

Muḥammad ‘Abduh: The Theology of Unity (Egypt, 1898)

Introduction

The treatise *Risālat al-tawḥīd* (The Theology of Unity)¹ by the Egyptian scholar and intellectual Muḥammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905)² is a modern classic of Islamic reformist theology. Since its first edition in 1898, it has maintained a continuous presence on the Arabic book market³ and has seen numerous translations into other languages.⁴ In fact, ‘Abduh’s *Risāla* might be regarded as one of the most prominent programmatic texts of late-nineteenth-century Islamic reformism. In the excerpt from the text presented here, ‘Abduh defines Islam through a catalogue of principles or values (*uṣūl*) that according to him characterise the true ‘spirit’ (*rūḥ*) of the message of Muhammad.⁵

The *Theology of Unity* originated in classes in Islamic theology which ‘Abduh taught between 1885 and 1888 at the Sultaniyya School (*al-Madrasa al-Sulṭāniyya*), an Ottoman government high school in Beirut. The Sultaniyya was a prestigious institution of higher education which served as a flagship

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- 1 ‘Theology of Unity’ has become an established translation since the publication of Muhammad Abduh, Ishaq Masa’ad and Kenneth Cragg, trans., *The Theology of Unity* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966). ‘Theology of Unity’ brings out the double meaning of *tawḥīd* in this book. It denotes the act of professing God’s unity as well as ‘Abduh’s reformist goal of unifying both the Islamic creed and thereby the Muslim world community. On this, see below.
 - 2 For introductions to ‘Abduh’s life and works, see Anke von Kügelgen, “‘Abduh, Muḥammad,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Three* (Leiden: Brill, 2008–, Print; Brill Online, 2016, Online); Mark J. Sedgwick, *Muhammad ‘Abduh* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2010).
 - 3 According to Mohamed Haddad, ‘Abduh’s *Risāla* in the edition of the *Al-Manār* publishing house saw its seventeenth edition already in 1960, while several pirate editions had appeared in parallel. Mohamed Haddad, “Les Oeuvres de ‘Abduh: Histoire d’une Manipulation.” *IBLA* 60, no. 180 (1997): 197–222, here 209.
 - 4 For translations into English and French see Ishaq Masa’ad and Kenneth Cragg, trans., *The Theology of Unity*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966); Bernard Michel and Moustapha Abdel Razik, trans., *Rissalat al Tawhid: Exposé de la religion musulmane*, (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1925).
 - 5 *Risālat al-tawḥīd*, first edition (Bulaq: al-Maṭba’a al-Amīriyya al-Kubrā, 1315 AH / 1898 CE) in the following abbreviated as *KT*, 97–116.

of the intensified Ottoman efforts to offer a Muslim alternative to the growing number of Christian and Jewish educational institutions in the city. It was directed by a notable Muslim scholar and a graduate of Cairo's al-Azhar College, Ḥusayn al-Jisr (1845–1909).⁶ In addition to all these assets, the school was also distinguished by its location in the heart of Beirut, a cosmopolitan city and one of the centres of the Nahḍa movement.⁷ All this certainly made the Sultaniyya a desirable working place for an Arab Muslim intellectual during this period.

Muhammad 'Abduh, however, had not come to Beirut entirely voluntarily. The city was a place of exile for him, after he had been forced out of Egypt for his involvement in the aborted 'Urabi revolt of 1882. Before he settled in Beirut, he had lived several months in Paris, where he, together with his mentor Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1839–1897),⁸ co-edited the controversial journal *al-'Urwa al-wuthqā* (The Strongest Bond). He continued to travel widely during the following years. In 1888, 'Abduh could finally return to Egypt. After his return, he started an extraordinary career in the Egyptian Islamic judicial and scholarly institutions, which eventually culminated in his appointment to the post of Grand Mufti of Egypt (*Muftī al-dīyār al-miṣrīyya*) in 1899. It was during the years of his ascent on the institutional ladder in Egypt that 'Abduh published his *Risāla*.

In his preface to the *Risāla*, 'Abduh provides insight in the way in which he himself wanted his book to be understood. His teaching, he writes "[...] was a deliberately concise summary and argued within carefully considered boundaries." 'Abduh proudly states that his lectures for the first grade followed an innovative method, without much consideration for inherited conventions in the teaching of Islamic theology. He writes:

I used to start with the presentation of several premises and went through to conclusions, with no concern other than the validity of proof. I did not mind if in the process I departed from customary forms of presentation.⁹

This fresh tone, which sometimes bordered on nonchalance, was certainly something that made 'Abduh a noted and—in some more conservative cir-

6 Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut*, 171–178. On Ḥusayn al-Jisr see chapter 1.09.

7 On Beirut's intellectual life during the late nineteenth century see Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut*. On the Nahḍa movement see Nada Tomiche, "Nahḍa," *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2008, Print; Brill Online, 2012, Online).

8 On whom see below.

9 RT, 2–3.

cles—also a controversial writer. It clearly distinguishes him from other contemporary Muslim reformists such as the director of the Sultaniyya, Ḥusayn al-Jisr, who presented their thoughts according to customary standards of Islamic scholarly writing. ‘Abduh’s youthful attitude made him popular especially with a younger generation of intellectuals with revolutionary ambitions, such as Sa’id Zaghlūl (1859–1927), a future leader of Egypt’s independence movement, or Qāsim Amīn (1863–1908), the author of a famous manifesto for women’s emancipation.

Muslim reformers in ‘Abduh’s time differed according to the roles they attributed to earlier authorities in developing novel approaches to Islamic theology or law. ‘Abduh positions himself in this debate, saying that his lectures series at the Sultaniyya followed “the way of the early authorities, without impugning their successors’ views” and continues to say that “it also stayed clear of the controversies between the schools of law.”¹⁰ In other words, ‘Abduh proposes to identify a new middle path for Islamic theology—retrieving the (alleged) purity of early Islamic thought without getting caught in those discussions that had divided earlier generations of scholars. He adds that “[r]egarding controversial content,” he had limited himself to “allusions that were only comprehensible to the initiated reader (*al-raġul al-rashīd*).” This suggests that ‘Abduh, in his *Risāla*, tried to address two groups of readers simultaneously: While the book was mainly a textbook for beginners, it also presented allusions to more advanced subjects and possibly more daring opinions which were only to be understood by the initiated.

So far, we know little about how the first edition of the text was in fact received by the public. What we do know, however, is that after ‘Abduh’s death in 1905, the reception of the text was shaped decisively by Rashīd Riḍā (1865–1939). Riḍā, a Muslim scholar and journalist of Lebanese origin, closely cooperated with ‘Abduh from 1897 onwards.¹¹ He prepared a second edition of the *Risāla* in 1908, for which he edited the text in a way designed to make it appealing to more conservative readers. Most importantly, Riḍā added notes and chapter headings of his own and deleted one passage which he apparently found theologically daring. This is the text used in most, if not all, Arabic re-editions since then.

The reception of the *Theology of Unity* is symptomatic for the way in which ‘Abduh’s works have been interpreted in general. Scholarly studies regularly refer to ‘Abduh as a founding father of modern reformist Islamic thought, and

10 RT, 3.

11 Werner Ende, “Rashīd Riḍā,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. See also the chapter 2.06 by Stefan Reichmuth.

his life and work have been the objects of several major studies. However, until recently most scholarship followed certain unquestioned guidelines. 'Abduh was generally portrayed as an outstanding individual writer, while not much attention was paid to his immediate context. In terms of content, many, if not most, studies focused on his political and legal ideas. If 'Abduh's religious writings were examined, then almost exclusively with an eye to uncovering his relation to certain intellectual trends, such as Islamic rationalist theology, Sufism, the traditionalist current of Salafism, or agnosticism. In short, the main prism through which 'Abduh's religious *oeuvre* has been viewed so far is that of intellectual genealogy and taxonomy. In contrast, the following remarks consider 'Abduh as a Muslim author who grappled with the public issues and conflicts of the period and who mobilised various resources from the patrimony of Islamic literature with the ambition to provide guidance to his contemporaries.

Islamic reformism was a very broad intellectual trend. During the late nineteenth century, a number of authors called for 'reform' (*iṣlāḥ*), or 'renewal' (*tajdid*) of Islam,¹² whereby they envisaged a variety of goals and made reference to a variety of sources and traditions. In 'Abduh's immediate surroundings in Cairo and Beirut, the Islamic reform movement was closely intertwined with the trans-confessional Nahḍa movement that aimed at a comprehensive reform of Arab society, mainly through language, education and culture. As many Islamic reformists were also working as journalists, they were in close contact with Muslim, Christian and Jewish exponents of the Nahḍa, and intellectual borrowing and lending between both currents was so close that it seems often impossible to decide whether some idea or formulation was first coined in a Muslim reformist or in a Nahḍa context. Thus Islamic reformism constituted no clearly delimited theological or intellectual school but rather a pool of ideas which were combined with a great variety of individual interests and approaches. In addition, Islamic reformists need to be understood as being part of a situation of globalising religious exchange, the participants of which, among others, included Islamic trends branded as 'heterodox,' such as that of the Baha'i, reformist thinkers from the Christian communities and secular intellectuals.

In the case of Muhammad 'Abduh, the last aspect is especially obvious, as his life and work are marked by increasing religious contact on a global scale, within the Islamic world and beyond.¹³ The most prominent example for religious contact with other Islamic schools of thought in 'Abduh's life is his

12 Ali Merad, "Iṣlāḥ," *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*.

13 See for this Johann Büssow, "Re-imagining Islam in the Period of the First Modern Globalization: Muhammad 'Abduh and His Theology of Unity," in *A Global Middle East*:

encounter with Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī,¹⁴ an Iran-born Shiite philosopher and anti-colonial activist. ‘Abduh became Afghani’s most important disciple and co-worker and received some of his main theological and political inspirations from him. He also was in close contact with leading Christian intellectuals and with ‘Abbās Efendi ‘Abd al-Bahā’ (1844–1921), the leader of a Shiite Messianic movement what was eventually to become the Baha’i religion.¹⁵ Membership in several Masonic lodges provided ‘Abduh with contacts to the ruling elite as well as to a wide array of personalities in Cairo and Beirut, among them merchants, intellectuals and educators of different faiths.¹⁶ Religious contact did not happen through personal interaction alone, but also through printed texts and manuscripts, which circulated in ever greater numbers. ‘Abduh’s knowledge of French and Persian enabled him to engage with the work of authors of various religious and philosophical backgrounds.

In sum, ‘Abduh’s life and work forms part of a global public sphere which began to emerge during the late nineteenth century.¹⁷ This global public sphere was constituted by the rapidly increasing mobility of people and texts and consolidated by institutions such as modern-style educational institutions, publishing houses, journals and newspapers. ‘Abduh, as a Muslim scholar and intellectual, was an active participant in all these fields. He integrated elements from the shared repertoire of ideas into his conceptual toolbox in various ways. Thereby the often fused them with arguments from the classical Islamic heritage as he knew it from his education at Cairo’s Al-Azhar college. The excerpt presented here illustrates this well. However, before we turn to the text, it is useful to take a brief look at the overall structure of the book.

Mobility, Materiality and Culture in the Modern Age 1880–1940, ed. Liat Kozma, Cyrus Schayegh and Avner Wishnitzer (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 273–320.

- 14 On Afghānī, see Nikki R. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn “al-Afghānī”* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968); for his Iranian background 5–11.
- 15 On ‘Abd al-Bahā’, see Oliver Scharbrodt, *Islam and the Baha’i Faith: A Comparative Study of Muhammad ‘Abduh and ‘Abdul-Baha’ ‘Abbas* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), and his chapter in this volume (3.06).
- 16 Sedgwick, *Muhammad Abduh*, 19–21. For details see A. Albert Kudsi-Zadeh, “Afghani and Freemasonry in Egypt,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 92, 1 (1972): 27–8; Karim Wissa, “Freemasonry in Egypt, 1798–1921: A Study in Cultural and Political Encounters,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 16, 2 (1989), 155. On freemasonry in Beirut, see the chapter by Sarah Büssow-Schmitz in this volume (3.07).
- 17 Dietrich Jung, *Orientalists, Islamists and the Global Public Sphere: A Genealogy of the Modern Essentialist Image of Islam* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2011), 88–93.

Contents

The *Theology of Unity* can be characterised as a brief survey of Islamic theology (*‘ilm al-tawhīd* or *‘ilm al-kalām*), which is framed by a historical introduction (chapter 1) and an apologetic final part (chapters 13–17). In theological terms, the book presents a new reading of Islamic theology according to the two schools that had emerged as dominant in Sunni Islam since the tenth century CE, the Ash‘arites and the Maturidiyya. A discussion of the theological positions taken in the *Risāla* is beyond the framework of this introduction. Suffice it to say that ‘Abduh signals his openness to a number of positions and approaches but at the same time is eager to stress the necessity to maintain a strictly abstract conception of God and to limit theological speculation in order not to jeopardise the unity of believers through controversial discussions that might arise from such speculation. The Arabic title *Risālat al-tawhīd* underlines these two goals, *tawhīd* being an ambiguous term which can equally be understood as ‘profession of God’s unity’ and ‘union among people.’¹⁸

Two aspects set the *Risāla* apart from previous works in Islamic theology: The first aspect is ‘Abduh’s consistent use of arguments derived from the academic disciplines of history and the social sciences as they had developed in nineteenth-century Europe. The second novel aspect is, as mentioned, the new language ‘Abduh employs. He presents his material in a prose replete with rhetorical figures and in a plot-structure of decline and revival which is reminiscent of what nineteenth-century European theorists of drama called anticlimax and climax.

The book opens on a solemn note, quoting the entire first chapter of the Quran (*sūrat al-fātiha*). A few preliminary remarks are followed by a historical part, which exposes the main problem, namely the fact that the Muslim community has been divided into different schools of thought and belief (chap. 1). The historical account breaks off with a lamentation on the weakened state of the Muslim community at the time when it was confronted with the challenge of the rising European powers. Here ‘Abduh’s narrative has reached its anticlimax. Now that the problem has been exposed and the urgency of a new understanding of Islam has been established, ‘Abduh continues with a very sober chapter in which he expounds principles of logic (chap. 2). This is a turning point insofar as ‘Abduh uses the logical principles as the base for a summary of Islamic theology which proceeds from the proof of God’s existence to the divine attributes, the foundations of ethics, the mission and message of the Prophet Muhammad and to the nature of the Quran (chaps. 3–12). The language of these chapters becomes more and more emphatic from chapter

¹⁸ Cf. note 1, above.

to chapter, and the use of imagery and rhetorical devices increases steadily. All this prepares the reader for three chapters of a truly novel kind that top ‘Abduh’s carefully constructed edifice: The first of these (chap. 13)¹⁹ is the origin of the excerpt presented here and will be summarised below. The following two chapters (chaps. 14 and 15) aim at proving that human progress in the future can reach its culmination “within Islam.” These chapters are the triumphant antithesis of the first chapter, which detailed the *misère* of the contemporary Muslim world. At this point, ‘Abduh’s narrative has reached its dramatic climax. What remains is a brief part providing the reader with guidelines how to defend Islam in polemical discussion (chaps. 16–17). Here the imperilled state of contemporary Islam is again brought to the readers’ mind. Now, however, the solution to the problem has been made clear, and so the book ends on a hopeful note.

Comments on the Translated Excerpt

As can be seen from the above discussion, the excerpt is taken from a central chapter of ‘Abduh’s *Risāla*. It summarises some of the main theses of the previous sections and opens the apologetic parts of the treatise that dominate the last quarter of the book. In the beginning of the excerpt, ‘Abduh summarises some central tenets of the Islamic creed which he has already explained in previous sections of the book. In so doing, he presents a reformulation of classical theological positions according to the Ash‘arite and Maturidite schools. Among them are: God is absolutely transcendent and a strictly limited number of divine attributes can be deduced from their traces in the created world. The prophets, God’s messengers to humankind, are distinguished by certain qualities and the veracity of their message is proven by miracles; these miracles, however, all happen according to God’s preordained will and do not allow the conclusion that the prophets themselves possess any superhuman qualities. Man ‘acquires’ (*kāsiḥ*) all his deeds as a ‘grace’ or ‘favour’ (*ni‘ma*) from God, but he or she possesses a free will insofar as he or she is asked to use this divine gift responsibly.

From here onwards, ‘Abduh proceeds to four more general observations on the nature of the Islamic creed. These observations depart from classical theology to a greater degree, as they stress values which gained almost universal currency during the nineteenth century. Thus ‘Abduh describes the creed of divine unity (*tawḥīd*) as a doctrine that implies complete freedom for the entrepreneurial human being, save certain obligations to charity and the common good. This goes along with a valorisation of individual achievement

19 RT, 97–116.

over status acquired by birth. In addition, 'Abduh continues, the Islamic creed forbids blind adherence (*taqlīd*) to religious authorities.²⁰ From this follows that the individual believer is called to judge the claims of any authority based on his own knowledge and convictions. Finally, Islam represents the original monotheistic creed. This pure monotheism holds the promise to unite humankind, which is plagued by discord on grounds of dogmatism and hypocrisy.

In the following passages, 'Abduh discusses the place of Islam within the context of an evolutionary model of religious history. Here he adapts an argument made by an authority from the classical Islamic heritage. Al-Jāḥiẓ, a famous author of the eighth century, had stated in his tract *Ḥujaj al-nubuwwa* (The Proofs of Prophecy) that while Moses had impressed the eyes of the Israelites by the miracle of cleaving the sea, Muhammad had impressed the intellect of his contemporaries by the 'inimitability' of the Quran.²¹ Al-Jāḥiẓ, and later generations of Muslim scholars after him, then took this comparison further by adding the idea that God had endowed each prophet with precisely that faculty which was most valued among a particular people. Thus, Moses surpassed the magical practices at the Pharaonic court and Jesus revived people from the dead in a context where medicine was most highly valued. Muhammad, finally, was the prophet of a people who excelled in poetry, and accordingly his prophetic sign was a linguistic one.²² 'Abduh presents his readers a revised version of al-Jāḥiẓ's argument, whereby he adds a temporal dimension to it and combines it with evolutionary thought along the lines of the 'law of the three stages' which was formulated by the pioneer of academic sociology Auguste Comte (1798–1857). Comte's model stipulates that humankind develops through three intellectual stages, which he likened to the stages in the development of the human individual: a 'childlike' theological stage, a 'youthful' metaphysical stage and a 'mature' positive stage.²³ Following Comte's model, 'Abduh presents Judaism as a religion fixed on rules as it befits the mind of a child. Then Christianity is introduced as a religion full of

20 Compare with chapter 1.08 by Amal Ghazal.

21 Al-Jāḥiẓ, *Rasā'il*, 3:153. On the Islamic dogma of the inimitability of the Quran (*i'jāz al-Qur'ān*) see Angelika Neuwirth, "Das islamische Dogma der 'Unnachahmlichkeit des Korans' in literaturwissenschaftlicher Sicht," *Der Islam* 60 (1983): 166–83.

22 Neuwirth, "Das islamische Dogma," 156. See Navid Kermani, *Gott ist schön: Das ästhetische Erleben des Koran* (München: Beck, 2000), 22–3.

23 On maturity see Auguste Comte, *Auguste Comte on Positivism: The Essential Writings*, ed. G. Lenzer (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1998), 34–42. For a general remark on Comte's writings as an inspiration for 'Abduh, see Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 139.

‘youthful’ emotions,²⁴ and finally Islam as a ‘mature’ system of belief and the only one fully compatible with modern science.

This leads to the final passages of the excerpt, in which ‘Abduh describes Islam as an ethical system for the modern age. ‘Abduh does so by presenting another list of values which according to him characterise the true nature of Islam. These final passages of the excerpt do not argue or exemplify. They simply proclaim a set of beliefs. ‘Abduh presents his views as the expression of the ‘true’ nature of Islam, similar to statements made in a creed or a political manifesto.

‘Abduh’s list of Islamic core values bears close resemblance to the values promoted by contemporary bourgeois liberal authors all over the world, among them the ideals of the French Revolution, freedom, equality and brotherhood, as well as self-discipline and individual achievement.²⁵ Thus, according to him, Islamic ritual prescriptions serve clearly identifiable goals in this world, such as the strengthening of character and bodily hygiene. In addition, Islam highly values entrepreneurship (in contrast to what he describes as glorification of poverty in Christian thought); and Islam repudiates discrimination on racial grounds while stressing the dignity of every human being. Finally, Islam, according to ‘Abduh, encourages purposefulness, trust and ‘brotherly’ cooperation. These values, the author states, are the secret to the well-being not only of individuals but of whole nations. The catalogue of values that ‘Abduh enumerates here comes close to what the English author Samuel Smiles, in a widely-read book of 1860, described as ‘the spirit of self-help.’²⁶ The Christian journalist Ya‘qūb Ṣarrūf published an Arabic translation of Smiles’ *Self Help* in 1880 under the title *Sirr al-Najāh* (The Secret of Success).²⁷ ‘Abduh, similar to his adaptation of Comte in the passage on religious evolution, fuses arguments

24 According to Adams, ‘Abduh’s view of Christianity as appealing to emotions is reminiscent of discussions in Protestant circles during the nineteenth century (Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, 174–6).

25 This aspect is further developed in Büssow, “Re-imagining Islam.” On the world-wide spread of middle class values during the nineteenth century see Jürgen Osterhammel, *Verwandlung der Welt, 1085–1104* (München: C. H. Beck, 2009). For a succinct list of typical elements of a nineteenth-century middle-class worldview see John L. Comaroff, “Images of Empire, Contests of Conscience: Models of Colonial Domination in South Africa,” in *Tensions of Empire*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 169–70.

26 Samuel Smiles, *Self Help; With Illustrations of Character and Conduct* (London: Murray, 1860).

27 Ṣarrūf’s translation was published in Beirut 1880 and in Cairo 1886. For its reception in Lebanon and Egypt, see Gudrun Krämer, *Hasan al-Banna* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2010), 109.

made by Smiles with others from a classical Islamic source. This time he draws directly on the Quran, quoting several verses from the Holy Scripture that threaten punishment of entire human communities who do not abide to divine commands, alongside others that promise earthly rewards to those who strive to better themselves. For ‘Abduh, the Quranic verse “God changes not what is in a people, until they change what is in themselves” (Q 13:11) clearly resonated with the opening sentence of Smiles’ book, which reads “Heaven helps those who help themselves.”²⁸

At this point, the reader is taken directly into the debates of the late nineteenth century in which Middle Eastern authors, Muslims as well as non-Muslims, tried to identify methods to counter the threat of their societies being subjugated to the hegemony of more powerful European nations. In ‘Abduh’s view, the ‘secret of success’ clearly lay in embracing a reformed Islam. Muslims needed to gain a comprehensive picture of ‘true’ Islam, ranging from the issue of the divine attributes to questions of practical ethics. This view, in turn, is connected to a vision of the future in which Muslims fully ‘own’ their religion again, overcome their manifold internal divisions and are thus able to reassert themselves on the world stage.²⁹

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Further Reading

‘Abduh, Muḥammad. *Rissalat Al Tawhid: Exposé de la Religion Musulmane*: Translation and introduction by Bernard Michel and Moustapha Abdel Razik. Paris: Geuthner, 1925.

‘Abduh, Muḥammad. *The Theology of Unity*: Translation and introduction by Ishaq Masa‘ad and Kenneth Cragg. London: Allen and Unwin, 1966.

Adams, Charles C. *Islam and Modernism in Egypt: A Study of the Modern Reform Movement Inaugurated by Muhammad ‘Abduh*. London: Routledge 2000.

Büssow, Johann. “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*. Edited by Liat Kozma, Cyrus Schayegh and Avner Wishnitzer, 273–320. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015.

Sedgwick, Mark. *Muhammad Abduh*. Oxford: OneWorld, 2010.

²⁸ Smiles, *Self Help*, 1.

²⁹ For more detailed observations on the concept of religion (*dīn*) in ‘Abduh’s *Risāla*, see Büssow, “Re-imagining Islam.”

Source Text³⁰*The Islamic Religion, or Islam*

[God’s attributes and transcendence]³¹

[...] The Islamic religion brought the creed that God—exalted be He—is one (*tawḥīd Allāh*) in His essence and His acts, and that He is transcendent above all comparison with created beings. It has come with proofs that the universe has one creator, and that He is to be described by what the traces of His handiwork reveal as exalted attributes, such as knowledge, power and will.³² [The Islamic religion also teaches] that none of His creatures resembles Him and that there is no relation between Him and them, except the fact that He is their originator, that they belong to Him and that to Him they return.³³ “Say: ‘He is God, One, God, the Everlasting Refuge, who has not begotten, and has not been begotten, and equal to Him is not any one.’”³⁴ [...]

[Prophets do not possess superhuman qualities and act according to a divine law]³⁵

[The Islamic religion also teaches that] [I]t is impossible that His essence or His attributes should manifest themselves in the form of the body or the spirit of any of the world’s inhabitants (*al-‘ālamīn*).³⁶ But He—praised be He—distinguishes whom He wills among His servants (*‘ibādihi*)³⁷ as He wills through knowledge or power for the deeds He ordains to them. This follows

30 The translation retains the paragraphs of the *Risāla*’s first edition of 1898. In order to make the topics treated in the text more transparent, additional subheadings have been inserted, marked by square brackets. At the beginning of each new section, the corresponding pages in the first edition are indicated in a footnote. The translation of Quranic verses generally follows Arthur John Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964). In some cases, Arberry’s translation has been modified in order to bring out those aspects of the verse that ‘Abduh presumably wanted to highlight in the context of the quote.

31 RT, 97–8.

32 On concepts of divine attributes (*ṣifāt Allāh*) in Islamic theology, see Daniel Gimaret, “Ṣifa; 2. In theology,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*.

33 Paraphrase of Quran 2:156: “Who, when they are visited by an affliction, say, ‘Surely we belong to God, and to Him we return.’”

34 Quran 112:1–3.

35 RT, 98.

36 See Quran 1:2: “Praise belongs to God, the Lord of all Being (*rabb al-‘ālamīn*).”

37 In Islamic religious literature, ‘servants’ (*‘ibād*) is a common synonym for human beings. The following passages refer to the special qualities of prophets.

an unchangeable law which He has ordained for this matter in His eternal and unchangeable knowledge.³⁸ [The Islamic religion] forbids any rational mind to attribute such unusual qualities to anyone, without proof, the premises of which must be able to prevail in front of the judgement of the senses and the related axioms of intuition (*al-badīhiyāt*) of which are at least as clear, if not more so. [Among such axioms would be,] for example, the impossibility to affirm both of two opposites at the same time or that it is necessary that the whole be greater than the part.³⁹ [The Islamic religion] teaches us that they, [His prophets,] like other human beings, “have no power to profit or hurt themselves.”⁴⁰ The entire truth about them is that they are [especially] honored servants and that everything that He makes happen through their hands needs special authorisation and special enablement, following a special end, according to a special wisdom. As we have explained above, God’s involvement in this can only be known on the basis of clear proof.

[Man is responsible for his deeds]⁴¹

This religion provides hints such as this from the Holy Book: “God brought you forth from your mothers’ wombs, knowing nothing. He gave you hearing and sight and hearts, so that perhaps you will be grateful.”⁴² Gratitude, among the Arabs, means using the grace (*niʿma*) given in loyalty to the intention within in. So in this way, [the Islamic religion] points us the fact that God has endowed us with senses and has implanted faculties within us which we should use

38 “[...] *ʿalā sunnatin lahu fi dhālika sannahā fi ʿilmihi al-azālī alladhī lā yaʿtarīhi al-tabdīl*” (RT, 98). Islamic theologians in the tradition of al-Ashʿarī have traditionally maintained that all deeds of man are ordained by God in his eternal foreknowledge. In a subtle re-interpretation, ʿAbduh interprets Quranic references to foreknowledge as part of the ‘laws’ (*sunan*, sg. *sunna*) which God supposedly has ordained for his creation. On the concept of ‘God’s law’ (*sunnat Allāh*) in the Quranic commentary *Tafsīr al-Manār* (co-authored by ʿAbduh and Rashīd Riḍā) see Christian van Nispen tot Sevenaer, *Activité humaine et agir de Dieu: Le concept ‘sunan de Dieu’ dans le commentaire coranique du Manār* (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1996). See for the concept of God’s *sunna* also the chapter 2.07 on Rashīd Riḍā in this volume.

39 I.e. each proof must prevail in front of the double judgement of the senses and of logic.

40 Quote from Quran 13:16: “[...] Say: ‘Then have you taken unto you others beside Him to be your protectors, even such as have no power to profit or hurt themselves?’ [...]” The context of the Quranic chapter suggests that this verse refers to those who seek help from other instances than God, such as men or women who allegedly possess superhuman qualities.

41 RT, 98–99.

42 Quran 16:78.

only in accordance to what He has intended with these gifts. Thus, everyone who acquires (*kāsib*) a specific activity [from God], acquires certain rights and obligations connected to it.⁴³ Those things, however, that perplex our rational conception, [things] without which we would be at the end of our forces, through which our soul feels that she is subject to a ruler who overwhelms her or strengthens her, this power that makes her humble, since it goes beyond every power that she knows, which defeats her, subjects her and lets her seek refuge in it—all this goes back to God alone. It is only in front of Him that the soul is allowed to humble herself, and only Him she can trust entirely. The same is true for what she fears and for what she longs with regard to the other life. The soul is not allowed to see refuge anywhere else than in God, in order to seek a reward for her good deeds and forgiveness for her misdeeds. He alone is “Master of the Day of Judgement.”⁴⁴ [...]

[The creed of unity means freedom]⁴⁵

Man became by the profession of divine unity (*tawḥīd*) the servant of God alone. He was freed from bondage to anyone except Him and obtained the right of a free man (*al-ḥurr*) among free men. There were no inequalities of ‘high’ and ‘low’ and no ‘inferior’ and no ‘superior’ anymore between men, except in their deeds, the only distinction being intelligence and knowledge. The only drawing closer to God was by the way of purification of the mind from the stain of prejudice, and by the freeing of action from deviance and hypocrisy. In addition, the possessions of the earners of livelihood (*al-kāsibīn*) were freed from all claims, saving only the obligations to the poor and needy and those to the common good. At the same time, they were protected from the grip of those parasites and idlers who pretended to have a claim to them due to rank and status, but not out of any work or service.

43 This is a moralistic interpretation of the Islamic theological doctrine of ‘acquisition’ (*kasb*). In its classical form, this doctrine, which was developed by the Ash‘arite theological school, meant to solve the conflict between the ideas of God’s omnipotence and human free will by stating that all human deeds were created by God, but that man ‘acquired’ each of them. See Louis Gardet, “Kasb; As a theological term,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*; Wilferd Madelung, “Der Kalām,” in Helmut Gätje and Woldemar Fischer, eds., *Grundriss der arabischen Philologie*, vol. 2 (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1987), 330–4.

44 Quran 1:4.

45 *RT*, 100.

[Islam values individual achievement]⁴⁶

Islam has called all able-bodied to work. It ordained that each individual should receive what he deserves, in the positive as well as in the negative sense. "And whoso has done an atom's weight of good shall see it, and whoso has done an atom's weight of evil shall see it."⁴⁷ "And that a man shall have to his account only as he has laboured."⁴⁸ [Islam] has allowed every man to consume from the good things what he desires, be it food or drink, dress or adornment. It has forbidden him only what is harmful to himself or to those within his protection, or what occasions harm to others. For this purpose, it has laid down general limits (*al-hudūd al-āmma*) adequate to preserve the common interests of humankind at large.⁴⁹ It has ensured each man in his independence of action and has given wide room for competition and endeavour, without let or hindrance, as long as they do not conflict with the established rights of others.

[Islam forbids blind adherence to authorities]⁵⁰

Islam has forbidden blind adherence to authorities (*taqlīd*) and has fought against it a relentless battle, scattering its cohorts, who had taken possession of men's minds, eradicating its roots, which had taken deep hold in the spirits, and shattering its pillars in the peoples' beliefs. Islam has roused reason from its lethargy and woke it up from its long slumber.

For whenever it was touched by a ray from the light of truth, the temple guardians of all prejudices intervened, murmuring quietly, "Sleep on, the night is dark, the way is rough and the goal distant. The riding camel is tired, and provisions are scant." The voice of Islam rose above these unworthy whispering and declared that man was not created in order to be led by a bridle, but that it was inscribed in his nature (*faṭara*) that he should be led by knowledge and by insight into the signs in the created world and in past events.⁵¹ Islam has taught that teachers are to alert and to guide, directing men to the paths of study. It declared that the adherents of truth are those "who give ear to the Word and

46 RT, 100–1.

47 Quran 99:7–8.

48 Quran 53:39.

49 *Maṣāliḥ al-bashar kāffatan*. This formulation testifies to 'Abduh's global perspective on social and religious matters. See Büssow, "Re-imagining Islam."

50 RT, 101.

51 *A'lām al-kawn wa-dalā'il al-ḥawādith*. The formulation reminds one of the so-called 'sign passages' in the Quran which speak of certain phenomena of nature and human life as 'signs' (*āyāt*) of God in his creation (See Alford T. Welch, "Qur'ān," *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, section 7 b. The passage can as well be understood as an exhortation to study natural sciences and history.

follow the fairest of it.”⁵² It described them as those who ponder all what is said, irrespective of who the speakers are, in order to adopt the fairest of it, and reject what does not give evidence of validity or usefulness. Islam attacked the religious authorities and pushed them down from the high place whence they uttered their commands and prohibitions. It made them answerable to their followers, so that these could scrutinise them as they liked and examine their claims according to their own judgement, and pronounce a verdict based on their knowledge and convictions, and not on speculation and prejudice. [...]

[Islam represents the original monotheistic creed]⁵³

When Islam came, mankind was divided into religious sects, and only a few stood at the side of true belief. They excommunicated each other, cursed one another, while pretending that they were holding on to “the rope of God.”⁵⁴ Separatism, discord and quarrelling appeared to them the best way of serving God. Islam repudiated all that and affirmed unequivocally that the religion of God—through all periods and according to the messages of all prophets—is one.

God said: “The true religion with God is surrender (*islām*). Those who were given the Book were not at variance except after the knowledge came to them, being insolent one to another.”⁵⁵ “No, Abraham in truth was not a Jew, neither a Christian; but he was someone who has surrendered to God (*muslim*) and one pure of faith (*ḥanīf*); certainly he was not one of those who associate other gods with God (*al-mushrikūn*).”⁵⁶ “He has laid down for you as religion that He charged Noah with, and that We have revealed to thee, and that We charged Abraham with, Moses and Jesus. Establish the religion, and be not divided therein. Hard for those who associate others with God is that to which you invite them.”⁵⁷ “Say: ‘People of the Book! Come now to a word common between us and you, that we serve none but God, and that we do not associate anything with Him, and do not some of us take others as lords, apart from God.’ And if they turn their backs, say: ‘Bear witness that we have surrendered to God (*muslimūn*)!’”⁵⁸

52 Quran 39:18.

53 RT, 104–5.

54 Quran 3:103.

55 Quran 3:19.

56 Quran 3:67.

57 Quran 42:13.

58 Quran 3:64.

There is much more to be quoted here, which, however, would be too long for these pages. Everyone who reads the Quran as it deserves to be read, knows the noble verses which admonish the people of the faith who disputed and disagreed, despite the clear case and the straight path shown to them leading to the knowledge of that over which they divided. The Book declares unambiguously that the religion of God through all ages is to acknowledge His Lordship alone, to surrender in worship only to Him, to follow His commands and prohibitions, which contain the common good of humankind and the basis for their happiness in this world and the Hereafter. God has set that down in the books which he has sent upon His chosen messengers, and He has called the minds to understand them and the will to act accordingly.

This meaning of religion is the principle (*aṣl*) one has to return to when the storm of discord is rising. It is the sure balance on which statements can be weighed when two opposing opinions have an equal number of proponents. Dogmatism and hypocrisy in controversy cut men off from religion and lead them astray from its path. However, when its wisdom is rightly esteemed and the divine care in the benediction it brings to humankind is recognised, disagreement ends and the hearts return to their true guide. Under its leadership, all men become brothers, holding fast to the truth and working together for its victory. [...]

[The evolution of religion until Islam]⁵⁹

When religions first came,⁶⁰ men understood their interests—common as well as private—in a way that resembles that of an infant lately born, who knows only what comes within his senses and who can hardly distinguish between today and yesterday, who can hardly appreciate anything he cannot touch, and who has no inner awareness by which to sympathise with family or fellow. The chief concern of such an infant is self-preservation and he is too pre-occupied to understand the implication of his relationships with others, unless it be the hand that feeds him or steadies him in sitting or standing.

It would not have been wise for religions in this context to speak to people about subtle aspects of consciousness or to even go beyond it on the ladder of proof. On the contrary, it is a sign of great grace that they treated the peoples—God's children—like a parent treats his child in the age of innocence, not confronting it with anything other than that what it can perceive by hearing or seeing. The religions gave them straight commands and deterring restraints, called them to obedience to the utmost possible degree. Although

59 *RT*, 106–7.

60 The following is, at least partly, a characterisation of Judaism.

the religions made only obligations that were most clearly sensible, men did not understand their meaning, and their comprehension did not grasp their aim. So they approached them with miracles that impressed men's eyes and aroused their feelings, and they imposed forms of worship on them in consonance with their condition.

Ages passed, during which the peoples ascended and descended, flourished and declined, during which they were tested and profited from it, during which they quarrelled and agreed. They tasted bitter days of pain and experienced happiness and calamity alternately—for days and days. The souls, through the influence of events and the lessons of disasters developed sensibilities which were finer in their perceptive faculty and anchored deeper in consciousness. These sensibilities, however, did not go above what happens in the hearts of women, or what is engendered by the passionate feelings of youth.

Then, a religion appeared which spoke to the emotions, appealed to charity and cultivated the passions into empathy.⁶¹ This religion spoke to the dispositions of the hearts and prescribed ascetic exercises to men, drawing them away from the world altogether and raising their faces to the highest kingdom. It taught that even someone with a legitimate claim should not insist on his right, that the gates of heaven are barred to the rich and similar well-known beliefs of this kind. It prescribed rules of religious service to men that were in line with their state and with this religion's message. Its call found an echo among the souls that hearkened to it, freeing them from corruption and healing them from diseases. But after only a few generations the resolve of men suffered from the burden of this religion. Men were no longer able to adhere to its limits and to hold fast to its words. The conviction grew that it was impossible to hold on to its teachings. The very custodians of this religion began to rival kings for their authority and to vie in wealth with the rich. The majority of people diverted from its path through arbitrary interpretation (*ta'wil*) and randomly added to it all kinds of false accretions. Thus was the development of their morals and practices. They forgot the purity of religion and sold its integrity, while in the domain of creed they became divided into sects. [...]

[General traits of the ethics inherent to Islam]⁶²

At length, human society reached a point at which man reached maturity, helped by the moral of past events. Now came Islam and spoke to reason, appealed to intelligence and understanding, connecting them to emotions and sensations, in order to lead man to happiness in this world and in the Hereafter.

61 What follows is a characterisation of Christianity.

62 *RT*, 108–9.

It explained the issues over which men were divided and revealed to them the sense of those over which they quarrelled. It proved that the religion of God was one through all ages and that there is only one way in which they could improve their matters and purify their hearts, and that He has created outward forms of religious service only in order to renew the contemplation of God in the souls, since God does not look at the outward form but at the heart.⁶³ It called upon the believer to cultivate both his body and his soul as well as to keep his exterior as clean as his inner being, and it made both part of the prescribed ritual purity. It made sincerity the spirit of religious service and prescribed only such rites which strengthen the character. "Verily, worship preserves from lewdness and iniquity."⁶⁴ "Man was created anxious. When evil befalls him, he becomes impatient, and niggardly when good touches him—except those who pray."⁶⁵

Islam raised the rich man who is grateful to the level of the poor man who endures patiently—perhaps even higher. It deals with man in his exhortations like a wise and sober counsellor would deal with a mature person, calling upon him to use all his external and internal powers and affirming unambiguously that this is the way of earning God's favour and the reward of His blessings. For this world is the sowing field of the Hereafter, and there is no way to eternal salvation but to strive for the betterment of this world. [...]

[Islam is opposed to racial discrimination]⁶⁶

Islam has abolished any discrimination between the human races and has awarded each human creature the dignity of being related to God through His act of creation and the dignity of belonging to the race of the human species and the merit, privilege and honor to stand on the level of perfection which God has given to this species. Therewith it contradicts those who pretend to privileged status denied to others, who declare other races as being inferior, who deny them to ever be able to reach their level of development, and who have thus killed the spirit of most nations and reduced most peoples to walking skeletons and shadows. [...]

63 This is an indirect statement regarding the question of true belief. While some theologians, like 'Abduh, regard only the profession of the heart as essential, others also include the outward religious service into the necessary components of the Islamic creed. For an overview see W. Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Creeds: A Selection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994).

64 Quran 29:45.

65 Quran 79:19–22.

66 RT, 110.

[The principle of self-help]⁶⁷

The spirit which God has implanted into all His Divine laws calls upon us to correct our thought and to get our reflection on the right track, to cultivate our passions and to set limits to our desires, to assess every matter first on its proper merits, to pursue all objectives soundly, to keep the trust confided to oneself (*al-amāna*), to be inspired from fraternity and collaboration in the name of benevolence, to counsel each other, be it in good or in bad times, among other moral principles (*uṣūl al-faḍā'il*).

This spirit is the source of the nations' wellbeing and their shining bliss in this life, before the other world is reached. "Whoso desires the reward of this world, We will give him of this."⁶⁸ God will never withdraw his blessing from a nation, as long as this spirit is alive in them. God multiplies their blessings if this spirit is strong, and he diminishes when it is weak.

If eventually this spirit should leave a nation completely, happiness will leave in its wake, and peace will follow suit. God then transforms the power of the people into weakness, its prosperity into poverty, its wellbeing into misery and its peace into trouble. While they are still slumbering in indolence, they will be overpowered by dictators, no matter whether they are just or unjust. "And when We desire to destroy a city, We command its men who live at ease, and they commit ungodliness therein, then the Word is realised against it, and We destroy it utterly."⁶⁹ "We have commanded righteousness," says God in this verse, "but they have perverted it to evil." In that event, moaning will not benefit them and weeping will be to no avail. What remains as appearances of activity will not redeem them, and their prayers will not be answered. They have only one hope of redemption from the calamity that has come down on them, namely to take refuge to this most noble spirit and to use the messengers of thought, contemplation, patience and gratefulness to seek its renewed descent from the heaven of mercy. "God changes not what is in a people, until they change what is in themselves."⁷⁰ "This was God's way in the case of those who passed away before; and thou shall not find any change in the way of God."⁷¹

Selected and translated by Johann Büssow

67 RT, 112–13.

68 Quran 3:145.

69 Quran 17:16.

70 Quran 13:11.

71 Quran 33:62.

Religious Dynamics under the Impact of Imperialism and Colonialism

A Sourcebook

Edited by

Björn Bentlage
Marion Eggert
Hans Martin Krämer
and Stefan Reichmuth



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