al-Tawḥīd* (Treatise on Divine Unity) which is often characterized as the ultimate summary of his reformist theological ideas.²⁷ Based on the notes of his theology lectures at the Madrasa Sultaniyya, the *Risālat al-Tawḥīd* is not a scholarly work like his early theological commentary on the *Sharḥ al-‘Aqā’id al-‘Aḥudiyya*. Addressing the general public, it seeks to simplify complex theological debates. The treatise addresses core theological questions, the nature of God and His attributes, the nature of human beings, the relationship between human free will and divine predestination and the scope of human ability to distinguish different moral categories. The connection between God and humanity are the prophets and messengers whose purpose and mission the treatise equally outlines and the necessity of whose revelations it justifies. It concludes with an outline of the mission of the Prophet Muhammad, the Qur’an as the ultimate proof of his prophecy and the nature and purpose of the Islamic religion as the final revelation of God and the ultimate climax of salvation history. A superficial look at the structure, contents and discourse of the treatise suggests that it provides a modernist Sunni theological catechism, enriched with ‘arguments from history and the social sciences.’²⁸ A closer look, however, reveals the continuation and re-articulation of mystical and philosophical ideas that had preoccupied ‘Abduh since his encounter with Afghani. By focussing on the common features of Islam, the treatise seeks to instil the reader with an irenic attitude towards its doctrinal and sectarian diversity. It is, as Haddad suggests, a pedagogical document to achieve Muslim doctrinal unity.²⁹

The continuous relevance of philosophy is most evident at the start of the treatise when 'Abduh recounts three different philosophical proofs of God's existence which had been articulated for the first time in this form by Ibn Sina. These proofs are already laid out in 'Abduh's *Risālat al-Wāridāt* and paraphrase discussions from other theological catechisms such as Taftazani's *Tahdhīb al-Manṭiq wa-l-Kalām* which he also used as a textbook when teaching theology at the Madrasa Sultaniyya in Beirut.³⁰ While 'Abduh criticizes certain excesses of Islamic philosophers and their often blind imitation (*taqlīduhum*) of Plato and Aristotle, he equally underlines that the objectives of philosophical enquiry – using reason as a means to acquire knowledge about human nature and the world, to distinguish truth from falsehood and to achieve happiness (*sa'āda*) – are encouraged in Islam.³¹ However, the benefits that philosophy has brought to Islamic intellectual life have been overshadowed by certain factors: the validity of the rational approach was undermined by the intellectual excesses of some philosophers, their critical and speculative thought at times, by which they lost the support of other scholars and the wider Muslim community. Ultimately, philosophy merged with theology,³² a process that led to 'intellectual chaos among Muslims, protected by the ignorance of their political leaders'.³³

In line with his previous ethical reading of Islam, 'Abduh also emphasizes the ethical mandate of religion. Prophets and messengers are primarily spiritual and ethical teachers, relaying to their communities 'what contains their happiness (*sa'adatuhā*) in both lives'³⁴ – this world and the hereafter. Similarly, the Prophet Muhammad's mission was to reform morals (*akhlāq*) and customs (*awā'id*).³⁵ This outline of the moral vision of religions in general and Islam in particular and the need to translate beliefs into action to achieve happiness resonates with the philosophical concerns of figures like al-Ghazali and Ibn Miskawayh. Identifying the means to achieve happiness is one of the primary objectives in Islamic philosophy³⁶ and is the central feature in classical *ādāb* literature.³⁷ The pairing of knowledge (*ilm*) and action (*amal*) is a necessary preparation for the hereafter and the only way to achieve happiness, for al-Ghazali.³⁸ The latter's confluence of knowledge, which also includes divinely revealed knowledge, and its translation into rightful human conduct to secure happiness goes back to Ibn Miskawayh. In his *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq*, he emphasizes the nexus between knowledge and action as necessary to achieve human perfection and happiness and presents it as a key insight provided by philosophy.³⁹

'Abduh discusses the nature of divine revelation and of prophecy which conforms to standard definitions of Ash'ari theology in the *Risālat al-Tawḥīd*. Prophets are chosen by God and receive His word via revelations which are

aurally transmitted.⁴⁰ This exposition appears to stand opposite to the more rationalized account ‘Abduh provides in his *Risālat al-Wāridāt* in which he recounts Ibn Sina’s philosophical prophethology: prophets are individuals that have achieved intellectual, spiritual and moral excellence by their innate disposition (*fiṭra*) and receive divine revelations qua their inherent perfection. The different accounts of the nature and sources of prophecy in both works suggest a shift of his theological stance from conceptions informed by Afghani’s mystical philosophy to an understanding in line with Ash‘ari theology.⁴¹ Such an argumentation, however, overlooks that ‘Abduh addresses very different audiences in both works: the mystical *Risālat al-Wāridāt* includes an account of Afghani’s teaching sessions while the *Risālat al-Tawḥīd* provides a summary of ‘Abduh’s classes on theology at an Islamic secondary school published for the wider Muslim public. The different audiences required the adoption of different idioms.

Elements of philosophical conceptions of prophecy are still evident in the *Risālat al-Tawḥīd* when ‘Abduh seeks to make the concept of revelation plausible. For ‘Abduh, it is obvious that humans differ in their intellectual abilities and that these differences are not solely the result of the type of education (*ta‘līm*) they have received. Rather these differences result from how ‘disparate innate dispositions (*fiṭar*) are which are not determined by human choice or acquisition’.⁴² Certain humans are intellectually more advanced than others by their innate abilities and have insights to knowledge other people do not possess. As consequence, ‘Abduh concludes that

among human souls there are those who have a pure essence based on their innate disposition (*fiṭra*) and who have been thereby prepared to receive direct divine effulgence (*al-fayḍ al-ilāhī*) in order to reach the most sublime horizons and to attain the highest peak of humanity. They witness by divine command things with their own eyes which others cannot obtain, even if they use reason and their senses, with the aid of evidence and proof.⁴³

Such a conceptualization of prophecy echoes Ibn Sina’s philosophical prophethology: prophets possess the innate disposition to gain access to knowledge other humans cannot reach. Embodying ‘the highest peak of humanity’, prophets appear more like the perfect human (*al-insān al-kāmil*) whose inherent perfection allows them to receive unmediated divine guidance. Revelation (*waḥī*) now becomes divine effulgence (*fayḍ ilāhī*), a key term in Islamic mystical philosophy, closely associated with the concept of emanation, to denote how God bestows knowledge on prophets, saints and philosophers.

As creation is a perpetual process, so God constantly illuminates perfect human beings with his knowledge. In this case, 'Abduh adopts the approach to prophecy articulated in *Risālat al-Wāridāt* – without mentioning Ibn Sina or emanation theology directly – in order to make the possibility of revelation plausible to a modern Muslim reader.

Some of the ramifications of this more mystical and philosophical conception of prophecy are explored further. In line with Ash'ari theology, 'Abduh distinguishes between revelation (*waḥī*) and inspiration (*ilhām*), the latter being more like an intuition (*wijdān*) whose source is unknown.⁴⁴ However, following his more philosophical conception of prophecy, 'Abduh also confirms the reality of saints, though admitting that most who claim this status are imposters and charlatans. However,

the sublime leaders and heavenly intellects from amongst the gnostics (*'urafā'*) have not reached the level of prophets but are content to be their saints (*awliyā'*) and the trustees of their revelation and mission. Many of them receive a portion of proximity to the prophetic status in type and sort. In some of their states, they reach something in the hidden world (*'ālam al-ghayb*). They truly witness things in the world of images (*'ālam al-mithāl*) which does not deny them to attain its realities in this world. Therefore, they are not that far away from what prophets experience.⁴⁵

This section is replete with Sufi terms and suggests that saints partake in the prophetic charisma. Their status is close to that of prophets and their mystical experiences akin to them. They have some access to the hidden knowledge which is only fully revealed to the prophets, but have visions of the world of images which is an intermediary realm between physical reality and the hidden spiritual world, inhabited by angels and jinn and the location of heaven and hell – beings and places Sufis saints encounter in their visions.⁴⁶ The access of saints to different worlds also resonates with a Sufi cosmology that distinguishes between different cosmic ranks, as discussed in 'Abduh's *Risālat al-Wāridāt*.

In his discussion of core issues of Islamic theology, 'Abduh equally merges the approaches and conclusions of different schools of thought. Several authors have observed that 'Abduh's understanding of the objective reality of good and evil and the inherent human ability to distinguish between both, without the aid of divine revelation, comes from the Mu'tazila school of theology.⁴⁷ Basic moral categories, like the aesthetic categories of beauty (*ḥusn*) and repugnance (*qubh*), are not determined by revelation but exist as objective realities. The role of revelation is merely to confirm these categories that humans can intuitively arrive at.⁴⁸ The Maturidi school adopts a similar approach to this question which

stands in opposition to the approach of the Ash‘ari school which argues that it is the act of revelation that determines what is morally good and what is morally reprehensible. While ‘Abduh’s adoption of the Mu‘tazila or Maturidi approach⁴⁹ does not suggest he was a ‘neo-Mu‘tazilite’⁵⁰ or a follower of the Maturidi school, it illustrates his approach to bring different theological schools together, in particular if their arguments are helpful in demonstrating the inherent rationality of Islam.⁵¹ His immersion in the intellectual culture of ambiguity of pre-modern Islam allowed him to disregard potential contradictions and inconsistencies between different theological schools as irrelevant and purely resulting from an exaggeration of their theological differences.

In other theological questions, he also moves between or combines perspectives of different theological schools. One of the earliest theological controversies in Islam revolved around the relationship between human free will and divine predestination. While Hasan al-Basri and the Mu‘tazila argue that human moral accountability necessitates humans choosing their actions by their own free will, other schools such as the *jabariyya* maintain complete divine determinism: everything in the world, including human actions, are predestined by God. Al-Ash‘ari developed a middle position arguing that human actions are created by God while humans acquire these actions out of which results their moral responsibility. ‘Abduh already reveals certain closeness to this Ash‘ari position in his early theological commentary⁵² and reiterates his support for the Ash‘ari doctrine of acquisition (*kasb*). ‘Abduh advises against dwelling on such issues too much as the relationship between divine predestination and human free will transcends rational understanding and only leads to theological divisions which he seeks to overcome.⁵³ Equally, ‘Abduh is eager to overcome the fatalistic mindset he attributes to most Muslims at his time who do not engage in activism based on a passive submission to divine providence.⁵⁴ ‘Abduh adds another component to human action not contained in Ash‘ari theology by suggesting that ‘actions in all their conditions are derived from acquisition (*kasb*) and choice (*ikhtiyār*).’⁵⁵ The concept of choice plays a significant role in *ādāb* literature but is also central to Shi‘i theology with which ‘Abduh was acquainted through Afghani⁵⁶ and is an important contribution of Maturidi to these discussions.⁵⁷ By adding the element of choice, ‘Abduh does not resolve the theological conundrum, he considers to be unresolvable in any case, but adds an element of human agency which the Ash‘ari notion of acquisition and its fatalistic interpretation does not entail.

In relation to another theological controversy, ‘Abduh equally adopts elements from different schools. In the *Risālat al-Tawhīd*, he returns to the

question of the createdness of the Qur'an as a major site of controversy between the Mu'tazila and Ash'ari schools of theology – a topic he discusses in detail in his first theological commentary. The Mu'tazila maintains that the Qur'an as the Word of God is created (*makhlūq*) in time and not eternal. The Ash'ari school in contrast argues that the Qur'an as the Word of God is uncreated (*ghayr makhlūq*) and pre-existent (*qadīm*). In his discussion of the question, 'Abduh appears to endorse the Mu'tazila understanding of the createdness of the Qur'an which stands in clear opposition to the Ash'ari view and Rida found so problematic that he omitted this section from the second edition of the treatise, published after 'Abduh's death.⁵⁸ A closer reading of the relevant passage, however, reveals that 'Abduh does not really endorse the Mu'tazila point of view, as some have suggested,⁵⁹ but reiterates the argument he already made in his earlier theological commentary on this question.⁶⁰ The Word of God in Itself is pre-existent (*qadīm*) but 'there is no disagreement that the heard Word [of God] (*al-kalām al-masmū'*) itself, the articulation of that pre-existent attribute, is contingent (*ḥudūth*) and a creation (*khalq*) of God.'⁶¹ 'Abduh castigates those believing in the eternity of the recited Qur'an (*al-qur'ān al-maqrū'*) as misguided and ridicules in particular Ahmad ibn Hanbal, one of the staunchest defender of the uncreatedness of the Qur'an.⁶² However, 'Abduh's reading does not conform to the Mu'tazila position either: he maintains that the Qur'an as the Word of God in Itself is eternal and distinguishes it from the recited Word of God which is created – a position that resembles the approach of the Maturidi school of theology and also of al-Ghazali on that matter.⁶³

On other questions, 'Abduh incorporates contemporaneous evolutionary views of history or a utilitarian approach to the formation of societies. This evident in his evolutionary account of salvation history with Judaism, Christianity and Islam representing different stages in the spiritual and intellectual maturation of humanity. Judaism as the religion of humanity's infancy introduced a paternalistic understanding of God and provided 'restrains or constraints'.⁶⁴ Christianity emerged as humanity matured appealing to the emotional side of human nature and advocating compassion. Islam, however, as the religion of human maturity engages in a discourse of reason and brings the material and spiritual needs of humans into harmony.⁶⁵ Such an evolutionary reading of salvation history appears innovative in an Islamic context⁶⁶ but reflects progressive conceptions of the intellectual and spiritual maturation of humanity in esoteric and mystical traditions of Islamic philosophy such as the Shaykhi School in Shia Islam to which Afghani was attracted. This scheme has also been compared with the 'law of the three stages' by the French social philosopher August Comte (1798–1857).⁶⁷ For

Comte, the final mature stage of human history is marked by replacing the search for supranatural and theological explanations for phenomena in the world with the use of reason, science and empirical observation. While Comte suggests the ultimate substitution of religion with science at this stage, for ‘Abduh, Islam, at least, need not be replaced: it is the religion of reason and science.

Similar apologetic arguments emerge when ‘Abduh provides a utilitarian account for the need of prophets and divine guidance – an approach that resonates with Ibn Sina’s argument for the necessity of prophethood.⁶⁸ Divine messengers and prophets not only teach about the realities of the hereafter which cannot be rationally grasped, they equally play a crucial role in forging social cohesion. Societies form out of the human need to provide subsistence which is easier to achieve in collectives. However, for societies to remain sustainable they need to be based on moral and spiritual principles that move beyond pragmatic notions of cooperation to fulfil the material needs of its members. Genuine connections among human beings, leading to peace and tranquillity, are based on love or affection (*maḥabba*) which creates social bonds as no other force. The socio-political manifestation of love is justice (*‘adl*) which is the most central principle on which any society needs to be built⁶⁹ and as a concept plays an important role in Islamic political philosophy.⁷⁰ While a few people with sufficient intellectual insight realize these pre-conditions for the successful and sustainable formation of a society, the majority does not. For this reason, God sends prophets and messengers as religion is the most powerful force to create social bonds and to preserve ‘the order of society.’⁷¹ ‘Abduh’s emphasis on the need to establish ideational foundations of social cohesion mirrors Ibn Khaldun’s understanding of *‘aṣabiyya*, this sense of group solidarity that creates and sustains socio-political orders. The nexus between love and justice equally reflects Ibn Miskawayh’s exposition of how societies create cohesion and what role religion plays in this process.⁷²

‘Abduh reaches out to a newly educated Muslim elite who is not necessarily convinced of the benefits of Islam in the modern world. By pointing out how religion facilitates the successful functioning of a society and its sustainability and basing his argument on intellectual sources coming from Islam as well as contemporaneous European social thought, he seeks to prove that Islam has not become obsolete in the modern world. ‘Abduh’s *Risālat al-Tawḥīd* combines different intellectual traditions of Islam with the aim of grounding modern Islamic thought in philosophy: the mystical philosophies of Ibn Sina and al-Ghazali, practical philosophy of Ibn Miskawayh and other authors of *ādāb* literature and the history of philosophy of Ibn Khaldun. While ‘Abduh hails Abu

al-Hasan al-Ash'ari as developing an important theological middle-position, not many of the creedal points the *Risālat al-Tawhīd* puts forward are really Ash'ari: many basic theological questions represent the views of Ibn Sina, the Mu'tazila or Maturidi schools of theology while questions of ethics and society are informed by French historians and sociologists and by moral and social philosopher of the Islamic tradition such as Ibn Miskawayh and Ibn Khaldun. Their names do not appear but shape the theological discourse of the treatise more than Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari.

Untypical for a theological catechism, 'Abduh's treatise lacks any detailed discussion of eschatology, the reward and punishment that await the believer in the hereafter, the possibility divine forgiveness and the nature of resurrection.⁷³ 'Abduh makes only a brief reference to these matters in one paragraph and presents them as well-known (*ma'rūf*).⁷⁴ 'Abduh intends to introduce a different model of Islamic religiosity that bears the imprint of Islamic philosophy more so than of Ash'ari theology. Muslims should develop a strong faith commitment not out of imitation of their ancestors but accept Islam out of an inner conviction in its inherent rationality and intelligibility. Such a faith commitment is informed by two sources: reason (*ʿaql*) and revelation (*naql*).⁷⁵ Equally, the knowledge acquired by both sources needs to be translated into moral human conduct – not out of fear for eternal punishment in the hereafter. Muslims should translate their beliefs into action as such conduct will lead to happiness for the individual – both in this world and the hereafter – and 'the general welfare'⁷⁶ of society.

'Abduh's apologetics

Similar concerns and arguments also mark 'Abduh's apologetic works of that time. He engaged in two debates in the press: one in response to several articles on Islam by the former French foreign minister Gabriel Hanotaux (1853–1944) and the other in response to articles by the Lebanese Christian author Farah Antun (1874–1922), a friend of Rida. Antun and Rida had moved together from Tripoli to Egypt in 1897. When discussing the contents of 'Abduh's apologetics, the discursive parameters of this genre need to be taken into account, as well as their publication in newspapers. Apologetics simplify and polemicize – in the case of 'Abduh to defend Islam against criticisms that were informed by Orientalist and racial stereotypes and articulated the common notion of European cultural superiority that also affected Arab writers like Antun. However, beneath the

surface of the more apologetic presentation, ‘Abduh articulates similar themes that shape the discourses of his other works.

Hanotaux published two articles in French in *Le Journal* in 1900. In these articles, he argues that Semitic and Aryan peoples possess different conceptions of divinity: Semites emphasize divine transcendence which assumes an inherent gap between humanity and God, encourages a fatalistic submission to God’s will and discourages engagement in the world. Islam as a Semitic religion exhibits these features explaining its civilisational inferiority. Christianity, in contrast, managed to overcome its Semitic roots and adopted an Aryan conception of God which emphasizes divine immanence in the world and the close connection between God and humanity. This is articulated in the Christian belief in Jesus Christ being the incarnate son of God. Such an understanding of God becoming human creates an attitude towards the world that is characterized by activism, explaining the superiority of European civilization.⁷⁷ Hanotaux’s articles were translated and published in Arabic and led to a wider debate in the Egyptian and Arab press in which ‘Abduh was just one of many participants.⁷⁸ The editor of the Egyptian *al-Ahrām* newspaper also conducted an interview with Hanotaux in the course of the debate to which ‘Abduh responded.

‘Abduh deconstructs both the racial assumptions and the simplistic connection between theological convictions and civilizational progress. Hanotaux’s assumption of a gulf between Semites and Aryans is artificial, as both peoples have interacted and mixed throughout history; in reality, ‘there are no differences between Aryans and Semites’.⁷⁹ ‘Abduh cites examples of Semitic peoples that have been industrious and successful in trade or developed great civilizations such as Jews or ancient Phoenicians.⁸⁰ In contrast, Indians today, although being Aryans, are considered to be backward.⁸¹ Islam despite its belief in divine transcendence developed a great civilization in its early days by incorporating ‘the sciences of the Persians, Egyptians, Romans and Greeks’.⁸² Hence, historical evidence suggests that neither one’s race nor one’s theology have an impact on civilizational progress. A fatalistic or activist attitude does not depend on whether one believes in divine transcendence or immanence but how one conceptualizes ‘the extent of divine knowledge of everything and the completeness of His power over everything contingent’.⁸³ In these questions, neither Christians nor Muslims have developed uniform responses but a range of different views in their theologies.⁸⁴

The colonial context of these debates is crucial. Hanotaux justified French colonialism to bring civilization to Muslim societies as they need support because of their Semitic nature and recommended the model of French colonial

rule in Tunisia where French authority was supplanted on existing political structures. In an interview with the newspaper *al-Ahrām*, Hanotaux points out that European societies only advanced once their states had secularized and political and religious authority was separated: 'And this is what we French want to support in our colonies: that absolute power belongs to the ruling authority while respecting the beliefs of the people who are under our jurisdiction and authority. And this is how we have proceeded in Algeria, Tunisia and other French colonies.'⁸⁵ This separation between religion and politics that French colonialism seeks to establish aims to change the parameters of Muslim politics for their own benefit: moving away from 'the necessity of Islamic unity'⁸⁶ and from determining political alliances by religious affiliation. European nations, in contrast, offer a model of international relations which are determined by what advances 'their economic and political welfare'⁸⁷ and not by religious considerations. The separation of religion and politics will lead to progress and a more pragmatic approach to international relations among Muslims and allow them to appreciate the benefits of French colonialism.

'Abduh at that time had adopted a pragmatic attitude towards British colonial rule in Egypt and cooperated with Cromer and the British authorities when he needed their support against the khedive and the conservative religious establishment at al-Azhar. However, in his response to Hanotaux's justification of European imperialism he reverts back to his anti-colonial stance and rejects the suggestion that Muslims should acquiesce to foreign domination.⁸⁸ He also makes a more subtle point about the need to secularize political authority which French colonialism seeks to facilitate in the Muslim world by pointing at several misunderstandings. Hanotaux's assertion about the primacy of Islam in Muslim politics is erroneous. Muslims might express solidarity with the Ottoman sultan as last remaining indigenous regional power and holder of the Sunni caliphate, but the religious policies of the Ottoman state reveal a pragmatic stance. Christians are employed in senior positions within the Ottoman state bureaucracy and do not face any discrimination. Hanotaux presents the orientation to *realpolitik* as a particular achievement of modern Europe that disregards religious affiliation. For 'Abduh, the Ottoman Empire is not different at all, as its alliances with European nations such as Germany illustrate:

The politics of the Ottoman state with European states is not based on religious politics. It was not religious at all when it was founded and is not until today. In the past, it was a state of conquest and victory, and lately it has become a state of diplomacy (*siyāsa*) and defence. Religion has nothing to do with its interaction with European nations.⁸⁹

According to ‘Abduh, a more serious misinterpretation lies in Hanotaux’s projection of the particular experience of Christian Europe onto the relationship between religion and state in Islam.⁹⁰ It is true, for ‘Abduh, that Islam as a religion not only provides guidance on spiritual matters but also brings a law, a social order and political authority. However, this does not mean that spiritual and secular authority are fused. There is no papacy in Islam which exercised immense power over secular rulers in Europe in the Middle Ages. Islamic law bestows ‘to the supreme ruler, whether he is caliph or sultan’⁹¹ the right to rule but he does not have any religious mandate: ‘The sultan directs (*mudabbir*) the country in domestic politics and defends it in war and in foreign politics.’⁹² This mandate of the ruler as outlined here is informed by discussions in Islamic political philosophy. For the Persianate Islamic philosopher Nasir al-Din Tusi, ‘such directing (*tadbīr*) is called political leadership (*siyāsat*)’⁹³ and foundational to the formation of a polity (*tamaddun*). The creation of more complex socio-political forms of human organization occurred first in cities (*mudun* – hence the process is denoted as *tamaddun*) and requires law (*nāmūs/qānūn*) and a ruler to function.⁹⁴ Based on such conceptualizations in political philosophy, ‘Abduh conceives the caliph as ‘a civil ruler (*ḥākim madanī*) in every respect’⁹⁵ who, like state-appointed religious officaries such as judges and muftis, only possesses ‘civil authority (*sulṭa madaniyya*)’.⁹⁶ Their mandate does not extend to matters of belief but solely pertains to those of the state, designated here as civil (*madanī*). ‘Abduh’s designation of caliphal or sultanic authority as civil denotes neither a secular reading of Islamic modes of governance, as suggested by Haddad,⁹⁷ nor the primacy and comprehensive nature of Islamic law, as argued by Rida.⁹⁸ His understanding bears the imprint of pre-modern Islamic political philosophy. For society to function and prosper, the ruler needs to enforce the law which consists of both, the legal discretion of the ruler (*qānūn*) and divine law (*shari‘a*). However, neither caliph and sultan nor religious officaries appointed by them to assist in the implementation of law possess any authority over creedal matters. Hence, requesting a secular separation between political and religious authority in Islam, as it has occurred in European history, is irrelevant to modes of governance and their relation to religion in Islamic history. For ‘Abduh, one cannot separate what has never been combined.

The opposition between Islam and Christianity was also central in the apologetic debate between ‘Abduh and Farah Antun which resonates with many of the issues touched upon in the debate with Hanotaux. Antun published an article in his own journal *al-Jāmi‘a*⁹⁹ in 1902 on the lack of tolerance

(*tasāmuḥ*) in Islam arguing that it led to hostility towards the scholarship of followers of other religions, religious wars among Muslims and the rejection of philosophy and science. Christians, in contrast, adopted a more tolerant attitude towards philosophy and science which explains its current advancements and civilizational superiority. 'Abduh counters Antun's argument with several historical examples and his own particular reading of early Islamic history. Antun fails to mention 'the philosophers and sages from different religions whom the heart of Islam embraced'.¹⁰⁰ Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians held important government positions in Muslim empires and their scholarly activities were not only tolerated but they were employed by Muslim rulers as scientists, physicians, teachers and translators to disseminate their knowledge.¹⁰¹ Muslim societies adopted a universal approach to different fields of knowledge which disregarded religious affiliation: 'Islam used to embrace in its heart the stranger and the friend by using the same criterion which is the criterion of respect of scholars for knowledge.'¹⁰²

Antun's second evidence for the lack of tolerance in Islam is the sectarian warfare that its history has witnessed. 'Abduh counters this argument by minimizing the religious nature of these conflicts. The early sectarian conflicts were not caused by creedal differences but by 'political views on the way the community (*umma*) should be ruled. They fought the caliphs not to vindicate their creed but to change the form of government'.¹⁰³ The conflict between the Umayyad caliphs and 'Ali and his sons was not a sectarian war but a power struggle between two tribes: the Hashimids to which 'Ali and his descendants belonged and the Umayyads. More recent conflicts between Muslim empires are also 'political wars'.¹⁰⁴ Christianity, in contrast, exhibited a much lower degree of tolerance throughout its history. Sectarian wars between Protestants and Catholics marred European history. The Catholic Church suppressed scientific investigation and persecuted scientists.¹⁰⁵ Jews and Muslims were expelled from Spain after Christians had conquered it.¹⁰⁶ European nations only managed to develop modern civilization not because of Christianity but in spite of it.¹⁰⁷ The intellectual roots of modern European civilization lie in the philosophical and scientific transmission work of Muslims in Spain. Political upheaval such as the French Revolution countered the power of Christian churches, and science only began to flourish once European societies had turned their back on Christianity.¹⁰⁸

'Abduh's portrayal of Christianity in opposition to Islam is part of the apologetic exchange between him and Antun. As Antun simplifies the nature of Islam in his article, so does 'Abduh reduce both religions to certain immutable

features which determine their social, cultural and political role throughout history. 'Abduh distinguishes between the fundamental principles that determine the nature (*ṭabī'a*) of both religions: Christianity is irrational, intolerant and other-worldly while Islam is presented as rational, tolerant and finds a better balance between human welfare in this life and in the hereafter.¹⁰⁹ His response to Hanotaux was in this regard more nuanced, as it rejected simplistic causal relations between doctrinal beliefs and social and historical realities. 'Abduh's juxtaposition of Christianity and Islam is part of the apologetic rhetoric to suggest to Muslim readers that it is not Islam that has a particular problem with modern science but rather Christianity.¹¹⁰

'Abduh also uses apologetics as vehicle to criticize contemporary Muslim societies and their attitudes towards intellectual investigation and scientific knowledge. In his portrayal of Christianity, 'Abduh projects many of the elements of the cultural and intellectual malaise of Muslim societies: the intolerance of Muslims towards other opinions, their rejection of modern science, their recourse to revelation as sole source of knowledge and their bigotry and fanaticism. 'Abduh reveals more about how he viewed the state of Muslim societies at his time than Christianity and polemicizes against the followers of both religions who think that 'ignorance is the source of piety'.¹¹¹ In his apologetic responses to both Hanotaux and Antun, he does not deny the current intellectual and cultural inferiority of Muslims and the need to reform Islam. However, he intends to demonstrate that this inferiority is not due to some inherent theological features of Islam – determined by race or doctrine – but due to the corruption Muslims have undertaken of their religion and to the incompetency of their political leaders. 'Abduh seeks to introduce a different vision of Islam as a religion of reason and tolerance that was once a major civilizational power because of its openness to knowledge, its interaction with different cultures and religions and its tolerance towards followers of other religions and acceptance of internal diversity. Therefore, Muslims today do not need to imitate Europeans, as Hanotaux and Antun suggest, but retrieve those intellectual and cultural values their civilization possessed in the past. These values are universal and based on human reason and fixed laws of history and unfold in the interaction between different civilizations.¹¹²

For Muslims today, this means rediscovering the capaciousness of Islamic intellectual traditions which included different branches of knowledge and encouraged the concurrent engagement with them. The tolerant co-existence of different Islamic discourses and epistemes was part of traditional institutions of Islamic education which approaches their diversity without fostering intellectual

hostility or supremacy to one another. For 'Abduh, Muslims need to embrace the culture of ambiguity that marks their intellectual heritage:

In a mosque or seminary belonging to a mosque teaching sessions of the jurist, the theologian, the scholar of hadith, the grammarian, the ethicist, the philosopher, the astronomer and the geometrician were conducted. The student moved freely from the jurist to the session of the philosopher and from the session on hadith to the session on ethics. If a debate occurred among them on a particular issue, freedom (*ḥurriyya*) prevailed based on persuasion and compelling argument. The standing of zealotry (*ghulūw*) was diminished in the deliberations and tolerance (*tasāmuḥ*) prevailed among them.¹¹³

For 'Abduh, this universality and comprehensiveness of Islamic knowledge traditions need to be recuperated, rather than seeing different branches of knowledge in opposition to another. Retrieving and synthesizing different intellectual traditions of Islam to focus on individual and collective moral transformation and civilizational progress reflects themes 'Abduh articulates in his early theological commentary on the *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id al-'Aḍudiyya* and is also central to his *Risālat al-Tawḥīd*. 'Abduh sought to anchor these objectives in his Qur'an commentaries as well.

'Abduh's Qur'an commentaries

'Abduh sought to move exegetical discourses around the Qur'an out of the scholarly domain by providing accessible interpretations for an educated modern Muslim audience, emphasizing that 'it is necessary for every Muslim to partake in its understanding according to their ability and capacity'.¹¹⁴ The aim to widen Muslim engagement with the Qur'an is evident in the methods he used to interpret it and the manner in which he disseminated his interpretation in journals. He never produced a complete scholarly commentary but his more systematic engagement with the Qur'anic text occurred during public lectures in Beirut and Cairo which were attended by the wider public, including non-Muslims, and became known as *Tafsīr al-Manār*. His other commentary *Tafsīr Juz' 'Amma* on the last 37 *sūras* of the Qur'an was written for teachers at schools run by his Muslim Benevolent Society in 1903.¹¹⁵ Although written initially as a teachers' training tool, the commentary was published for a wider readership and, according to Rida, at the time of its publication in 1904 the most prominent and most widely read of 'Abduh's works.¹¹⁶

The question of authorship is important in ‘Abduh’s Qur’an commentaries. *Tafsīr al-Manār* was published based on notes taken by Rida which ‘Abduh reviewed and approved prior to their publication. His premature death in 1905 meant that ‘Abduh could not complete his lectures on the Qur’an and only reached up to verse 4:125. Rida then completed the exegesis without ‘Abduh. ‘Abduh’s death also meant that he was only able to review Rida’s notes until the middle of *sūra* 2 which were published during his lifetime (Figure 4). Hence, the commentaries on the latter half of *sūra* 2 and *sūras* 3 and 4 cannot be attributed with absolute certainty to ‘Abduh, as he was not able to ensure that they reflected his ideas. Even those transcripts ‘Abduh was able to review and which were published during his



Figure 4. Muhammad Rashid Rida in Egypt, 1909.

lifetime do not solely contain his own words but are intermixed with Rida's own reflections. In particular from the latter half of the second *sūra* onwards, Rida's interventions dominate the discourse. For this reason, Pink suggests that around 15 per cent of the *Tafsīr al-Manār* can be attributed to 'Abduh while the *Tafsīr Juz' 'Amma* is the only commentary solely authored by him.¹¹⁷

'Abduh's *Risālat al-Tawhīd*, contains a chapter on the Qur'an which presents its inimitability (*i'jāz*) as proof of its divine origin.¹¹⁸ While this argument reflects standard Islamic doctrines, 'Abduh sees the uniqueness of the Qur'an not only in its literary and rhetorical eloquence (*balāgha*) but also in its argumentative cogency that compels the intellect to believe in its divine origin. In his apologetics with Antun, 'Abduh emphasizes more explicitly – restating a view of the Mu'tazila school –¹¹⁹ that 'the miracle of the Qur'an (*mu'jizat al-qur'ān*) lies in its combination of speech and knowledge (*al-qawl wa-l-'ilm*) both of which lead the intellect (*'aql*) to understanding'.¹²⁰ Accepting the Qur'an and its recipient Muhammad yielded the civilisational transformation of the Arabs and other peoples that accepted Islam, as these peoples internalized the agenda of moral and intellectual progress expounded by the Qur'an.¹²¹

'Abduh's exegetical works align with this understanding and seek to make the Qur'anic message accessible and to use hermeneutics as a tool for the socio-moral transformation of Muslim societies. Therefore, he avoids complex linguistic discussions and rejects the use of Judeo-Christian sources (known as *isrā'iliyyāt*)¹²² to shed further light on Biblical figures and events that are mentioned in the Qur'an.¹²³ Comparing and contrasting Qur'anic stories with accounts contained in other books of ancient history is pointless, as 'the Qur'an is not history or stories but guidance and exhortation. It does not mention a story to explain historical events'.¹²⁴ His approach to synthesize different Islamic knowledge traditions that characterizes most of 'Abduh's intellectual output is also evident in his approach to Qur'anic exegesis, as he is disinterested in the consistent application of the technical apparatus traditional commentators would use. There is a conspicuous disregard for past authorities and a dearth of references to Prophetic traditions (*aḥādīth*) as sources of interpretation.¹²⁵

Both his *Tafsīr al-Manār* and *Tafsīr Juz' 'Amma* share similar objectives with his other writings: opposing the spirit of blind obedience to scholarly authorities of the past (*taqlīd*), extracting the moral message of the Qur'an and rationalizing it. 'Abduh discusses the polemics of the Qur'an against different groups opposing Muhammad's revelation, such as the Arab polytheists (*mushrikūn*) and the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*, Jews and Christians). 'Abduh, however, uses these polemics to make a general point about *taqlīd*. The deviation of Jews and

Christians was the result of ‘the imitation (*taqlīd*) of their forefathers.’¹²⁶ Likewise, he defines an unbeliever (*kāfir*) as someone who rejects the clear evidence of truth if it contradicts their own beliefs and clings onto ‘the imitation (*taqlīd*) of his ancestors.’¹²⁷ Another example ‘Abduh uses to attack the spirit of *taqlīd* are the so-called hypocrites (*munāfiqūn*), a Qur’anic term for the opponents of Muhammad in Medina who had accepted Islam but secretly conspired against him. Pretending to be loyal Muslims, they were ‘putting forward corruption caused by the evil of blind imitation (*taqlīd*) which is not able to distinguish between what is righteous and what is corrupt.’¹²⁸ ‘Abduh makes it very clear that the mind-set of the hypocrites was not restricted to their time, but ‘the verses describe a group of people that exists in every community.’¹²⁹ When discussing the refusal of these various groups to embrace Islam, ‘Abduh presents their adherence to past authorities as the main reason and equates their ritualistic and formalistic approach to their religion with the manner in which his contemporaries practise Islam.¹³⁰ As ‘imitators who do not use their intellects (*‘uqūl*)’ they prefer inherited ‘traditions and customs (*al-taqālīd wa-l-‘ādāt*)’¹³¹ over divine commandments.

This slavish adherence to the past is contrasted by ‘Abduh to an intellectual engagement with Islam that uses independent reasoning (*ijtihād*). Similar to his other works, ‘Abduh maintains that, via their rational faculty, humans possess the innate ability to distinguish between right and wrong. This ability precedes revelation¹³² and is the result of innate human disposition (*al-fiṭra al-insāniyya*)¹³³ or innate intuition (*al-wijdān al-fiṭrī*).¹³⁴ In discussing the Qur’anic term ‘those who are pious (*al-muttaqūn*)’,¹³⁵ ‘Abduh interprets it as a reference to those Arabs before the rise of Islam who rejected polytheism and developed a monotheistic conviction by the use of reason (*‘aql*)¹³⁶ alone and possessed ‘an intuitive knowledge of the creator (*wijdān ma’rifat al-khāliq*).’¹³⁷ ‘Abduh’s commentary conceives humans as rational beings who are encouraged to use their intellect to understand and interpret their religion, as the Qur’an itself emphasizes the rational intelligibility of its theological and moral teachings.

The term ‘Abduh employs here to denote the innate ability of humans to acquire knowledge of the truth and to make moral judgements is *fiṭra*, usually translated as nature or innate disposition. ‘Abduh’s use of the term *fiṭra* reflects his earlier exposure to the discussion of the concept within Islamic philosophy.¹³⁸ Ibn Sina considered *fiṭra* as an innate epistemic disposition rather than innate knowledge humans possess. *Fiṭra* allows humans to understand certain general premises, to make judgements on certain issues, based on these premises, observations and estimations, and to use these to develop arguments. For Ibn Sina, *fiṭra* denotes

the *modus operandi* of the intellect¹³⁹ whose judgements need not be correct.¹⁴⁰ Equally, *fiṭra* does not include the ability to undertake right moral judgements.¹⁴¹ Developing the idea of *fiṭra* further, al-Ghazali does not approach *fiṭra* 'as an innate repository of knowledge but as the human disposition toward truth and the capacity to arrive at it'.¹⁴² Equally, he considers monotheism to be part of the human innate disposition and in this sense, ingrained in the human soul naturally.¹⁴³ In line with Sunni-Ash'ari theology, al-Ghazali rejects the notion that *fiṭra* can determine morality whose sole source for him is the shari'a.¹⁴⁴ Early Muslim philosopher al-Farabi (872–950), on the other hand, adduces an ethical dimensions to *fiṭra* by suggesting an innate human disposition towards morality which instigates the human realization and acquisition of virtues.¹⁴⁵

'Abduh does not really define *fiṭra* but his framing of the concept and its use suggests a conflation of these different philosophical approaches additionally informed by the view of the Mu'tazila school of theology.¹⁴⁶ Such views equally reflect nineteenth-century European discourses on 'natural religion' as an 'anthropological constant'.¹⁴⁷ Similar to Ibn Sina, he comprehends it as the manner in which the intellect operates while being closer to al-Ghazali and al-Farabi in the understanding that in its intellectual operation it is naturally disposed towards realizing the unity of God and arriving at right moral judgements. 'Abduh suggests that by bestowing humans with this innate disposition, God inspires knowledge to humans leading them to truth and morality.¹⁴⁸ At the same time, following Ibn Sina, 'Abduh also includes an empirical element: human innate disposition includes the ability to measure the moral values of certain actions by observing their consequences. By assessing actions through their impact, God facilitates the human process of arriving at correct moral judgements.¹⁴⁹

'Abduh's commentary covers *sūras* that contain references to the signs announcing the Day of Judgement and descriptions of the hereafter – in particular in his *Tafsīr Juz' 'Amma* that includes the earliest revelations during Muhammad's Meccan period.¹⁵⁰ 'Abduh adheres to the literal meaning of these eschatological descriptions and does not explain them away by adopting an allegorical approach. The opening of the sky, the eclipse of the sun, the falling of the stars, the setting in motion of mountains and the resurrection of the bodies are understood as literal occurrences, based on 'Abduh's premise that 'we believe in what God, the Exalted, tells us about it. Neither do we add or take anything away nor do we research about its particulars'.¹⁵¹ In a similar vein, it is necessary to believe in the reality of hellfire as punishment for the unbelievers and sinners¹⁵² and the promise that the believers will be joined

by 'pure spouses'¹⁵³ in paradise. 'Abduh, however, emphasizes the difference between this life and the hereafter pointing out that 'the joy of spousal companionship will be loftier there'.¹⁵⁴

'Abduh's approach to Qur'anic depictions of the Day of Judgement and the hereafter accepts its literal meaning and suggests a suspension of disbelief: these descriptions should be accepted at face-value without any further investigation – an attitude that resembles the Ash'ari position of 'not asking how' (*bi-lā-kayfa*) of certain theological questions. In his *Risālat al-Tawhīd*, 'Abduh exhibits reluctance to discuss Islamic eschatology and just devotes one paragraph to it. In his earlier theological commentary, he defends the philosophers' understanding of resurrection as not being physical. In his Qur'an commentary, he oscillates between two positions and thereby adopts an approach similar to the Sufi philosopher Ibn 'Arabi¹⁵⁵: 'Abduh demands faithful adherence to its literal meaning in the Qur'an. At the same time, he stresses – in a vein similar to mystical philosophy – the complete otherness of the hereafter and seeks to steer the attention away from its sensorial descriptions as a place that is spiritual (*rūḥānī*).¹⁵⁶ The moral message behind these verses that outline in detail the punishment or reward that humans await on the Day of Judgement is more important. They intend to communicate the ultimate purpose of religion which is to promote justice (*ʿadl*), truthfulness (*ṣidq*), good actions (*ʿamal khayr*) and general welfare (*maṣāliḥ ʿamma*).¹⁵⁷

'Abduh exhibits an ambivalent attitude to the scientific exegesis of the Qur'an (*tafsīr ʿilmī*) which suggests various ways how the Qur'an anticipates or conforms to the discoveries of modern science. There are a few examples in his commentaries where 'Abduh draws analogies between supernatural beings or events and phenomena discovered by modern science. For instance, he suggests that microbes are a type of jinn.¹⁵⁸ Qur'anic descriptions of the signs of the Day of Judgement are equally related to scientific evidence. That 'the seas boil over'¹⁵⁹ is equated with earthquakes and volcanos showing that tectonic shifts push hot magma from beneath the ground to the surface of the earth and could heat up the seas on the Day of Judgement.¹⁶⁰ However, 'Abduh appears sceptical of a scientific exegesis of the Qur'an, since he emphasizes that the prophets are not meant to be experts and teachers in history and sciences.¹⁶¹ His observations of possible analogies are often qualified. He uses his equation of jinn with microbes as an opportunity to emphasize the need to follow the insights of medical experts¹⁶² and to criticize efforts to understand the nature of jinn in more detail.¹⁶³ Rather than suggesting that the Qur'an is in conformity with modern science, he attempts to make some Qur'anic tropes plausible by proposing their similarities with modern scientific discoveries.

A similar approach becomes evident when 'Abduh discusses the meaning of miracles and magic. For 'Abduh, the belief in miracles as such is not irrational. It is possible that God suspends the laws of nature to cause a miraculous occurrence, although it is not a doctrinal requirement to believe in the miracles (*karamāt*) attributed to Sufi saints.¹⁶⁴ He confirms the miracles performed by other prophets¹⁶⁵ but presents the miracle of Muhammad's prophecy as being of a superior nature: the Qur'an itself and its rhetorical and argumentative perfection provide clear evidence for the truth of his mission which is, in this sense, not really a suspension of natural law. As miracles can occur, so does 'Abduh not deny the reality of magic (*siḥr*). He does not explain away the Qur'anic references to magical practices among the Arabs before the rise of Islam but emphasizes that the Qur'an must not be used to suggest a divine sanction of magic.¹⁶⁶ 'Abduh opens up possibilities for alternative readings of Qur'anic references to magic at the same time: 'The evil of those who blow knots'¹⁶⁷ – a reference to sorcerers who used knots to cast spells on people – might describe how insincerity and viciousness can destroy the bond of friendship and other human relations.¹⁶⁸

'Abduh's approach to rationalize passages and concepts that seem to contradict a modern scientific worldview is multifaceted and ambiguous. While he relates some Qur'anic passages to discoveries in modern science, he neither endorses fully a scientific exegesis of the Qur'an nor employs allegorical interpretations consistently to explain away issues and statements potentially contradictory to modern science. In interpreting supernatural descriptions as they are meant to occur on the Day of Judgement, he attempts to adhere to the literal meaning of the Qur'an as much as possible and to keep its understanding simple and argues against further specification as distracting from the moral message of the Qur'an. Equally, 'Abduh alludes to certain pathways for an allegorical interpretation of such passages while maintaining the validity of their literal meaning. Pre-modern traditions of Qur'anic exegesis conceived the Qur'an as a deliberately ambiguous and open to a variety of interpretations.¹⁶⁹ 'Abduh does not attempt to resolve these ambiguities and postulates a certain intellectual relativism: both a literal and an allegorical interpretation of eschatological Qur'anic verses are equally true. Such an attitude aligns with exegetical approaches in mystical philosophy which assumes that the Qur'anic text as divine scripture possesses multiple layers of meaning. 'Abduh's approach is also shaped by intellectual caution: he does not deny the validity of the verses' literal meaning to avoid being accused of undermining the scriptural authority of the Qur'an while equally suggesting interpretative approaches that prioritize the moral message of the Qur'an and appear more modern.

'Abduh's approach to Qur'anic exegesis is defined by one central objective: to extract the intellectual and moral universe from the Qur'an and to use the text as a means to arrive at a rationally founded and defensible religious and moral worldview. In his constant rejection of *taqlīd* and his emphasis on the faculties that human innate disposition (*fiṭra*) provides, 'Abduh emphasizes the intellectual and moral autonomy of humans which is always threatened by social and cultural forces that pressurize individuals into conformity and cloud their rational and moral judgement. In his understanding of *fiṭra*, 'Abduh does not follow a clear definition but combines approaches to its understanding from different Islamic philosophers and theologians. Overcoming the ethos of *taqlīd* includes for 'Abduh not to articulate his allegiance to a particular school of thought and also to combine their approaches creatively. He intends to encourage critical reflection of the Qur'an rather than blindly adhering to traditional interpretations and religious conventions. As 'Abduh argues, *taqlīd* prevents Muslims from becoming sincere believers and – as the example of Arab polytheists and the People of the Book suggests – leads to disbelief (*kufr*). True and sincere faith is built, however, on 'sound evidence derived from innate intuition (*al-dalīl al-ṣaḥīḥ al-mustamad min al-wijdān al-fiṭrī*).'¹⁷⁰ Such a plea for overcoming *taqlīd* in understanding Islam and its foundational text suggests the need for a constant re-interpretation via *ijtihād* to retrieve the core theological and moral message of the Qur'an. With a concern for 'the general meaning'¹⁷¹ of the Qur'anic text, 'Abduh's approach facilitates separating the particular from the universal, ethicizing the Qur'anic text by distracting universal values out of its comprehensive message and approaching the Qur'an as a holistic document that purports a coherent and intelligible doctrinal and moral worldview. This method would significantly influence literary and contextual exegetical approaches in the twentieth century.¹⁷²

Conclusion

'Abduh's intellectual output in the final stage of his life shows that a label like Salafi does not sufficiently encompass the various intellectual traditions he synthesizes in his writings and he engaged with throughout his life. The Salafi label does not do justice to his approach even if 'modernist' is attached to it. Designating 'Abduh as an Islamic modernist is equally problematic as it suggests an attempt to transplant modern ideas into a novel reconstruction of an Islamic essence. His earliest journalistic articles, his anti-colonial agitation and his apologetic

works appeal to the civilizational strength of Islam in the past which is not based on the role-model of a golden age or the actualization of an immutable Islamic essence but resulted from the capaciousness of its intellectual traditions. Muslim societies do not need to emulate a model of modernity as imposed on them by European colonialism. Islamic knowledge traditions provide sufficient intellectual resources for an indigenous engagement with modernity which does not reduce its diversity to minimalist essential features.

Despite 'Abduh's combination of a variety of sources which at times appear random and inconsistent, certain themes that were informed by Islamic philosophical traditions and had been central to his thought before his return to Egypt remain constant. He emphasizes the social and moral progress that Islam seeks to achieve as a civilizational force. The laws of history explain the factors that lead to the rise and decline of communities. Unity and social cohesion remain the main sources of strength combined with competent political leadership and intellectual freedom. While he sees the need to articulate these ideas in the idiom of Sunni notions of orthodoxy in his later writings, he equally wants to ensure that humans use their rational faculties to explore the laws of history and nature and adopt methods of scientific investigation for that matter.

A key theme is his critique of the intellectual stagnation of the contemporary Muslim world, caused by the slavish adherence to scholarly authorities of the past (*taqlid*). 'Abduh's own ideas are certainly influenced by previous scholars but he combines their contributions in a creative synthesis that converses with modern European historical and social theories, in particular nineteenth-century notion of the evolutionary progression of societies. The opposite of *taqlid* is the notion of *ijtihad*, independent reasoning – an opposition which receives a particular reading by 'Abduh. Traditionally *ijtihad* denotes the personal effort of a religious scholar to arrive at a legal ruling using the primary sources as well as the whole repertoire of jurisprudential scholarship. *Taqlid* refers to the adherence of a scholar to the scholarship of their own legal school (*madhhab*). 'Abduh however provides these terms with a new meaning. The *mujtahid*, the scholar practising *ijtihad*, is identified with a new model of Islamic intellectual leadership: the *mujtahid* re-interprets the primary sources in the light of current problems and circumstances and historicizes the accumulated scholarly knowledge.¹⁷³ The *muqallid*, in contrast, meticulously preserves the medieval scholarly heritage and is presented as a traditionalist out of touch with the modern world.¹⁷⁴ 'Abduh – steeped in Islam's culture of ambiguity – does not always adhere to this idealized dichotomy between *ijtihad* and *taqlid*. As grand mufti of Egypt he had to ensure that his official fatwas followed the jurisprudence of the Hanafi school of law. He

was equally conscious that a hostile religious and political environment required him to couch his re-assertion of rationalist traditions of Islam in the idiom of Sunni orthodoxy. Such an orthodox cladding of Islamic philosophical traditions yields ambiguity and potentially delimits the innovative potential of his call for *ijtihād*, as the subsequent reception history of his ideas illustrates.

‘Abduh also contrasts *taqlīd* to *fiṭra*, the innate human disposition to arrive at true theological and ethical insights which has been clouded by social conventions and scholarly traditions. ‘Abduh adopts the well-known designation, put forward by the Hanbali scholar Ibn Taymiyya that Islam is the religion of innate disposition or the religion of nature (*dīn al-fiṭra*).¹⁷⁵ However, unlike Ibn Taymiyya, ‘Abduh does not understand this term in the sense that every human being is naturally born Muslim and then taken away from their original disposition by the corrupting religious education of their parents and society. For ‘Abduh, Islam is *dīn al-fiṭra*, as its basic doctrinal and ethical principles can be attained by the use of reason. A proper use of the human intellect (*‘aql*) will lead to a realization of divine truths.¹⁷⁶ However, blind imitation disables this innate disposition and inhibits human reason to achieve its full intellectual potential. In his Qur’an commentary, ‘Abduh refers to a group of people who were known as *hanīf* in the pre-Islamic period of *jāhiliyya*. They had abandoned imitating the polytheistic practices of their society and, of their own accord, began to believe in and worship one God:

They are those whose innate disposition was sound (*salamat fiṭratuhum*). Their intellects (*‘uqūl*) acquired some sort of right understanding and some capacity (*istiḍād*) was present in their souls to reach the light of truth that leads them to avoid the displeasure of God, the Exalted, and to seek His pleasure. This is due to what their knowledge (*‘ilmuhum*) gave them and what their contemplation (*naẓaruhum*) and independent reasoning (*ijtihāduhum*) brought them.¹⁷⁷

These individuals who turned towards monotheism by their own effort and without following a revealed religion were capable of doing so because they overcame the mindset of *taqlīd* and did not blindly imitate the customs, traditions, beliefs and practices of their ancestors and societies but kept their innate disposition intact to arrive at the realization that there can only be one God. ‘Abduh’s reform was to retrieve this original disposition among his Muslim contemporaries to arrive at an understanding of Islam in tune with the modern world.

‘Abduh’s reformist oeuvre does not suggest a resolution of theological, sectarian and jurisprudential controversies of the past nor does it seek to reconcile Islam

with modernity by translating modern ideas into an Islamic idiom. Rather he undertakes a selective synthesis of diverse intellectual traditions of Islam whose tensions he does not resolve. Equally, he does not disambiguate the ambivalences created by aligning certain concepts with modern intellectual paradigms. His anti-colonial intellectual outlook is visible, for example, in rejecting calls by European intellectuals and their Muslim emulators to secularize Islamic modes of governance in order to achieve progress and freedom. For 'Abduh, such an assumption imposes the European historical experience on Muslims and reveals a lack of understanding of the relationship between political and religious authority in Islamic history which Islamic political philosophy and jurisprudence has more adequately theorized. For 'Abduh, positioning Islam intellectually, culturally and politically in the modern world is not achieved by emulating European societies and their values completely or vindicating a particular school of thought in Islam as constituting orthodoxy. 'Abduh suggests adopting an irenic attitude towards the diversity of Islamic thought and fully utilizing it in its plurality to provide the most suitable and pragmatic answers to the challenges Muslim face in the modern world. His theological commentary on the *Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id al-'Aḍudiyya* seeks to nurture such an outlook by arguing that all sects of Islam are saved because their fundamental commonalities outweigh their differences. Such an approach can be characterized as eclectic, inconsistent and contradictory but is informed by the intellectual culture of ambiguity that shaped the pre-modern Muslim world and 'Abduh employs in his own effort to reform Islam. His legacy is characterized by a certain incompleteness as a consequence. He did not want to and could not address all ambiguities. His plans to establish a new educational institution in Egypt that combines Islamic with modern knowledge never materialized. His Qur'an commentary remains incomplete, as his premature death in 1905 prevented pursuing these and other projects further.

Notes

- 1 Muhammad Rashid Rida, *Ta'rikh al-Ustādh al-Imām al-Shaykh Muḥammad 'Abduh*, vol. 1 (Cairo: al-Manar, 1931), 11; Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1798–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 140–1.
- 2 Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad 'Abduh, *al-'Urwa al-Wuthqā wa-l-Thawra al-Taḥrīriyya al-Kubrā*, 2nd edn (Cairo: Dar al-'Arab, 1958), 56, 131, 133.
- 3 Muhammad 'Abduh, 'al-Radd 'alā Hānūtū', in *al-'Amāl al-Kāmila li-l-Imām Muḥammad 'Abduh*, ed. Muhammad 'Imara, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dar al-Shuruq, 1993), 226.

- 4 Muhammad ‘Abduh, *Risālat al-Tawḥīd*, 17th edn (Cairo: Yousif Sulayman, 1960), 15.
- 5 Henri Lauzière, *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 5, 36.
- 6 Ibid., 4.
- 7 Ibid., 4–5.
- 8 ‘The best generation is my generation, then those who come after them, then those who come after them.’
- 9 Mohamed Haddad, *Muḥammad ‘Abduh: Qarā’a Jadīda fī Khiṭāb al-Iṣlāḥ al-Dīnī* (Beirut: Dar al-Tali’a li-l-Taba’a wa-l-Nashr, 2003), 84.
- 10 ‘Abduh, *Tawḥīd*, 16.
- 11 Muhammad ‘Abduh, ‘al-Radd ‘alā Faraḥ Anṭūn’, in *al-A’māl al-Kāmila li-l-Imām Muḥammad ‘Abduh*, ed. Muhammad ‘Imara, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dar al-Shuruq, 1993), 267; Muhammad ‘Abduh, ‘Nafī al-Qitāl bayna-l-Muslimīn li-Ajall al-I’tiqād’, *al-Manār*, 5 (1902): 405.
- 12 ‘Abduh, *Tawḥīd*, 18–19; Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimat ibn Khaldūn*, vol. 2 (Damascus: Dar Ya’rib, 2003), 212.
- 13 ‘Abduh, *Tawḥīd*, 19, n. 2.
- 14 ‘Abduh, ‘Radd ‘alā Anṭūn’, vol. 3, 359.
- 15 ‘Abduh Muhammad, ‘al-Qiḍā’ wa-l-Qadar’, in *al-‘Urwa al-Wuthqā wa-l-Thawra al-Taḥrīriyya al-Kubrā*, Jamal al-Dīn al-Afghani and Muhammad ‘Abduh (Cairo: Dar al-‘Arab, 1958), 56.
- 16 ‘Abduh, ‘Radd ‘alā Anṭūn’, vol. 3, 359; Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 149.
- 17 Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddima*, vol. 2, 212–14.
- 18 Ovamir Anjum, *Politics, Law, and Community in Islamic Thought: The Taymiyyan Moment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 148–9. ‘Abduh adopts al-Razi’s preference for allegorical interpretations in case of a contradiction between reason and revelation. See ‘Abduh, ‘Radd ‘alā Anṭūn’, vol. 3, 301.
- 19 ‘Abduh, *Tawḥīd*, 22.
- 20 Ibid., 4.
- 21 Haddad, *Qarā’a Jadīda*, 73–4.
- 22 Jacques Jomier, *Le Commentaire Coranique du Manār: tendances modernes de l’exégèse en Egypte* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1954), 50–1.
- 23 Rida, *Ta’rīkh*, vol. 1, 768–9.
- 24 Yvonne Y. Haddad, ‘Muhammad Abduh: Pioneer of Islamic Reform’, in *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*, ed. Ali Rahnama, 2nd edn (London: Zed Books, [1994] 2005), 46.
- 25 Rotraud Wielandt, ‘Main Trends of Islamic Theological Thought from the Late Nineteenth Century to Present Times’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, ed. Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 718.

- 26 Thomas Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität: Eine andere Geschichte des Islams* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2011), 192–223; Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 10–31.
- 27 Wielandt, 'Main Trends of Islamic Theological Thought', 719.
- 28 Johann Buessow, 'Re-imagining Islam in the Period of the First Modern Globalization: Muhammad 'Abduh and His *Theology of Unity*', in *A Global Middle East: Mobility, Materiality and Culture in the Modern Age, 1880–1940*, ed. Liat Kozma, Cyrus Schayegh and Avner Wishnitzer (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 284.
- 29 Haddad, *Qarā'a Jadīda*, 82–3.
- 30 Sa'd al-Din al-Taftazani, *Tahdhīb al-Manṭiq wa-l-Kalām* (Cairo: Matba'at al-Sa'ada, 1912), 7–35, 77–104; Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddima*, vol. 2, 205–7.
- 31 'Abduh, *Tawḥīd*, 20.
- 32 'Abduh's account of the conflation of both mirrors Ibn Khaldun's description. Compare 'Abduh, *Tawḥīd*, 19–20, with Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddima*, vol. 2, 213.
- 33 'Abduh, *Tawḥīd*, 23.
- 34 Ibid., 119, 129–30, 200.
- 35 Ibid., 140.
- 36 Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 248.
- 37 Ibn Miskawayh, *al-Sa'ada li-bn Miskawayh fi Falsafat al-Akhlāq* (Cairo: al-Matba'a al-'Arabiyya, 1928). On similar discussion on what constitutes happiness, see Ibn Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq* (Cairo: Matba'at al-Taraqqi, 1318 H [1900/1901]), 65–6.
- 38 al-Ghazali, *Mizān al-'Amal* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1964), 193–7. See also his Persian work focussing on the philosophical and spiritual means to achieve happiness, al-Ghazali, *Kīmīyā-yi Sa'adat*, 2 vols (Tehran: Intisharat-i 'Ilmi wa-Farhangi, 1380 SH [2001/2002]). On how 'Abduh's discourse is shaped by al-Ghazali, see Samira Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition: Reform, Rationalist, and Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 110–12.
- 39 Ibn Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq*, 32–3; Majid F. Fakhry, 'Ethics in Islamic Philosophy', in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London: Routledge, 1998).
- 40 'Abduh, *Tawḥīd*, 109.
- 41 Muhammad 'Imara, 'al-Muqaddima', in *al-Ta'liqāt 'alā Sharḥ al-'Aqā'id al-'Aḍudiyya*, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad 'Abduh (Cairo: Maktabat al-Shuruq al-Duwwaliyya, 2002), 16.
- 42 'Abduh, *Tawḥīd*, 111.
- 43 Ibid., 112; R. Caspar, 'Le Renouveau mo'tazilite', *Mélanges d'Institut Dominicain d'Etudes Orientales du Caire*, 4 (1957): 169–70.
- 44 'Abduh, *Tawḥīd*, 109.

- 45 Ibid., 115.
- 46 On the understanding of *‘ālam al-mithāl* in mystical philosophy, see Fazlur Rahman, ‘Dream, Imagination and *‘ālam al-mithāl*’, *Islamic Studies*, 3(2) (1964): 167–80.
- 47 Caspar, ‘Le Renouveau mo’tazilite’, 157–69.
- 48 ‘Abduh, *Tawḥīd*, 67–75; al-Afghani and ‘Abduh, *al-Ta’līqāt*, 476.
- 49 Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 142.
- 50 Thomas Hildebrandt, ‘Waren Ġamāl ad-Dīn al-Afghānī und Muḥammad ‘Abduh Neo-Mu’taziliten?’, *Die Welt des Islams*, 42(2) (2002): 207–62.
- 51 Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 142.
- 52 Haddad, *Qarā’a Jadīda*, 105–6.
- 53 ‘Abduh, *Tawḥīd*, 62.
- 54 Ibid., 62–3. See also detailed discussion in ‘Abduh, ‘al-Qiḍā’ wa-l-Qadar’, 49–58.
- 55 ‘Abduh, *Tawḥīd*, 65 [emphasis added].
- 56 Vincent J. Cornell, ‘Muḥammad ‘Abduh: A Sufi-Inspired Modernist?’, in *Tradition and Modernity: Christian and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. David Marshall (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 110
- 57 Meric J. Pessagno, ‘Irāda, Ikhtiyār, Qudra, Kasb: The View of Abū Maṣṣūr al-Māturīdī’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 104(1) (1984): 177–91; Ulrich Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī and die sunnitische Theologie in Samarkand* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 340. For the Maturidi roots of ‘Abduh’s understanding, see Ulrich, *Al-Māturīdī*, 340, note 360; Wielandt, ‘Main Trends of Islamic Theological Thought’, 723–4.
- 58 Mohamed Haddad, ‘Les Oeuvres de ‘Abduh: histoire d’une manipulation’, *Revue de l’Institut des Belles Lettres Arabes*, 180 (1997): 197–222.
- 59 Caspar, ‘Le Renouveau mo’tazilite’, 157–69.
- 60 al-Afghani and ‘Abduh, *al-Ta’līqāt*, 490–2.
- 61 Muhammad ‘Abduh, ‘Risālat al-Tawḥīd’, in *al-‘Imāl al-Kāmila li-l-Imām Muḥammad ‘Abduh*, ed. Muhammad ‘Imara, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dar al-Shuruq, 1993), 393. Volume 3 of ‘Imara’s collected works by ‘Abduh contains the first edition of the *Risālat al-Tawḥīd*.
- 62 Ibid., 394.
- 63 Ahmad S. Dallal, ‘Review: Ghazali and the Perils of Interpretation’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 122(4) (2002): 780.
- 64 ‘Abduh, *Tawḥīd*, 167.
- 65 Ibid., 168–71.
- 66 Wielandt, ‘Main Trends of Islamic Theological Thought’, 721.
- 67 Buessow, ‘Re-imagining Islam’, 287; Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 138.
- 68 Frank Griffel, ‘Al-Ġazālī’s Concept of Prophecy: The Introduction of Avicennan Psychology into Aṣ’arite Theology’, *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy*, 14 (2004): 110.
- 69 ‘Abduh, *Tawḥīd*, 99–103.

- 70 Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 478–81.
- 71 'Abduh, *Tawhīd*, 107.
- 72 Ibn Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq*, 109–16.
- 73 Taftazani, *Tahdhīb al-Manṭiq*, 107–13.
- 74 'Abduh, *Tawhīd*, 202.
- 75 Ibid., 24.
- 76 Ibid., 157; Haddad, *Qarā'a Jadīda*, 128–9.
- 77 Gabriel Hanotaux, 'L'islam', *Le Journal*, 9(2730) (1900): 1; Gabriel Hanotaux, 'L'islam. II', *Le Journal*, 9(2737) (1900): 1; Ammeke Kateman, *Muḥammad 'Abduh and His Interlocutors: Conceptualizing Religion in a Globalizing World* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 167–8.
- 78 Kateman, *'Abduh and His Interlocutors*, 168–73.
- 79 'Abduh, 'Radd 'alā Hānūtū', vol. 3, 223.
- 80 Ibid., 223, 226.
- 81 Ibid., 221.
- 82 Ibid.
- 83 Ibid., 225.
- 84 Ibid., 226.
- 85 'Ḥadīth ma'a Hānūtū li-Ṣāhib Jarīdat al-Ahrām', in *al-Islām bayna-l-'Ilm wa-l-Madaniyya*, M. 'Abduh (Damascus: Dar al-Sida li-l-Thaqafa wa-l-Nashr, 2002), 36.
- 86 Ibid., 39.
- 87 Ibid.
- 88 'Abduh, 'Radd 'alā Hānūtū', vol. 3, 238.
- 89 Ibid., 254.
- 90 Ibid., 308–9; Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition*, 92–6.
- 91 'Abduh, 'Radd 'alā Hānūtū', vol. 3, 250.
- 92 Ibid.
- 93 Nasir al-Din Tusi, *Akhlāq-i Nāṣiri* (Tehran: Khwarizmi, 1356 SH [1977/1978]), 252.
- 94 Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 462–8.
- 95 'Abduh, 'Radd 'alā Anṭūn', vol. 3, 308.
- 96 Ibid., 309; Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition*, 96–7.
- 97 Haddad, *Qarā'a Jadīda*, 22–3.
- 98 Muhammad Rashid Rida, *al-Khilāfa [aw al-Imāma al-'Uṣmā]* (Cairo: Hindawi [1922] 2015), 68, 87–99; Andrew F. March, *The Caliphate of Man: Popular Sovereignty in Modern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 53–7.
- 99 *Al-Jāmi'a* was a journal published by the Syrian Christian Farah Antun to familiarize the Egyptian reading public with French Enlightenment thought. See Donald M. Reid, 'Farah Antun: The Life and Times of a Syrian Christian Journalist in Egypt' (PhD diss., Princeton, 1969), 99–126.

- 100 ‘Abduh, ‘Radd ‘alā Anṭūn’, vol. 3, 275.
- 101 Ibid., 273–5.
- 102 Ibid., 275–6.
- 103 Ibid., 267.
- 104 Ibid.
- 105 Ibid., 285.
- 106 Ibid., 289–90.
- 107 Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition*, 97.
- 108 ‘Abduh, ‘Radd ‘alā Anṭūn’, vol. 3, 354–6.
- 109 Ibid., 276–315.
- 110 Ayyub, M., ‘Islam and Christianity: A Study of Muhammad Abduh’s View of the Two Religions’, *Humaniora Islamica*, 2 (1974): 121–37.
- 111 Abduh, ‘Radd ‘alā Anṭūn’, vol. 3, 284.
- 112 Ibid., 250.
- 113 Ibid., 328.
- 114 Muhammad ‘Abduh, *Tafsīr al-Fātiḥa* (Cairo: Isma‘il Hafiz, 1901), 5; J. J. G. Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 18–19.
- 115 Muhammad ‘Abduh, *Tafsīr Juz’ ‘Ammā*, 3rd edn (Cairo: Matba‘at Misr, 1341H [1922–3]), 2.
- 116 Rida, *Ta’rīkh*, vol. 1, 788.
- 117 Johanna Pink, ‘Abduh, Muḥammad’, in *Encyclopedia of the Qur’ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2001); Jomier, *Commentaire coranique*, 50–1. Naguib disagrees and argues that the volumes published during ‘Abduh’s lifetime reflect his ideas despite Rida’s significant editorial role. See Shuruq Naguib, ‘The Hermeneutics of Miracle: Evolution, Eloquence, and the Critique of Scientific Exegesis in the Literary School of *tafsīr*. Part I: From Muḥammad ‘Abduh to Amin al-Khūlī’, *Journal of Qur’anic Studies*, 21(3) (2019): 62.
- 118 ‘Abduh, *Tawḥīd*, 146–7.
- 119 Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, ‘The Dilemma of the Literary Approach to the Qur’an’, *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 23 (2003): 10–18.
- 120 ‘Abduh, ‘Radd ‘alā Anṭūn’, vol. 3, 299; Naguib, ‘Hermeneutics of Miracle’, 63–4.
- 121 ‘Abduh, *Tawḥīd*, 134–5.
- 122 On *isrā’īliyyāt*, see Roberto Tottoli, ‘Origin and Use of the Term *Isrā’īliyyāt* in Muslim Literature’, *Arabica*, vol. 46 (1999): 193–210.
- 123 Muhammad ‘Abduh and Muhammad Rashid Rida, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Ḥakīm al-Mushtahīr bi-sm Tafsīr al-Manār*, 2nd edn, vol. 1 (Cairo: al-Manar, 1947), 174; Jomier, *Commentaire coranique*, 112; Jansen, *Interpretation of the Koran*, 27.
- 124 Muhammad ‘Abduh and Muhammad Rashid Rida, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Ḥakīm al-Mushtahīr bi-sm Tafsīr al-Manār*, 2nd edn, vol. 2 (Cairo: al-Manar, 1947), 471; Abu Zayd, ‘Literary Approach to the Qur’an’, 19–20.

- 125 Jomier, *Commentaire coranique*, 59, 62.
- 126 'Abduh, *Tafsīr Juz' 'Amma*, 133.
- 127 Ibid., 169, 136–7; 'Abduh and Rida, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, vol. 1, 430; Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 148.
- 128 'Abduh and Rida, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, vol. 1, 157; 'Abduh, *Tafsīr Juz' 'Amma*, 184–5.
- 129 'Abduh and Rida, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, vol. 1, 157.
- 130 'Abduh, *Tafsīr Juz' 'Amma*, 163–4.
- 131 'Abduh and Rida, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, vol. 1, 154.
- 132 'Abduh, *Tafsīr Juz' 'Amma*, 90–1.
- 133 Ibid., 101.
- 134 Ibid., 56; Jomier, *Commentaire coranique*, 133–5.
- 135 Qur'an 2:1.
- 136 'Abduh and Rida, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, vol. 1, 126. This is a reference to Arabs who have rejected polytheism before the rise of Islam and are known as *ḥanīf*. See *ibid.*, 338.
- 137 'Abduh, *Tafsīr Juz' 'Amma*, 17.
- 138 Frank Griffel, 'The Harmony of Natural Law and Shari'a in Islamist Theology', in *Shari'a: Islamic Law in the Contemporary Context*, ed. Abbas Amanat and Frank Griffel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 49.
- 139 Dimitri Gutas, 'The Empiricism of Avicenna', *Oriens*, 40(2) (2012): 404–10.
- 140 Frank Griffel, 'Al-Ghazālī's Use of 'Original Human Disposition' (*Fiṭra*) and Its Background in the Teachings of al-Fārābī and Avicenna', *The Muslim World* 102 (2012): 14.
- 141 Ibid., 24–5.
- 142 Andrew F. March, 'Naturalizing *Shari'a*: Foundationalist Ambiguities in Modern Islamic Apologetics', *Islamic Law and Society*, 22 (2015): 59.
- 143 Griffel, 'Al-Ghazālī's Use of "Original Human Disposition"', 5–6; 30–31.
- 144 Griffel, 'The Harmony of Natural Law and Shari'a', 45.
- 145 March, 'Naturalizing *Shari'a*', 61–2.
- 146 Haddad, *Qarā'a Jadida*, 132–4.
- 147 For a discussion of this concept in relation to 'Abduh's *Risālat al-Tawḥīd*, see Buessow, 'Re-imagining Islam', 293.
- 148 'Abduh, *Tawḥīd*, 127.
- 149 'Abduh, *Tafsīr Juz' 'Amma*, 101–2; 'Abduh, *Tawḥīd*, 60; 70–2.
- 150 All *sūras* are attributed to the Meccan period with the exception of *sūras* 98, 99 and 110 which are considered to be Medinan.
- 151 'Abduh and Rida, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, vol. 1, 233; 'Abduh, *Tafsīr Juz' 'Amma*, 5.
- 152 Ibid., 28.
- 153 Qur'an 2:25.
- 154 'Abduh and Rida, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, vol. 1, 234. 'Abduh equates the spouses in paradise with the *ḥūriyy* who are equally promised as a reward. See *ibid.*, 233.

- 155 Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 29.
- 156 ‘Abduh, *Tafsīr Juz’ ‘Amma*, 73.
- 157 Ibid., 24.
- 158 Muhammad ‘Abduh and Muhammad Rashid Rida, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Ḥakīm al-Mushtahīr bi-sm Tafsīr al-Manār*, 2nd edn, vol. 3 (Cairo: al-Manar, 1947), 96; Lutz Berger, ‘Esprits et microbes: l’interprétation des ġinn-s dans quelques commentaires coraniques du XXe siècle’, *Arabica*, 47(3) (2000): 557.
- 159 Qur’an 81:6.
- 160 ‘Abduh, *Tafsīr Juz’ ‘Amma*, 26; Jomier, *Commentaire coranique*, 152.
- 161 ‘Abduh, *Tawḥīd*, 123–4; Jacques Jomier, ‘La raison et l’histoire dans le commentaire du Manār’, *Mélanges de l’Institut dominicain d’études orientales du Caire*, 19 (1989): 25.
- 162 ‘Abduh and Rida, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, vol. 2, 96.
- 163 ‘Abduh, *Tafsīr Juz’ ‘Amma*, 186–7.
- 164 ‘Abduh, *Tawḥīd*, 206–7; Naguib, ‘Hermeneutics of Miracle’, 61–6.
- 165 ‘Abduh, *Tafsīr Juz’ ‘Amma*, 11–13.
- 166 Ibid., 181–3.
- 167 Qur’an 113:4.
- 168 ‘Abduh, *Tafsīr Juz’ ‘Amma*, 181; Jansen, *Interpretation of the Koran*, 31.
- 169 Bauer, *Kultur der Ambiguität*, 46–7.
- 170 ‘Abduh, *Tafsīr Juz’ ‘Amma*, 56, 152–3; al-Afghani and ‘Abduh, *al-Ta’līqāt*, 164.
- 171 ‘Abduh, *Tafsīr Juz’ ‘Amma*, 21.
- 172 See Naguib, ‘Hermeneutics of Miracle’, 57–88.
- 173 Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition*, 79–84. On broadening the scope of *ijtihād* and the rejection of *taqlīd* among eighteenth-century Muslim reformers, see Ahmad S. Dallal, *Islam without Europe: Traditions of Reform in Eighteenth Century Islamic Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 68–93.
- 174 Muhammad ‘Abduh, ‘al-Fiqh wa-l-Fuqahā’, in *al-A’māl al-Kāmila li-l-Imām Muḥammad ‘Abduh*, ed. Muhammad ‘Imara, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dar al-Shuruq, 1993), 212–15; Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, *Defining Islam for the Egyptian State: Muftis and Fatwas of the Dar al-Ifta* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 65–8.
- 175 ‘Abduh, ‘Radd ‘alā Hānūtū’, vol. 3, 242.
- 176 Haddad, *Qarā’a Jadīda*, 85.
- 177 ‘Abduh and Rida, *Tafsīr al-Manār*, vol. 1, 126.

Muhammad 'Abduh

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Oliver Scharbrodt

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