

VI

MUHAMMAD 'ABDUH¹

FROM time to time in the life of al-Afghani we have come upon the figure of Muhammad 'Abduh, the disciple and collaborator moving closely in his wake. But 'Abduh did not remain all his life a pupil of al-Afghani, nor were the years of their collaboration the most fruitful of his career. He was to become a more systematic thinker than his master and have a more lasting influence on the Muslim mind, not only in Egypt but far beyond. His teaching was in the end to be rejected by many of those to whom he addressed himself, but remained working beneath the surface, the unacknowledged basis of the religious ideas of the ordinary educated Muslim.

His origin was very different from that of al-Afghani. Al-Afghani came from some distant place not to be determined with certainty, and passed like a meteor from one country to another; 'Abduh was firmly rooted in an ordinary family of the country where his main work was to be done. He was born in 1849 in a village of the Egyptian delta, into a family belonging to what has been the creative class of modern Egypt: the village families of some local standing and with a tradition of learning and piety. His father was perhaps of distant Turkish origin, his mother of an Arab family claiming descent from one of the early heroes of Islam. Both families had long been settled in a village near Tanta, but in the later years of Muhammad 'Ali they were forced to leave because of the exactions of his tax-collectors, and lived for some time in difficult straits elsewhere. Muhammad 'Abduh himself was born during this period of involuntary wandering, and although the family later returned to its village and recovered something of its position, he kept all his life the memory of what the victories and worldly glories of Muhammad 'Ali had really meant for the Egyptian people.

¹ For the life and thought of 'Abduh cf. works by Adams, Goldziher, Horten, and Jomier cited in the bibliography. For a searching critique of his school of thought, cf. Gibb, *Modern Trends in Islam*.

When he was about thirteen years old he was sent to study at the Ahmadi mosque at Tanta, then the greatest centre of religious culture in Egypt outside the Azhar. He was so bewildered by the method of teaching in use there—the learning by rote of commentaries on ancient texts—that after a time he ran away. He wanted to abandon his studies, but was persuaded to return by a maternal uncle, Shaykh Darwish, whose influence was to be the most decisive in his life before that of al-Afghani. It was his uncle who taught him the reality of belief which lay behind the stiff phrases of the books of grammar and doctrine, and many years later, in a fragment of autobiography, 'Abduh revealed something of what he owed him, and the affection in which he held his memory:

I found no divine to direct my conscience in the path it should take, except that shaykh who, in a few days, let me out from the prison of ignorance into the open air of knowledge, from the bonds of literalism to the freedom of true belief in God. . . . He was the key to my happiness, if I have had any happiness in my life. He gave me back that part of myself which I had lost, and revealed to me what lay concealed in my own nature.²

He went back to Tanta, and after finishing his studies there went on to the Azhar in Cairo, where he stayed from 1869 to 1877. He was particularly drawn to a shaykh who lectured on logic and philosophy, but even more to mystical theology. Mysticism remained for some time his favourite study, and was the subject of his first published work. For a while he lived a life of extravagant asceticism, shunning contact with other human beings, but from the danger of this he was rescued first by another intervention of Shaykh Darwish, then by his first meeting with al-Afghani. The Afghan was passing through Cairo for the first time on his way to Constantinople:

One of the students of the Syrian *riwaq* [says 'Abduh's biographer] told him that a great Afghan scholar had come to Cairo and was living in Khan al-Khalili. He rejoiced at that and suggested to Shaykh Hasan al-Tawil that they should visit him together. They found him at supper; he invited them to join him and, when they excused themselves, began to ask them questions about certain verses of the Quran, and what the commentators and mystics said about them. Then he began to give his own explanation, and ['Abduh's] heart was filled with wonder and

² Rida, *Ta'rikh*, i. 23.

love, because Quranic interpretation and mysticism were his favourite studies or, as he used to say, the key of his happiness.³

When al-Afghani came back to Egypt in 1871 'Abduh became the most devoted of the students who gathered around him, attending the informal classes in his house and helping to spread his ideas. Under al-Afghani's influence he began to study philosophy at this time: two copies of the *Isharat* of Ibn Sina, made by his own hand at this time, bear witness to his interest, and one of them ends with a eulogy of al-Afghani.⁴ At this time also he began to make a name for himself as a writer on social and political subjects, with some articles in a journal newly established in Cairo by two brothers from Lebanon, *al-Ahram*. In 1877 he finished his studies with the degree of 'alim, and started the career which was always to be the most congenial to him, that of teacher. He taught at the Azhar, but also held informal classes in his own house. Soon afterwards he began to teach at Dar al-'Ulum, a new college established to provide a modern education for students of the Azhar who wished to become judges or teachers in government schools. Among the books on which he lectured in his house were a work on ethics by Miskawayh and the Arabic translation of Guizot's *History of Civilization in Europe*, and at Dar al-'Ulum his first class was on Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddima*, which had been published in Cairo, thanks to the interest of Tahtawi, in 1857. The choice of books shows the way in which his mind was moving: Miskawayh's book was an Islamic version of Greek ethical philosophy and both Guizot and Ibn Khaldun dealt in different ways with the problem of the rise and fall of civilizations.

The 1870's were the period when national consciousness became articulate in Egypt. It was given expression by the new periodical press, and a new direction by the growth of foreign influence. The Khedive Isma'il had fallen hopelessly into debt to foreign bankers, and the European Powers, to safeguard their interests, imposed a financial control which seemed likely to become political as well. European ministers took office in the government of Nubar Pasha, formed in 1878; and when Isma'il dismissed them and seemed inclined to break away from control he was deposed by the sultan acting under pressure from the

³ Rida, *Ta'rikh*, p. 25.

⁴ Osman Amin, *Muh. 'Abduh*, p. 29.

Powers. His autocratic rule, and the very high taxes he had imposed to pay the interest on his debts, had made him unpopular in Egypt, but his son and successor was no more popular. In the first years of his rule three overlapping movements of opposition grew in strength: those who, by religious conviction or national sentiment, saw in his subservience to the influence of Europe a danger to the independence of Egypt; those who, from principle or because of interest, wanted to replace absolute by constitutional rule; and the officers of Egyptian origin, who wanted to break the control of the Turco-Circassian officers over the army. The British and French policy of support for Tawfiq gradually blended these groups into a single movement of national opposition, and—as was perhaps inevitable—leadership fell into the hands of the soldiers. Their leader, 'Urabi Pasha, became Minister of War and virtual head of the government at the beginning of 1882. His government was regarded by Britain and France as a danger to their interests, and a period of tension and suspicion was brought to an end by the British bombardment of Alexandria and occupation of the whole country in September 1882. 'Abduh played an important part in these events. His early articles in the *Ahram* reflected al-Afghani's political views and it was perhaps for this reason that, when the Khedive Tawfiq exiled al-Afghani from Egypt, he ordered 'Abduh to retire to his village. But in 1880 he was back in Cairo, appointed by the Prime Minister, Riaz Pasha, as one of the editors, then as chief editor, of the official gazette, the *Waqā'i' al-misriyya*. During the next two years of crisis he played an important part in forming public opinion, by a series of articles on the social and political order, and in particular on national education. He was one of the leaders of the civilian wing of the national opposition. At Blunt's instigation, he and other civilian leaders drew up a statement of their aspirations which was sent to Gladstone and published in *The Times*. At this time he disapproved of the ideas and methods of the military leaders and had no high opinion of 'Urabi Pasha, but when the British attack began he had no hesitation in drawing closer to them and doing what he could to organize a national resistance. After the British occupation and restoration of the khedive's power he was arrested, kept in prison for a time, and maltreated. This, and the collapse of the nationalist movement, had a profound effect on

him. Broadley, the English lawyer who was sent out by Blunt to defend 'Urabi at his trial, says that 'Abduh's 'great intellectual strength [was] overclouded for a time by moral and physical weakness. His mind and body alike seemed crushed out beyond hope of recovery by the cruel reaction born of shipwrecked hopes and the agony of despair.'⁵

Sentenced to exile for three years, he went first to Beirut and then joined al-Afghani in Paris, helping him to organize his secret society and publish *al-'Urwa al-wuthqa*. He was drawn deeply into al-Afghani's political schemes, visited London in 1884 to discuss with Hartington and others the problem of Egypt and the Sudan, and, when *al-'Urwa* expired, travelled to Tunis and then entered Egypt in disguise, hoping to go from there to the Mahdi in the Sudan.⁶ Like so many of al-Afghani's plans this came to nothing, and 'Abduh returned to Beirut, where he remained for three years teaching in a school newly established by a Muslim benevolent society. It was here that he delivered the lectures on theology which he was later to expand into his most famous book; and in Beirut as in Cairo his house was a centre for young scholars and writers, Christians, Druzes, and Muslims, who came to talk with him about Islam and the Arabic language.

In 1888 he was allowed to return to Egypt by the khedive, on intercession from various quarters including the British Agency.⁷ He had hoped to resume his teaching, but the khedive was unwilling to place him where he could once more have influence over the young. He was made a judge in the 'native tribunals' set up in 1883 to dispense the new codes of positive law, and this was the beginning of a new public career which lasted until his death in 1905. In 1899 he became Mufti of Egypt, head of the whole system of religious law. In this position he could do something to reform the religious courts and the administration of the *awqaf*; and his *fatwas* on questions of public concern helped to reinterpret the religious law in accordance with the needs of the age. In the same year he was appointed a member of the Legislative Council, a small body of thirty members, some nominated and some chosen by a restricted electorate, established in 1883; its functions were to deliberate and advise only, but as a matter of public duty he gave much time to its business. At heart however he remained a scholar, a teacher, and an organizer

⁵ Broadley, pp. 227-8. ⁶ Rida, *Ta'rikh*, i. 380-1. ⁷ Cromer, ii. 179-80.

of schools. He helped to found and direct the Muslim Benevolent Society, the purpose of which was to establish private schools, and in 1895 he persuaded the khedive to set up an administrative council for the Azhar. He remained its most prominent member for ten years, and was able to carry out some reforms in the organization of the ancient university. When he could he still taught there, and when he had time he wrote. His most important book was a systematic treatise on theology based on his lectures in Beirut, *Risalat al-tawhid*; but he wrote a number of commentaries on parts of the Quran, and collaborated with one of his disciples, Rashid Rida, to prepare an elaborate commentary on the whole, based on his lectures but unfinished at the time of his death. At some time in the second half of his life he learnt to read French, and read widely in the European thought of his age. His library contained, among much else, Rousseau's *Émile* and Spencer's *Education*; the novels of Tolstoy as well as his didactic writings; Strauss's *Life of Jesus* and the works of Renan.⁸ He had some contact with European thinkers, wrote a letter to Tolstoy, and went to Brighton to see Spencer; he went to Europe whenever he could, to renew himself, as he said, and because it revived his hopes that the Muslim world could recover from its present state.⁹

Alike through his writings and public activities, he became in later life one of the best known and best loved men in Egypt. A photograph taken on the terrace of the House of Commons when he visited England in 1884 shows a handsome man, well built, dark of complexion, with a tranquil and almost melancholy charm that does not quite conceal the look of conviction in his eyes. In later years the gentleness increased, and those who knew him well were conscious of his kindness and intelligence and a certain spiritual beauty. He was on good terms both with Cromer and with the most eloquent of his critics, Wilfrid Blunt, and he had around him a group of devoted friends and followers who were to become prominent in the life of Egypt. But the intransigence was still there, and while those who liked him liked him very much, there were others who resented his influence or opposed his religious and political convictions: the conservative school in the Azhar, the nationalists of the party of Mustafa Kamil, and the Khedive 'Abbas Hilmi. The khedive and Mustafa

⁸ Osman Amin, p. 33.

⁹ Rida, *Ta'rikh*, i. 846.

Kamil opposed him for reasons which were mainly political, but there were aspects of his teaching which might well have aroused the anger of the conservatives.

The starting-point of his thought, as of al-Afghani's, was the problem of inner decay, the need for an inner revival. He was conscious, as al-Afghani had been, of a type of decay peculiar to Islamic societies. According to the orthodox Muslim conception, Muhammad was sent not only to preach a way of individual salvation but to found a virtuous society. It followed that there were certain ways of acting in society which were in conformity with the Prophet's message and the will of God, certain others which were not. But as circumstances changed, society and its rulers inevitably found themselves faced with problems not foreseen in the prophetic message, and acting in ways which might even appear to contradict it. How to bridge the gap between what Islamic society should be and what it had become? In what sense could Muslim society still be said to be truly Muslim? This had been the problem of the Muslim thinkers of the later Middle Ages, but it came up again in a graver form as the movement of westernization advanced. By the time 'Abduh began to form his views and express them, Egypt like the Ottoman Empire was in its second generation of change. Isma'il had imparted to the process a new dynamic force. New codes of law had been adopted, schools on the new model were being created, there was talk of new political institutions, and in every sphere life was throwing up problems undreamed of by those who had made the *Shari'a* into a code. In general, 'Abduh did not deplore the changes. From the 1870's until the end of his life he remained convinced that the general line of development was both inevitable and to the benefit of Egypt. But he was conscious of the danger inherent in it: the danger of a division of society into two spheres without a real link—a sphere, always diminishing, in which the laws and moral principles of Islam ruled, and another, always growing, in which principles derived by human reason from considerations of worldly utility held sway. In other words, the danger came from an increasing secularization of a society which, by its essence, could never be wholly secularized; the result was a chasm which revealed itself in every aspect of life.

In 'Abduh's early articles we find already a clear analysis of the

problem and its result. There is, for example, a group of articles concerned with the problem of law. For 'Abduh, as for his predecessors, society to be moral must conform to a law of some sort. All created things had their natural laws; if a being went beyond its laws, it was in danger of destruction. For men and societies, those laws were 'the moral laws which limit human behaviour . . . they are set down by men of knowledge and wisdom in books of ethics and human education, after they have found expression in the divine commandments'.¹⁰

Once it crossed the limits laid down by its laws, a society would fall into ruin. But 'laws vary as the conditions of nations vary'; to be effective they must have some relation with the standards and circumstances of the country to which they apply, otherwise they will not fulfil the essential function of law, which is to direct human actions and mould human habits—in fact, they will not be laws at all.¹¹ This, 'Abduh pointed out, was the position of law in modern Egyptian society. Muhammad 'Ali and his successors had tried to reform Egypt by planting European institutions and laws in her soil. 'Abduh had a lively admiration for the achievements of modern Europe, for the serious tone of its society, even at this early age before he knew it directly. But he did not believe it possible to transplant its laws and institutions to Egypt. Laws planted in another soil do not work in the same way, they may even make things worse. The new laws brought from Europe are not really laws at all, because nobody understands them and therefore nobody can respect or obey them; Egypt is becoming that worst of societies, a society without laws.¹²

In the same way, there were two separate types of school in the country. On the one side stood the old religious schools with the Azhar at their apex, on the other the modern schools on the European model, whether established by foreign missions or the government. These two had no relations with each other, and neither was satisfactory in itself. The religious schools suffered from stagnation and slavish imitation, the characteristic ills of traditional Islam. They taught religion in a way, but not the sciences which were necessary for living in the modern world. The mission schools, whether consciously or not, brought their pupils near the religion of the teachers; there were instances known of Muslim children being turned into Christians, and

¹⁰ Ibid. ii. 97. ¹¹ Rida, *Ta'rikh*, ii. 157 & 163. ¹² Ibid. pp. 103 & 157 ff.

even when this did not happen the student who studied a foreign curriculum in a foreign language might become mentally dependent on a foreign nation and estranged from his own. As for the new State schools, they had the vices of both; they were imitations of the foreign schools with this difference, that while the missionaries taught Christianity, the government schools taught no religion except in a formal way, and therefore no social or political morality.¹³

Behind this division of institutions there lay a division of 'spirits'. By the time of 'Abduh the two systems of education had produced two different educated classes in Egypt, each with a spirit of its own. One was the traditional Islamic spirit, resisting all change; the other, the spirit of the younger generation, accepting all change and all the ideas of modern Europe. The ideas of the French Enlightenment were becoming by this time the commonplaces of thought among the younger generation; the knowledge of French was widespread, Montesquieu and Voltaire had been translated. The ideas of positivism, in their original or a distorted form, were widespread. Some Egyptians indeed had drunk at the fountain-head: there is extant a copy of Comte's *Discours sur l'ensemble du positivisme*, presented by the author himself 'à mon ancien élève', Mustafa Mahramji, an Egyptian engineer sent to Paris by Muhammad 'Ali as a member of an educational mission.¹⁴ This meant not only the absence of a common basis shared by the two groups; it meant also the danger that the moral bases of society would be destroyed by the restless spirit of individual reason, always questioning, always doubting. The thought of nineteenth-century France, by which 'Abduh was deeply influenced from an early age, contained full warnings against the dangers of the 'metaphysical' spirit of the previous century. Comte had emphasized that 'social order must ever be incompatible with a perpetual discussion of the foundations of society',¹⁵ and pointed out that, while the doctrines of the metaphysicians had been necessary in order to break up the theological system, they were essentially negative and destructive, 'a complete doctrine of methodical negation of all regular government'.¹⁶ 'Abduh was aware that the danger would be even greater if these destructive weapons were in hands that did not

¹³ Rida, *Ta'rikh*, ii. 505 ff.

¹⁵ Martineau, ii. 13.

¹⁴ Collection of Mr M. Wahba.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 10.

fully understand them. He knew the fragility of the western culture of the gallicized Egyptian, who imitated the outward show of European life: 'It is the appearance of strength which has led the orientals to imitate Europeans in matters in which there is no profit, without perfecting their knowledge of its sources.'¹⁷

'Abduh's purpose, in all the acts of his later life as well as his writings, was to bridge the gulf within Islamic society, and in so doing to strengthen its moral roots. He thought this could only be done in one way. It could not be done by a return to the past, by stopping the process of change begun by Muhammad 'Ali. It could only be done by accepting the need for change, and by linking that change to the principles of Islam: by showing that the changes which were taking place were not only permitted by Islam, but were indeed its necessary implications if it was rightly understood, and that Islam could serve both as a principle of change and a salutary control over it. He was not concerned, as Khayr al-Din had been in a previous generation, to ask whether devout Muslims could accept the institutions and ideas of the modern world; they had come to stay, and so much the worse for anyone who did not accept them. He asked the opposite question, whether someone who lived in the modern world could still be a devout Muslim. His writings were directed not so much to convinced Muslims doubtful whether modern civilization was acceptable, as to men of modern culture and experience who doubted whether Islam, or indeed any revealed religion, was valid as a guide to life. It was this class which was the greatest danger to the *umma*, if it was won to metaphysical secularism; but equally it was from this class only that the leadership of a revived *umma* could be drawn.

It may not be fanciful indeed to think of 'Abduh's ideas as being constructed on a framework of Comtean positivism. The starting-point of Comte's thought was the French Revolution, when the rationalist élite, having destroyed the rule of the priesthood, had then almost destroyed the civilized order. Two parties, as Comte saw it, faced each other: those who wanted to return to the world of before the Revolution, and those imbued with the revolutionary spirit. The essence of the revolutionary spirit was the exaltation of private judgement, 'the absolute dogma of

¹⁷ Rida, *Ta'rikh*, i. 868.

individual free inquiry',¹⁸ which led to divergences of ideas and sentiments and so also of interests and actions; the way to 'close the revolutionary period' was to find a system of ideas universally acceptable. Once found, it must be embodied in religious symbols and ritual, and guarded by 'a small number of choice minds which shall have been prepared by a high order of discipline and instruction for the investigation of questions so complex and so mixed up with human passions',¹⁹ a new spiritual authority, governing opinions and morals and supervising the system of education. In Comte's opinion, this new system of common beliefs could be reached by extending the rational methods of mathematics and the natural sciences to society, and developing a rational sociology which should also be a rational system of social morality, a norm of social action and a science of human happiness. It was 'Abduh's purpose to show that Islam contained in itself the potentialities of this rational religion, this social science and moral code which could serve as the basis of modern life; and to create the élite who should guard and interpret it—a new type of '*ulama*' who could articulate and teach the real Islam and so provide the basis for a stable and progressive society, a 'middle group' between the traditional and revolutionary forces to which Comte had pointed, and which could so easily be discerned in modern Islamic society.

In asserting that Islam could be the moral basis of a modern and progressive society, 'Abduh did not of course intend to imply that Islam would approve of everything that was done in the name of progress, and that the purpose of the new '*ulama*' was simply to legitimize a *fait accompli*. On the contrary, Islam as he conceived it was a principle of restraint: it would enable Muslims to distinguish what was good from what was bad among all the suggested directions of change. The task which he set himself therefore involved two things: first a restatement of what Islam really was, secondly a consideration of its implications for modern society. Of these, the former was the more important, indeed 'Abduh himself thought it the most important of his life's purposes. At the beginning of his fragment of autobiography, he defines those purposes:

First, to liberate thought from the shackles of *taqlid*, and understand religion as it was understood by the elders of the community before

¹⁸ Martineau, ii. 277.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 24.

dissension appeared; to return, in the acquisition of religious knowledge, to its first sources, and to weigh them in the scales of human reason, which God has created in order to prevent excess or adulteration in religion, so that God's wisdom may be fulfilled and the order of the human world preserved; and to prove that, seen in this light, religion must be accounted a friend to science, pushing man to investigate the secrets of existence, summoning him to respect established truths, and to depend on them in his moral life and conduct. All this I count as one matter, and in my advocacy of it I ran counter to the opinion of the two great groups of which the body of the *umma* is composed—the students of the sciences of religion, and those who think like them, and the students of the arts of this age, with those who are on their side.

My second purpose has been the reform of the way of writing the Arabic language. . . . There is still another matter of which I have been an advocate. People in general are blind to it and far from understanding it, although it is the pillar of their social life, and weakness and humiliation would not have come upon them had they not neglected it. This is, the distinction between the obedience which the people owe the government, and the just dealing which the government owes the people. I was one of those who called the Egyptian nation to know their rights *vis-à-vis* their ruler, although this nation has never had an idea of it for more than twenty centuries. We summoned it to believe that the ruler, even if it owes him obedience, is still human, liable to err and to be overcome by passion, and nothing can divert him from error or resist the domination of his passions except the advice of the people in word and deed.²⁰

Nevertheless there were some, even among those who knew him well and liked him, who doubted whether he was himself convinced of the truth of Islam. Cromer thought he was really an agnostic,²¹ and Blunt recorded in his diary 'I fear he has as little faith in Islam . . . as I have in the Catholic Church'.²² In the same way some of his Muslim critics hinted that he was not scrupulous in performing the religious duties of a Muslim, even that of regular prayer.²³ Such statements, taken literally, cannot stand against the evidence of his own writings and of those who knew most intimately the movement of his thought. Rashid Rida, his biographer, has borne witness to 'Abduh's personal faith; in these matters, he says, 'Abduh followed the central tradition of Islamic devotion, that of al-Ghazali and those who believed that

²⁰ Rida, *Ta'rikh*, i. 11.

²² Blunt, *Diaries*, p. 346.

²¹ Cromer, ii. 179–80.

²³ Rida, *Ta'rikh*, i. 1042.

'submission and the presence of the heart in prayer are an obligation, and are one of the pillars of prayer and a condition of its being valid and acceptable'.²⁴ With this tradition he had first come into contact through his uncle, Shaykh Darwish, who had rescued him from his early doubts and mystical excesses and taught him the Islam of *ahl al-sunna wa'l-jama'a*: strictly orthodox in theology, suspicious of too free a rational speculation about the divine mysteries, a little withdrawn from public life but keeping the conscience of the community, observing strictly the requirements of the law but softening legalism with a personal devotion, a practice of the presence of God, far removed from the pantheism of the mystical theology and based on meditation on the Quran and devotion to the person of the Prophet. But in another sense the doubts had a certain validity. They point to an aspect of his thought which, for his critics, might very well be a sign of weakness: a sort of eclecticism, a blending into a system of elements taken from different schools. In his years of study he acquired a wide and precise knowledge of the orthodox theology, and in his writings the influence not only of al-Ghazali but of al-Maturidi can be clearly seen; indeed on the points at issue between the various orthodox schools of theologians, he seems to accept the position of al-Maturidi rather than al-Ghazali—for example, on the question of whether good and evil can be known independently of revelation.²⁵ But the influence of other studies also can be seen: his thought always bore the mark of the study of Ibn Sina in which al-Afghani had initiated him; and it is possible to see also the influence of Mu'tazilism, that early Islamic rationalism which had been first sponsored and then suppressed by the 'Abbasid caliphs, had then become a dormant element in Islam, but since 'Abduh has been one of the elements of modern orthodoxy.²⁶

This eclecticism seems to imply a tendency to evade difficult questions: for example, he never squarely faces the problem, fundamental in Muslim theology, of whether the Quran was created or not. A statement in the first edition of *Risalat al-tawhid*, supporting the theory of the created Quran, was quietly removed in later editions and nothing put in its place. It is

²⁴ Rida, *Ta'rikh*, i. 1036.

²⁵ Cf. M. Kerr, *Muh. Abduh and Rashid Rida*.

²⁶ Cf. R. Caspar, 'Le Renouveau mo'tazilite', *MIDEO*, iv (1957), 141-202.

perhaps this equivocation in 'Abduh's thought which gave rise to the doubts of Cromer and Blunt, and the criticisms from the Azhar. He does indeed give the impression of picking and choosing out of the mass of Islamic ideas those which best serve two purposes: first, to preserve the unity and social peace of the *umma*, concern for which led him to blur intellectual distinctions and refuse to reopen old controversies; and secondly, to reply to certain questions posed by the religious debates of the Europe of his time. His intellectual problems were those of Islamic thought, but they were also those of nineteenth-century Europe, in particular of the great debate about science and religion. The European books which he read were mainly those of the English and French thinkers of his day who tried to apply the methods of the natural sciences (as they conceived them) to human nature, society, and the universe as a whole; and his closest European friend, Wilfrid Blunt, was a Catholic who had lost his faith through reading Darwin, but kept all his life a longing for an 'evolutionary Christianity' in which he could believe, and had some contact with Father Tyrrell and the Catholic 'Modernists'. He was also influenced by the distinction drawn by such scholars as Strauss and Renan, as well as by Tolstoy, between 'the real Jesus' and his teachings, and the Christianity evolved by St Paul and the Catholic Church. 'Abduh accepted in general the view of Christianity which he learnt from Renan and Spencer or heard from Blunt: that Christian doctrine as traditionally formulated cannot stand up to the discoveries of modern science and the modern concepts of the laws of nature and of evolution. Such teachings fitted in well with the Muslim view of Christianity: the belief that Jesus was a human prophet, whose teaching and nature had been distorted by his followers. But he did not accept the free thinkers' rejection of theism and their materialism — Renan's view of religion as a necessary creation of the human imagination, and of man as 'the summit of the universe',²⁷ or Herbert Spencer's view of an unknowable power, manifesting itself in force and its various transformations, as 'the fundamental verity under *all* forms of religion'.²⁸ Islam seemed to him to be the middle path between the two extremes: a religion fully consistent with the claims of the human intellect and the discoveries of modern science, but safeguarding the divine

²⁷ Renan, *Nouvelles études*, p. xv.

²⁸ Spencer, p. 90.

transcendence which, for him as for al-Afghani, was the one valid object of human worship and stable basis for human morality. Islam indeed was the religion of human nature, the answer to the problems of the modern world, and some day the Europeans would get tired of the corruptions of their own faith and accept it.²⁹

To show that Islam can be reconciled with modern thought, and how it can be, was one of 'Abduh's major purposes. He took part in two famous controversies on the matter, one with the French historian Hanotaux, the other with a Lebanese-Egyptian journalist, Farah Antun, and the polemical element was never absent from his thought. But polemics have their danger: in defending oneself, one may draw closer to one's adversary than one thinks. It is significant that both his controversies were concerned, not with the truth or falsity of Islam, but with its being compatible with the supposed requirements of the modern mind; and in the process, it may be that 'Abduh's view of Islam was itself affected by his view of what the modern mind needs. He carried farther a process we have already seen at work in the thought of Tahtawi, Khayr al-Din, and al-Afghani: that of identifying certain traditional concepts of Islamic thought with the dominant ideas of modern Europe. In this line of thought, *maslaha* gradually turns into utility, *shura* into parliamentary democracy, *ijma'* into public opinion; Islam itself becomes identical with civilization and activity, the norms of nineteenth-century social thought. It was, of course, easy in this way to distort if not destroy the precise meaning of the Islamic concepts, to lose that which distinguished Islam from other religions and even from non-religious humanism. It was perhaps this of which his conservative critics were uneasily aware: there was bound to be something arbitrary in the selection and the approximation. Once the traditional interpretation of Islam was abandoned, and the way open to private judgement, it was difficult if not impossible to say what was in accordance with Islam and what was not. Without intending it, 'Abduh was perhaps opening the door to the flooding of Islamic doctrine and law by all the innovations of the modern world. He had intended to build a wall against secularism, he had in fact provided an easy bridge by which it could capture one position after another. It was not an accident

²⁹ Rida, *Ta'rikh*, i. 939.

that, as we shall see, one group of his disciples were later to carry his doctrines in the direction of complete secularism.

The key to his defence of Islam, indeed to all his thought about it, was a certain conception of true religion: a distinction between what was essential and unchanging in it and what was inessential and could be changed without damage. The real Islam, he maintained, had a simple doctrinal structure: it consisted of certain beliefs about the greatest questions of human life, and certain general principles of human conduct. To enable us to reach these beliefs and embody them in our lives both reason and revelation are essential. They neither possess separate spheres nor conflict with each other in the same sphere. In the pursuit of religious as of all knowledge we must start with reason and follow its lead as far as it will take us: it teaches us first of all that God exists, and then some of His attributes—necessity, knowledge, will, power, choice, and unity.³⁰ It can tell us also that there is a life to come, that our fate in it is connected with the good and evil of our acts, and that some things are good and others bad.³¹ By reason moreover we can know that there exists something called 'prophecy' and men called 'prophets'. Two lines of thought converge on this point. First, there are certain things which we cannot know by our reason. Some of them we do not need to know, and it is best not to speculate about them; we cannot know anything about the divine essence, for our minds and language are not adequate to grasp the essence of things.³² Others we need to know in order to live properly, but cannot know by our own efforts: certain attributes of God (His word, sight, hearing); the nature of the life to come, its judgement, its pleasures and pains; certain acts of worship which are pleasing to God, but which man by himself could never have thought of. If to know these is necessary to life, they must be known in some way other than by reason. Secondly, there are things which can in principle be known by reason, but which most men do not in fact know, because their reason is imperfect or because of the power of passion to lead their minds astray.

For both these reasons, men need a help if they are to live as

³⁰ 'Abduh, *Risalat al-tawhid*, pp. 42 ff.

³¹ Ibid. p. 90.

³² Ibid. pp. 61–62.

God wishes them to: 'a help to whom they can look in defining the principles of conduct and fixing a right attitude to belief'.³³ But this help must himself be a man, so that other men can understand him, and so that they can deduce his divine inspiration from his being better than others in human matters. Such a help is a prophet: that is to say, a man who transmits to others a message concerning God, judgment, and such other things as they must know.

Just as reason can tell us that prophets exist, so it can tell us who is really a prophet, and specifically that Muhammad is. The proofs that a prophetic mission is genuine are, first, the prophet's own conviction and claims; secondly, the continuity of acceptance and faith in him; thirdly, the evidentiary miracles which he is able to perform and which are vouched for by an unbroken tradition. Judged by these standards, 'Abduh has no doubt that Muhammad was a prophet. Unless God was working in him, how explain his acts and influence in history?³⁴ How explain the miracle of the Quran, for the splendour of its language and the depth of its thought could not have sprung from a human mind?³⁵ In the same way, there are rational proofs of Muhammad's claim to be the last of the prophets. The line of prophets must have an end somewhere, for at some point the whole of mankind will have received the guidance to happiness that it needs.³⁶ This point was reached with the Islamic revelation; Muhammad was sent when mankind was fully grown and capable of understanding all that was necessary; the message he transmitted can be shown to satisfy every need of human nature, and through him it was transmitted to all mankind.

At this point, reason must pause. Having proved that the Quran embodies a divine message, it must accept everything that is in it without hesitation; once it acknowledges that Muhammad was a prophet, it must accept the entire content of his prophetic message. The message is contained in the Quran and in the *hadith* of what he said and did: or rather in such of the *hadith* as are validated by a continuous and sound tradition, for 'Abduh showed much reserve in accepting the greater number of them. Quran and authentic *hadith* between them contain certain truths about the universe (both those which reason unaided

³³ 'Abduh, *Risalat al-tawhid*, p. 92.

³⁵ Ibid. p. 169.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 164.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 192.

can reach and those it cannot); the general principles of individual morality and social organization; and the commandment to perform or abstain from certain acts (in particular acts of worship) which we could not otherwise have known to be right or wrong. These clear precepts must be accepted by all Muslims without question, although even here at least one rational science is involved, that of the Arabic language.³⁷ But there are matters in regard to which Quran and *hadith* give no clear guidance: because the text of the Quran is not clear; or because there are doubts about the authenticity of the *hadith*; or because Quran or *hadith* state only a general principle, not a particular ruling; or because both Quran and *hadith* are silent. In these circumstances reason must act as interpreter. Individual *ijtihad* is not only permitted, it is essential. It operates within certain limits, it is true: it cannot 'explain away' what the Quran or *hadith* lay down, and if there is anything in them which seems incompatible with reason, it must either search for the real sense of the words or else submit itself to God and accept without understanding.³⁸ Only those who possess the necessary knowledge and intellectual power must exercise their *ijtihad*; the rest should follow any doctor in whom they have faith. But within these limits, reason is free and its task unending; the *ijma'*, the consensus of the community, is not for 'Abduh a third source of doctrine and law on a level with the other two. A sort of *ijma'* does grow up in time, a collective judgement of the community, but it is never infallible and cannot close the door to *ijtihad*.

Such are the true principles of the religion Muhammad came to preach; but his mission was not only to preach, it was to found a community as well. Only a prophet could do this, for left to themselves men will misuse their freedom of will under the impulse of desire;³⁹ they will not listen to the voice of the philosopher, only to that of the religious leader, for 'religion is the most powerful factor in the moral system of the many, and even of the élite'.⁴⁰ Only a prophet can insert into human life a regulative principle which his fellow men will accept. What is this principle, and what is the ideal society which the Prophet Muhammad created? For 'Abduh, as for the main line of Muslim

³⁷ 'Abduh, *al-Islam wa'l-Nasraniyya*, pp. 72 ff.

³⁸ Cf. Jomier, pp. 81 ff.

³⁹ 'Abduh, *Tafsir al-fatiha*, p. 49.

⁴⁰ 'Abduh, *Risala*, p. 145.

thinkers, society was a system of rights and duties held together by moral solidarity: by the mutual recognition of rights, and mutual exhortation and help in the performance of duties. The system of rights and duties was embodied in a law derived from revelation: but derived from it in a certain way, for 'Abduh introduced into the theory of the *Shari'a* a concept not without its origins in Islamic thought, but which also owed something to the European theory of natural law as well as to Utilitarianism. Ibn Taymiyya and other thinkers had made a distinction between acts directed towards the worship of God (*'ibadat*) and those directed towards other men and life in the world (*mu'amalat*). 'Abduh adopted this and maintained that there was a systematic difference between the teaching of revelation in regard to the one and the other. Quran and *hadith* laid down specific rules about worship; about relations with other men, they laid down for the most part only general principles, leaving it to men to apply them to all the circumstances of life. This was the legitimate sphere of *ijtihad*, of human judgement exercised responsibly and in accordance with certain principles.

For 'Abduh therefore the mark of the ideal Muslim society is not law only, it is also reason. The true Muslim is he who uses his reason in affairs of the world and of religion; the only real infidel (*kafir*) is he who closes his eyes to the light of truth and refuses to examine rational proofs.⁴¹ Contrary to what its enemies say, Islam has never taught that human reason should be checked, it is the friend of all rational inquiry and all science.⁴² This indeed was the subject of 'Abduh's controversy with Farah Antun. In an essay on Ibn Rushd (Averroës, 1126-98), Antun had maintained that Islam had killed the philosophic spirit. A disciple of Renan, Antun had not necessarily meant to imply that Christianity was any more favourable to science and philosophy, but so 'Abduh took him to mean. Christianity, he retorted, was intolerant by its nature, the enemy of rational explanation and free inquiry; modern western civilization had nothing to do with Christianity, it had developed precisely because the thinkers and scientists of Europe had rejected it, and accepted in its place the principle of materialism.⁴³ But since Islam was rational, Muslims

⁴¹ 'Abduh, *Tafsir juz' 'amma*, p. 169; cf. Osman Amin, p. 49.

⁴² 'Abduh, *al-Islam wa'l-Nasraniyya*, p. 202.

⁴³ Rida, *Ta'rikh*, ii. 400 ff.

could have the sciences of the modern world without accepting the religion of matter or rejecting their own.

The ideal society is that which submits to God's commandments, interprets them rationally and in the light of general welfare, obeys them actively, and is united by respect for them. This is the virtuous society, but it is also the happy, prosperous, and powerful society, for the commands of God are also the principles of human society. The behaviour which the Quran teaches to be pleasing to God is also that which modern social thought teaches to be the key to stability and progress. Islam is the true sociology, the science of happiness in this world as well as the next; it does not lead men to an excessive renunciation of the goods of this world, but to a just and moderate use of them. So when the Islamic law is fully understood and obeyed society flourishes; when it is misunderstood or rejected society decays.⁴⁴ The individual must often wait until the life to come for his reward, but communities, good and evil, have their rewards and punishments in the here and now.

This is the ideal society, but for 'Abduh it is also a society which once existed. His imagination is fixed on the golden age of Islam, the first generation of obedience and the rewards of obedience—political success and an intellectual development almost without a parallel in the speed and manner of its flowering.⁴⁵ The early *umma*, the community of the elders, the *salaf*, was what the *umma* ought to be. It remained so throughout the first centuries, for when 'Abduh talks of the *salaf*, he does not use the term in a technical sense to mean the first generation of friends and disciples of the Prophet; he uses it more generally to refer to the central tradition of Sunni Islam in its period of development: the great theologians of the third and fourth Islamic centuries, Asha'ri, Baqillani, Maturidi, are also *salaf*.⁴⁶ If this perfect society in the end decayed, it was for two reasons. First, there came into Islam elements alien to it: the philosophers and extreme Shi'is brought in the spirit of excess,⁴⁷ and a certain type of mysticism obscured the essential nature of Islam. For the true mysticism, as he conceived it, 'Abduh had a great respect: it was right that Muslims should interiorize their obedience to the

⁴⁴ 'Abduh, *Tafsir al-fatiha*, p. 63.

⁴⁵ 'Abduh, *Risala*, pp. 214 ff.

⁴⁶ 'Abduh, *al-Islam wa'l-Nasraniyya*, p. 198.

⁴⁷ 'Abduh, *Risala*, pp. 7, 19.

law. But another type of mysticism he regarded as dangerous to the mind and morals: that type which gave its devotion to the 'saints' (friends of God, *awliya'*) and their miracles, and so tended to divert attention from God and to place intermediaries between God and man; which had invented its own liturgies and by implication disobeyed the clear injunctions of the Quran about how God wanted to be worshipped; which taught the believer to neglect his duties in this world in favour of too much preparation for the next; which subjected the disciple to the will of his spiritual director, and so weakened the activity of the individual will, the necessary basis of a flourishing Muslim society; which used technical metaphors with dangerous moral implications; and whose doctrine of 'the unity of existence' tended to destroy the gap between God and created things. On all these grounds the mystical theology of such thinkers as Ibn al-'Arabi, and the practices of the brotherhoods, seemed to him to attack the bases of the community, and when in his later years he was president of a commission to supervise the publishing of Arabic classics he refused to allow the publication of Ibn al-'Arabi's *al-Futuhat al-makkiya*.⁴⁸

There was another way in which the *umma* had declined. Even those who preserved the essentials of the faith began to lose their sense of proportion and forget the difference between what was essential and what was not. They began to regard the detailed social regulations of early Islamic society as having the same status as the principles of the faith and demanding the same unchanging and unquestioning obedience. This too was a sort of excess—an 'excess of adherence to the outwardness of the law'⁴⁹—and from it sprang a habit of blind imitation (*taqlid*) which was far from the freedom of true Islam. For 'Abduh the spread of *taqlid* was connected with the rise of the Turkish power in the *umma*; perhaps we can see the influence of Renan here. The Turks, newcomers to Islam and devoid of the gift of understanding, failed to grasp the meaning of the Prophet's message. In their own interest, they encouraged a slavish acceptance of authority, and discouraged the free exercise of reason among those they ruled. Knowledge was their enemy, for it would teach their subjects how bad the rulers' conduct was, so they

⁴⁸ Osman Amin, p. 191; cf. *al-Manar*, vii (1904-5), 439.

⁴⁹ 'Abduh, *Risala*, p. 19.

introduced their supporters into the ranks of the '*ulama*', to teach the faithful a dull stagnation in matters of belief and the acceptance of political autocracy. When the '*ulama*' were corrupted everything in Islam began to decay: the Arabic language lost its purity, unity was broken up by the strict division into religious schools, education was perverted, and even doctrine was corrupted when the balance between reason and revelation was overturned and the rational sciences neglected.⁵⁰

So Islam was corrupted by its rulers: 'intellectual anarchy spread among Muslims, under the protection of ignorant rulers'.⁵¹ This ignorance, this corruption had continued until modern times. What 'Abduh wrote of the Turks in the Middle Ages he would equally have applied to the Ottoman sultans. They too, in his eyes, were the pillars of unintelligent conservatism in matters of religion; he disliked Shaykh Abu'l-Huda, the intimate adviser of the sultan and advocate of a mystical view of Islam very different from his own.

While the Islamic nations were losing their virtues and so their strength, the nations of Europe were becoming stronger and more civilized, developing in their own way the essential social virtues of reason and activity, and reaping their reward. 'Abduh was convinced that the Muslim nations could not become strong and prosperous again until they acquired from Europe the sciences which were the product of its activity of mind, and they could do this without abandoning Islam, for Islam taught the acceptance of all the products of reason. This involved a change in the institutions of Islamic society: its legal system, its schools, and its methods of government.

Muslims must do once more what they should always have done: that is to say, reinterpret their law and adapt it to modern problems. Two principles were necessary for this purpose: both already accepted by the jurists but given a new extension by 'Abduh. First was the principle of 'interest', *maslaha*. As we have seen, Maliki jurisprudence had always accepted this principle; and 'Abduh was himself a Maliki by rite, although he studied Hanafi jurisprudence at the Azhar. He used the principle, but he gave it a more general meaning than it had had. Traditionally, it had been no more than a rule for the interpretation of

⁵⁰ 'Abduh, *al-Islam wa'l-Nasraniyya*, pp. 134 ff.

⁵¹ 'Abduh, *Risala*, p. 25.

texts: in explaining the Quran and *hadith*, the jurist should assume that God's purpose in making His revelation was to promote human welfare, and he should therefore choose that interpretation which, in his opinion, best conduced to this purpose. 'Abduh and his school, however, made it a rule for deducing specific laws from general principles of social morality. Only such general principles, they taught, have been revealed by God. They must be applied to the specific problems of social life by human reason, and since those problems change, the application must also change; the guiding rule at any time is the general welfare of mankind at that time. The second principle was that of *talfiq*, or 'piecing together'. The notion that in any particular case a judge could choose that interpretation of the law, whether it came from his own legal code or not, which best fitted the circumstances had been accepted within limits by some classical authorities, but what 'Abduh suggested was something broader: not simply the 'borrowing' of a specific point from some other code, but a systematic comparison of all four, and even of the doctrines of independent jurists who accepted none of them, with a view to producing a 'synthesis' which would combine the good points of all. As Mufti of Egypt, he was able to put these suggestions into practice. When asked for a ruling by the Egyptian government, he had no choice but to give it in accordance with the official Hanafi code; but when approached by private individuals he had more freedom. For example, an Indian Muslim sent to ask him whether it was lawful for Muslims to co-operate with non-Muslims in framing charitable works, and in his reply he first of all asked the shaykhs of all four codes at the Azhar to state the position of their code, and then gave his own opinion, taking the four statements into account but going behind them to the Quran, the *hadith* of the Prophet, and the practice of the first age.⁵²

The logical implication of this method was the creation of a unified and modern system of Islamic law. 'Abduh was well aware of this, and in his writings, as well as his decisions as mufti, he took the first steps towards it. The range of his decisions and opinions was wide and covered almost the whole field of law and social morality: whether Muslims should wear European hats, whether they should eat meat slaughtered by Christians or Jews,

⁵² Rida, *Ta'rikh*, i. 648.

whether the painting of the human form was permitted by the law, whether polygamy was morally good or bad. By his decisions he started a tendency which has continued in Egypt since his death until it has achieved part of what he hoped for but by no means all. Since 1920 a succession of official laws and decrees has defined, and in the process has modified, the Islamic law which the religious courts have dispensed. The making of such laws could indeed be justified in orthodox Islamic terms by the right which *Shari'a* gives to the temporal sovereign to define the matters in regard to which the *Shari'a* judges shall have jurisdiction, as well as by the principle of *talfiq*. But *talfiq* has been used in a way more sweeping than the orthodox jurists would have approved, to justify interpretations of the law which seem to meet the needs of the modern age, even if they find no support among the doctors of the Hanafi school, or indeed any of the four great schools of law. In this way what is virtually a modern and unified system of Islamic law has been built up. But this is true only of those matters of personal status—marriage, divorce, and testaments—which the modern codes have left to the jurisdiction of the *Shari'a*. In other matters the process which 'Abduh wanted to reverse has continued. There are still secular courts administering civil and criminal codes derived from European models and enacted by the authority of the State. The civil code of 1948, it is true, mentions the *Shari'a* as a source of inspiration; but it is regarded as one source only, along with natural justice and custom, and in fact the body of the code shows little sign of its influence. Finally, in 1956 the separate religious courts were abolished, although matters of personal status are dealt with by the secular courts in accordance with the *Shari'a* as modified by legislation.⁵³

A reform of the law would not be effective unless there were trained lawyers to interpret and apply it, and this involved a reform in the system of religious education. The fullest expression of 'Abduh's views on the matter is contained in a memorandum written during his years of exile in Beirut. There should, he thought, be a different type of religious education for each class in society. The ordinary people should be taught the broad

⁵³ Cf. Schacht, 'Islamic Law in Contemporary States', *Am. J. Comp. Law*, viii (1959), 133-47 and *Esquisse d'une histoire du droit musulman*; Anderson, 'Recent Developments in Shari'a Law', *Muslim Wld.*, xl-xlii (1950-2).

principles of doctrine without anything being said about the differences of sects, and something of Islamic history, with an explanation of why Islam spread and conquered so rapidly. Those who were being trained as government officials should be taught logic and philosophy, doctrine with emphasis on the rational proofs of its truth and an exhortation to avoid dissension between the different rites, ethics with the same emphasis on its rational basis and a study of the exemplary lives of the *salaf*, and religious history. Those who were going to be teachers and spiritual directors should be more thoroughly trained in the religious sciences. They should first of all master the sciences of the Arabic language, then study the Quran, with an explanation of it which would take into account the customs, traditions, language, and methods of thought of the Arabs at the time it was revealed and so make it possible to distinguish the essence of the revelation from what was incidental; the *hadith* of the Prophet, but only those which were well authenticated; a complete system of ethics on the model of Ghazali's *Ihya' 'ulum al-din*; theology and jurisprudence, taking into account what could validly be deduced from the texts; the arts of persuasion and argument; and ancient and modern history—not only the period of Islamic glory but that of decline with an explanation of its causes.⁵⁴

When 'Abduh reached a position of authority he was able to do something to carry these ideas into practice. A committee was established at his instigation, and with himself as chairman, to advise on reforms at the Azhar, and later a law was issued embodying its proposals: an administrative council was to be set up, new regulations laid down for the admission of students, for discipline and examinations, the curriculum was to be revised.⁵⁵ The council was in fact set up and 'Abduh was its most active member. It carried out some of the measures proposed: an attempt was made to replace the textbooks in use by a direct study of the great masters of Islamic thought, and add to the curriculum neglected sciences like ethics, history, and geography. The attempt however met with opposition: from the conservatives in the Azhar, and from the Khedive 'Abbas, who was on bad terms with 'Abduh at this time, and wished also to preserve the close link between the ruler and the Azhar which had existed in Egypt since Mamluke times. In 1905 'Abduh

⁵⁴ Rida, *Ta'rikh*, ii.

⁵⁵ 'Abd al-Muta'al al-Sa'idi, pp. 58 ff.

resigned from the council, after an attack on him in a public speech by the khedive.⁵⁶ After his death the impulse which he imparted to reform in the Azhar never quite died out. More than one of the Rectors of the University during the last fifty years have been his pupils and followers. In spite of opposition from inside and outside they have been able to carry on his work intermittently, and if the Azhar today is different from what it was in 'Abduh's time, it is largely thanks to him.

When 'Abduh wrote of political institutions there was the same ambivalence in his ideas as in those of his master al-Afghani, between the idea of the political unity of the *umma* and that of the nation in the modern sense. But the ambivalence was more apparent than real, as is clear if we look closer at his view of the *umma*. The earliest exposition of it—if indeed it can be taken as such—is to be found in Wilfrid Blunt's book, *The Future of Islam*. Blunt states that the views he expounds are largely those of 'Abduh, and this might be accepted up to a point. As we shall see later, the book puts forward an argument for the transfer of leadership in the *umma* from the Turks back to the Arabs, and implies that the disappearance of the Ottoman Empire is both inevitable and to be desired. It is unlikely that 'Abduh would have accepted this; but the book also contains an exposition of the nature of the Islamic community and the way to reform it, and it is perhaps possible to accept this as a true report of what was thought at the time in 'Abduh's circle.

The starting-point of the book indeed is exactly that of 'Abduh's own writings: the Islamic community is in decline, it must be reformed from within. The adoption of western institutions will not by itself bring about reform: the *Tanzimat* have been 'instituted not by and through religion, as they should have been, but in defiance of it. . . . All changes so attempted must fail in Islam because they have in them the inevitable vice of illegality'.⁵⁷ The Wahhabi movement had been nearer to a true reform, for it had attacked the problem at its root, the need for a reformation of morality and doctrine, a return to the fundamentals of Islam. What was fundamental was a small body of doctrines in conformity with the demands of human reason; Islamic law was the rational application of the principles to the changing circumstances of the world. What was needed now was

⁵⁶ A. Amin, *Zu'ama' al-islam*, p. 324.

⁵⁷ Blunt, *Future of Islam*, p. 78.

to reinterpret the law so as to assimilate what was good in European morality: to accept, for example, the abolition of slavery, and equality before the law for Christians living in Muslim countries. But how could this process avoid 'the vice of illegality'? The law could not be changed unless there was an authority to change it: it was therefore necessary to restore the true caliphate with a spiritual function and claiming spiritual authority alone. The caliph was to be what 'Abduh's disciple Rashid Rida later called the chief *mujtahid* (practitioner of *ijtihad*). He should have the respect of the *umma* but not rule it; the unity of the *umma* was a moral unity which did not prevent its division into national States. There should, 'Abduh suggested at one point, be 'a chief of our Egyptian nation, acting under the religious sovereignty of the caliphate'.⁵⁸

'Abduh was an Egyptian, deeply rooted in the traditions of his own country, and the nationalist element was important in his thought from the beginning. His very first article, published in *al-Ahram*, talks of the great past of 'the kingdom of Egypt',⁵⁹ and he was always conscious that the common history and interests of those who lived in the same country created a deep bond between them in spite of differing faiths. The sense of the importance of unity, which affected his view of Islamic reform, coloured also his view of the nation. Unity, he maintained, was necessary in political life, and the strongest type of unity was that of those who shared the same country—not only the place they lived in, but the locus of their public rights and duties, the object of their affection and pride.⁶⁰ Non-Muslims belonged to the nation in exactly the same sense as Muslims, and there should be good relations between those who differed in religion. So when the nationalist press attacked Butrus Ghali, a Copt and then Under-Secretary for Justice, 'Abduh intervened to point out that criticism of one person for one act should not become an attack on a whole community.⁶¹ In the same way, Muslims should accept help from non-Muslims in matters of general welfare: an Indian Muslim asked him whether such help was lawful, and to prove it he quoted the Quran, the *hadith*, and the practice of the *salaf*.⁶²

⁵⁸ Blunt, *Gordon*, p. 626.

⁶⁰ Ibid. pp. 194–5.

⁶² Ibid. i. 647.

⁵⁹ Rida, *Ta'rikh*, ii. 15.

⁶¹ Ibid. pp. 361 ff.

The Egyptian nation then existed as a separate fact, but like the whole of the *umma* it was in a state of inner decay, and could not hope to rule itself until it had reformed its life. 'Abduh's ideal of government was more or less that of the medieval jurists: the just ruler, ruling in accordance with a law and in consultation with the leaders of the people. He went farther than Khayr al-Din in identifying this rule with limited, constitutional monarchy, but he did not believe Egypt was yet ready for it. She needed first of all a gradual training in the arts of rule before she could govern herself. There should be local councils first, then an advisory council, then finally a representative assembly.⁶³

These were his settled views, already articulate in his early articles and repeated in his later years. But in between he passed through a period when his national feeling was strong and he was ready to support violent measures. In the later years of Isma'il's reign, the influence of al-Afghani and the worsening situation of Egypt drew him into political life, and as the crisis reached its height his views grew more intransigent. He was no less opposed to the autocracy of the khedive than to foreign intervention. 'Every Egyptian', he wrote to Blunt in April 1882, '... hates the Turks and detests their infamous memory',⁶⁴ and the same bitterness of feeling lasted all through the period when he was working closely with al-Afghani in Paris. When he came to England in 1884, Blunt found that 'the dominant feeling now is hatred for England; and in this is merged the hatred of the Circassians'.⁶⁵ During the visit Blunt interviewed him for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and he repeated the Egyptian claim for independence: 'Do not attempt to do us any more good. Your good has done us too much harm already.'⁶⁶

When he went back to Egypt after the years of exile he returned to the detached moderation of his early years. Some said this was because of an undertaking he gave to the Khedive Tawfiq, when he was allowed to return, but it is easier to explain it by the waning of al-Afghani's influence and of the memory of 1882, which allowed his fundamental convictions to reassert themselves. What Egypt needed was a period of genuine national education; every political and social problem should be seen in the light of this need. If constitutional government hindered the

⁶³ Ibid. ii. 129.

⁶⁵ Blunt, *Gordon*, p. 270.

⁶⁴ Blunt, *Secret History*, p. 191.

⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 626.

process it was bad or at least premature; if autocratic rule, or even foreign rule, helped it, it was to be tolerated. There was no purely political road to political maturity and real independence, and in later years he criticized his old master al-Afghani for acting as if there were. 'The Sayyid', he told one of his own disciples, 'never did any real work except in Egypt'.⁶⁷ Instead of meddling in the intrigues of the palace at Constantinople, he should have tried to persuade the sultan to reform the system of education. He wrote something of this to al-Afghani himself who was angry, and their relations seem to have ended on this note. When al-Afghani died, he wrote no word of eulogy or affectionate commemoration.

He certainly tried to avoid the same mistake. As we have seen, the greater part of his time was given to national education and reform as he conceived it. When he was appointed a member of the Legislative Council he gave long hours to debates and committees, but did not think of it as political work; it was rather part of the task of political education.⁶⁸ He did not want it to have more power; in a famous article he spoke of the benefit which could be derived from 'a just despot', who could 'do for us in fifteen years what we could not do for ourselves in fifteen centuries'.⁶⁹ But this of course was not an endorsement of absolute rule as such. The despot must be just, and 'Abduh, like al-Afghani, belonged to the minority of Muslim thinkers who thought the community had a right to depose its ruler if he were not just and the general welfare demanded it.⁷⁰

These principles explain his relations with the political forces of his time. Although the British were foreigners and not Muslims, he was prepared to co-operate with them so far as they were helping in the work of national education and provided their stay was temporary. He was on good terms with Cromer and liked him personally, although he did not like all the other British officials.⁷¹ Cromer wrote of him and his group as 'the natural allies of the European reformer', and supported him when the khedive wanted to dismiss him from his position as mufti.⁷² But this did not mean that 'Abduh was wholly satisfied with British policy. Even if Cromer were a just despot, he should

⁶⁷ Rida, *Ta'rikh*, i. 79.

⁶⁹ Ibid. ii. 390-1.

⁷¹ Blunt, *Diaries*, pp. 91 & 350.

⁶⁸ Ibid. p. 722.

⁷⁰ 'Abduh, *al-Islam wa'l-Nasraniyya*, p. 84.

⁷² Cromer, ii. 179-80.

still rule in consultation with the leaders of the people, and this he was unwilling to do. 'Abduh wanted him to use his influence with the khedive so that more Egyptians should be appointed ministers in place of the old group of Turco-Circassian courtiers, but although Cromer seemed interested in the idea for a moment he did nothing, since he did not believe that the ministers suggested would be better than those now in office.

In the same way, 'Abduh was prepared to work with the khedive if he should prove to be a just autocrat. When 'Abbas Hilmi succeeded his father, Tawfiq, in 1892 'Abduh was at first on good terms with him and could influence him in some respects. But the khedive turned against him when he tried to prevent the misuse of *waqf* properties for the royal purposes, and besides he was distrustful of 'Abduh's influence in the Azhar. 'Abduh for his part soon saw that the khedive would never give up his privileges or share his power with a responsible ministry. This brought out in him all the latent hostility to the family of Muhammad 'Ali which was in the hearts of the Egyptian peasantry: in an article, written on the hundredth anniversary of Muhammad 'Ali's becoming ruler of Egypt, he pointed to the dark side of the achievements of the man who was often called 'maker of modern Egypt'. In reality, 'he was not able to bring things to life, only to kill them'. For his own power he destroyed all who were noble or eminent in Egyptian life; he gave office to those who were prepared to be his docile instruments, and protection and privilege to foreigners of doubtful character. If his government was strong, it was not based on respect for law; he built an army, but by methods which did not instil into the Egyptian people the military virtues. He encouraged agriculture only in order to swell his own profits, and from being many estates Egypt became one great estate. He was Muslim only in name, did nothing for the faith, and on the contrary despoiled the mosques and schools of their endowments.⁷³

On the other hand, the doctrinaire nationalists seemed to him mistaken in thinking there could be a short cut to independence. He always remained critical of 'Urabi and the other military leaders of 1882. 'Urabi, he said in his autobiographical fragment, had at first no idea of political reform. He was simply concerned for his own position in the army and hated the Circassian officers

⁷³ Rida, *Ta'rikh*, ii. 382.

who blocked the promotion of the Egyptians. Later he developed some idea that the calling of a parliament would curb the absolute power of the ruler and would also cover the mutiny he had led with the cloak of legitimacy. But this was no more than a vague idea gathered from newspapers and translations of European books—it was ‘a fantasy which played about in his mind’.⁷⁴ ‘Abduh goes on to describe how he used to argue with ‘Urabi and his friends. The people, he would warn them, were not yet ready for self-government. Even had they been ready, it would still have been wrong to demand self-government by military pressure. Whatever was gained in that way would not be lasting, and besides it might lead to foreign occupation: ‘I foresee that a foreign occupation will come and that a malediction will rest for ever on him who provokes it’.⁷⁵ Twenty years later, when the nationalist spirit revived under the leadership of Mustafa Kamil, ‘Abduh made the same criticisms: Kamil’s methods were illegitimate, they would produce either no results at all or results which would not be lasting. The two men did not find each other congenial: ‘Abduh could not quite take Kamil seriously, and Kamil criticized the mufti because ‘he cared too much for having official influence’.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Rida, *Ta'rikh*, i. 198 & 207.

⁷⁶ Blunt, *Diaries*, p. 565.

⁷⁵ Blunt, *Secret History*, p. 379.

ARABIC THOUGHT IN
THE LIBERAL AGE

1798–1939

ALBERT HOURANI



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