

Chapter 5

Muhammad ‘Abduh and the Doctrine of *Tawhid*

From Theology to Politics

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DEFINING TAWHID

In the opening lines of his *Risalat al-tawhid* (1898), Muhammad ‘Abduh notes that in its original meaning, the word *tawhid* refers to “the belief that God is One and has no associates (*la sharik lahu*)” (‘Abduh 1994: 17). This is the fundamental pillar of Islam, the one that every Muslim acknowledges through the *shahada*, the profession of faith: *la ilaha illa Allah*, “there is no god but God.” This concept’s importance was so crucial that the entire science of theology was named after it: the main goal of the *‘ilm al-tawhid* is indeed “the demonstration of the unity of God in Himself and in the act of creation.”¹

Translatable as “monotheism,” the word *tawhid* is—grammatically—the verbal noun of *wahhada*, itself a derivative in the second form of the root *w-h-d*, which contains the ideas of unity, oneness, singleness, or solitude. In Arabic, the second form imparts an intensive, causative, or declarative meaning to the verbal root. As Kenneth Cragg remarked in his English translation of ‘Abduh’s treatise, *tawhid* does not refer to divine unity as an abstract state but rather refers to the positive, active, even “aggressive” assertion that God is One. Furthermore, it holds that He alone deserves worship (*ibada*) and excludes the other so-called gods of this world (Cragg 1966: 12).² The violation of *tawhid*, either through the worship of other natural or supernatural beings or by conceptualizing God as multiple or dualistic, is called *shirk*. A derivative of the Arabic root *sh-r-k*, whose meaning includes the ideas of sharing, associating, or participating, *shirk* is defined in the Qur’an as the worst possible form of unbelief, the only unforgivable sin which inevitably dooms those who commit it to Hell:

God does not forgive the joining of partners with Him: anything less than that He forgives to whoever He will, but anyone who joins partners with God has fabricated a tremendous sin. (Q. 4:48)³

Curiously, while the Qur'an repeatedly mentions *shirk* and its derivatives, the term *tawhid* does not appear as such, nor do other derivatives of the second form of the root *w-h-d*. However, *al-tawhid* is one of the most renowned among the numerous names given to the Qur'anic *sura* 112.

Say: He is God the One
 God, the eternal
 He begot no one nor was He begotten
 No one is comparable to Him

Another name by which this *sura* is commonly known is *al-ikhlas* (purity of faith): both titles are unusual, as they do not typically refer to terms mentioned in the body of the *sura* but rather to its overall meaning. Note also that *al-tawhid* and *al-ikhlas* are part of a more substantial number of titles (twenty, according to theologian and philosopher Fakhr al-Din al-Razi).⁴ This number itself reflects the great theological value accorded to this *sura*: indeed, “the greater the number of titles [a thing has], the greater the merit [associated with it], and convention bears witness to what we have [just] said.”⁵

The importance of this short *sura* cannot be overestimated. A well-known prophetic *hadith* states that reciting it is equivalent to reciting a third of the Qur'an, and these verses were “seen by the exegetes to encapsulate the spirit of the Qur'anic guidance in its entirety, not only in guiding the believer upon the path to the ‘purest monotheism’—adherence to which constitutes the minimal requirement for salvation in the Hereafter—but also in protecting him or her from the sundry potential obstacles strewn across the same path” (Hamza and Rizvi 2008: 492).

All significant issues that inflamed theological disputes in the formative and classical ages of Islam—such as the speculations over God's attributes (*sifat*) in relation to His essence (*dhat*), the arguments over the state of the Qur'an of being created or eternal, or the disagreement regarding human capacity for action and its relation with God's omniscience—directly stemmed from the necessity to reconcile the plurality of this world (and God's signs) with the uncompromising affirmation of *tawhid* as found in this *sura*.⁶ That being said, a thorough analysis of the premodern theological debates over divine unity goes beyond the scope of this chapter. It would suffice to recall the notorious dispute that took place in the ninth century of the Christian era between the Mu'tazilites and the Hanbalites over the nature of the Qur'an as God's word. The Mu'tazila set the issue of *tawhid*—alongside that of divine justice (*'adl*)—at the very

center of their theological reflection, to the point of defining themselves as *ahl al-‘adl wa al-tawhid*, “the people of justice and unity.” To defend the absolute transcendence and unity of God against any suspicion of multiplicity, the Mu‘tazilites concluded the Qur’an had been created. Instead, the Hanbalites claimed that because the eternal reality of God’s names and attributes was mentioned directly in the Qur’an, belief in that reality was obligatory. Any speculation on the “how” of this apparent paradox should be avoided.

Debates over the nature and meaning of *tawhid* were not a theological prerogative: classical philosophers also discussed at length the subject of divine unity and the relation between the One creator and the multiplicity of the creation. This debate reveals Platonic, Aristotelian, and Neoplatonic influences (Janos 2017). Moreover, contemplation over the divine unity and the realization of the ultimate unity of existence (*wahdat al-wujud*) represent the ultimate goal of the Sufi path, and a central focus of Sufi thought, as elaborated in particular by the followers of the Andalusian mystic Ibn Arabi (Chittick 1994).⁷

These debates flourished throughout the Muslim world at least until the eighteenth century. By the time of ‘Abduh, however, theological reflection had entered what he described as a process of decline and fossilization. He viewed this decline as caused by the general abandonment of “reasoned reflection” (*ijtihad*) in favor of the blind imitation of past scholars (*taqlid*). As it were, ‘Abduh saw the revival of theological reflection and the Muslim capacity for rational reasoning in general as his lifelong goal.

RISALAT AL-TAWHID: THE CONTEXT AND THE CONTENT

In ‘Abduh’s treatise, *tawhid* is referred to both as the founding concept of Islam and as the discipline of theology. The latter represents the declared focus of the book, which originated in a series of lectures on theology that ‘Abduh held in a secondary school in Beirut in 1886. The purpose of this treatise was mainly educational: according to ‘Abduh’s own words, he was convinced that “compendia on this discipline fell short on their objective of benefitting the students; major works were beyond their comprehension, and intermediate text books were written for a different time than their own” (‘Abduh 1994: 13).⁸ Consequently, clarity and ease of comprehension are the book’s mainstays, reflecting ‘Abduh’s professed intention to provide his students—and the general public—with a simplified outline of classical Islamic theology.

The *Risalat al-tawhid* enjoyed almost immediate success, and to this day it is considered the *summa* of Muhammad ‘Abduh’s thought, as well as “one

of the most prominent programmatic texts of late-nineteenth-century Islamic reformism” (Bussoff 2017: 141). Nevertheless, from a strictly theological point of view, the ideas put forth by ‘Abduh did not substantially depart from classic Asharite orthodoxy, although tempered with a marked rationalist approach that is more akin to the most moderate currents of Mu’tazilism.⁹

Indeed, the originality (and modernity) of ‘Abduh’s theoretical work did not consist in positing radical or innovative theological concepts, but rather in his ability to combine elements from different theological and juridical schools in order to find a point of compromise among what he believed to be “extremist” interpretations of Islamic tenets. He was deliberate in making “only remote allusions to controversial matters, of a kind that only mature men could understand” (‘Abduh 1994: 14), and repeatedly stressed how intellectual dissent could be harmful to the well-being of the *umma*, the Islamic community. ‘Abduh was particularly harsh in condemning those “silly discourses that led people astray, dividing the paths of brothers who were marching toward the same destination and ended up meeting again in the darkest night” (‘Abduh 1994: 55). He considered these quarrels, along with the “mentality of *taqlid*,” to be significant factors leading to the stagnation (*jumud*) of Islamic thought and the consequent social, moral, and political decay of his contemporary Muslims.

To quote Albert Hourani’s words,

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 [. . .] in particular the great debate about science and religion. (Hourani 1970: 143)

Indeed, the selective reappropriation of diverse elements from the Islamic tradition and their creative re-elaboration in order to respond to the challenges of modernity represent the core of the sociocultural project of the *Salafiyya*—the reform movement of which ‘Abduh is considered the most important ideologue, alongside his mentor Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897) and his pupil Rashid Rida (d. 1935). The Egyptian *Salafiyya* was part of a larger intellectual current that argued for the necessity for reform (*islah*) and renewal (*tajdid*) of Islamic thought as the only way to counter the cultural and political subjugation to Western colonialism that most of the Islamic world was facing at the turn of the twentieth century. In this context, the purpose of the *Salafiyya* was to assert the validity of Islam as the moral basis for a modern and progressive society. However, to do so Muslims needed to “liberate thought from the shackles of *taqlid* and

understand religion as it was understood by the elders of the community (*Salaf*) before dissension appeared; to return, in the acquisition of religious knowledge, to its first sources, and to weigh them in the scales of the human reason.”¹⁰

The term *Salaf*, from which the noun *Salafiyya* and the adjective *Salafi* are taken, is used to define the first three generations of Muslims: the Companions of Muhammad (*sahaba*, those who met the Prophet in person), their Followers (*tabi'un*), and the Followers of the Followers (*tabi' al-tabi'un*). Due to their closeness to the Prophet and their allegedly faultless conduct, the *Salaf* represent the role models to be followed by Muslims at any time or place. Although Muhammad's Companions are historical figures whose existence is universally accepted, it goes without saying that the *ideal model* of the *Salaf* must be considered an idealized transfiguration, a rhetorical construction, or an “invented tradition,” to borrow Eric Hobsbawm's now-classic concept (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983).

The religious dimension of the *Salafiyya* experience is not easily separated from its social, cultural, and political elements, as clearly appears in 'Abduh's works. The *Risalat al-tawhid* does not examine theological inquiries into the nature of God and the Prophecy of Muhammad as abstract concepts detached from reality but rather does so as a tool for social reform and cultural transformation. In other words, 'Abduh's approach to the concept of *tawhid* is more functional than epistemological; his intellectual effort aims at transforming what had become a mere theological concept into an agent of social change, as it once was in the “golden age” of the Islamic civilization, during the historical-mythical age of the *Salaf*.

This sociopolitical dimension of theology appears more clearly in the second part of the *Risala al-tawhid*, dedicated to the fundamental role that the advent of Islam has had in the history of humanity. While the first six chapters of 'Abduh's treatise explore classical debates over God's nature and attributes, with the explicit purpose of demonstrating the essential harmony of reason, revelation, and individual temperament (*fitra*), the discussion of Muhammad's mission and its historical function is implicitly aimed at highlighting the liberating potential of Islam.

In reading 'Abduh's reference to mankind's “urgent need for a trumpet call that shakes the thrones of the kings, shatters the foundations of their tyranny and makes them lower their gaze from high heaven to ponder the conditions of their wretched subjects” ('Abduh 1994: 119), or his comments on how “religious leaders affirmed in its name that religion was the enemy of reason and of all theoretical works, unless tied exclusively to commentary on the Holy Scripture” ('Abduh 1994: 120), one wonders if he was writing about the seventh-century Arabian Peninsula or instead alluding to the political and cultural situation of his own time. Either way, the subtext is clear:

what happened before could happen again, on the condition of reviving the true spirit of the religion that God revealed to the human race through the Qur'an.

[The Prophet Muhammad] called upon the leaders of men to humble themselves to the common rank and submit to the One sovereign power, the architect of heaven and earth, who holds their life spirit in the temples of the body. He confronted those who laid claim to an intermediary position between the high God and His worshippers, and proved to them, in the light of Revelation, that before God the greatest of them was no more than the least of those who gave them credit. He demanded that they come down from their pretentious "lordly" stations to the lowest rung of service, to participate with every soul of man in adoring the One Lord, before whom every creature is equal, save in their different endowments of knowledge (*'ilm*) and virtue (*fadila*). ('Abduh 1994: 126)

In 'Abduh's thought, the sociopolitical value of *tawhid* operates in two main dimensions: first, it instills a sense of unity in the *umma*, reinforcing "group solidarity" (*'asabiyya*); secondly, it functions as the starting point for the liberation of the oppressed against abuses of tyrannical powers. In fact, since God's Oneness and Self-Sufficiency do not allow for intermediation between the Divine and the human, *tawhid* becomes the basis for invoking an egalitarian political ethos: everyone is equal before God, and subject only to His will as expressed in His revealed law—any social hierarchy based on class, race, or nationality is illegitimate.

Revolutionary tone notwithstanding, it would be a significant exaggeration to view 'Abduh as a supporter of radical egalitarianism. These passages from the *Risala* were dictated to his students while he was in exile on the charge of having participated in the 'Urabi nationalist revolt (1882) and reveal the contentious attitude he held at that time toward Egypt's ruling classes.¹¹ This view was strongly influenced by that of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. Indeed, Afghani has rightfully been labeled a "professional agitator and propagandist" (Lockman 2004: 82), as he spent his life traveling across the Islamic world urging Muslims to join against colonial domination and intellectual stagnation. However, 'Abduh was certainly more accommodating than his mentor in confronting power, and he became increasingly so with the passing of time. When he was allowed to return to Egypt (1888), 'Abduh took up a position of compromise toward both British occupiers and the class of the religious scholars. He carefully avoided overt confrontations out of principle; this caution certainly helped him in climbing the rungs, ultimately bringing him to become Grand Mufti of Egypt in 1899, a position he held until his death in 1905. He became increasingly critical toward al-Afghani's positions on politics and revolution, effectively putting an end to their collaboration

and friendship: "when al-Afghani died, he wrote no word of eulogy or affectionate commemoration" (Hourani 1970: 158).

It should also be noted that 'Abduh never developed his ideas on politics in a systematic political theory or program. On the contrary, "when the more specific issues of constitutional organization and the source of political authority were at stake, 'Abduh's views were fragmentary and changing" (Kerr 1966: 147). They shifted from early opposition to authoritative power and appreciation for representative government to later declarations such as "only a just dictator can cause the East to progress" (Kerr 1966: 135); an ambiguity that is reflected by his own life choices. Moreover, it is worth remarking that a poorly concealed intellectual chauvinism always tempered the egalitarian outbursts found in the *Risala al-tawhid* and other earlier works of his. Evidence of this can be glimpsed in statements such as that "humans are not equals in their ability to know God or the life to come" ('Abduh 1994: 76) since "some intellects are superior to others, and the lowest can only superficially grasp what the wisest know" ('Abduh 1994: 103). 'Abduh invests the "wise men" (*al-'urafa*)—whom he considers superior to ordinary people in terms both of education and natural temperament—with the fundamental historical function of assisting the Prophets in guiding humanity. This role appears in contradiction with the proclaimed refusal for any and all hierarchy among men.

Finally, it should be stressed that the egalitarian spirit promoted by 'Abduh was assumed to be among *male* Muslims: non-Muslim believers and women could not fully participate in the "social contract" of Islam. Christianity and Judaism were depicted as "intermediary" stations in the teleological process of divine education that God provided to humanity: when the Torah was revealed, humankind was in its infancy and needed a law centered on its bodily needs and desires, while Jesus was the response to the needs of humanity when it reached a status of "higher sensitivity," comparable "to what women feel in their heart, as well as to young boys' tendencies" ('Abduh 1994: 148). 'Abduh tried in several occasions to demonstrate that Christianity was inferior to Islam due to its fundamental irrationality, and used roughly the same argument to justify the legitimacy of gender inequalities: "he was the first exegete to adapt a relevant biblical reference when he stated that 'a man is like the head, and the woman is the body,' and it is 'no shame for a human being to have his head better than his hand' " (Abou Bakr 2015: 54). That being said, 'Abduh's re-elaboration of *tawhid* as an agent of social change and the basis for egalitarian ethics represented a marked epistemological break in Islamic exegetical history, one that had an enduring effect on subsequent Islamic political thought.

Referring to the concept of *break* does not imply that premodern theology was disconnected from the social and political contexts that produced it, nor

that making use of theological concepts such as *tawhid* for social or political purposes was an absolute novelty introduced by *Salafiyya* in the nineteenth century. On the contrary, *tawhid* has always been instrumental in setting the boundaries of the Islamic *umma* by defining who was “in” and who was not, in a process of identity construction that has always implied a parallel process of Othering (Tanner Lamptey 2015). In this sense, the doctrine of *tawhid* has played a leading role not only in Muslim polemical refutations of Christianity and Judaism, but also in shaping the discourse of orthodoxy; scholars referred to the concept of *tawhid* in order to establish *internal* boundaries between those who actually follow “the right way” (*al-sirat al-mustaqim*) and those who are “led astray” (*al-dallin*). Creating boundaries implies promoting the Self by devaluating the Other, a process that brings the inherent risk of promoting various forms of intolerance toward the latter, ranging from ridicule and disapproval to militant opposition. When this process of Othering is directed toward a declared Muslim, the opposition may even involve *takfir*, accusing one’s opponent of being an unbeliever deserving of persecution as an enemy of Islam.¹²

The practice of defending doctrinal positions by reclaiming one’s adherence to *tawhid* and condemning the tenets of others as *shirk* or *kufr* has been widespread throughout Muslim history; in some cases, these theological strivings had important political consequences. The most notorious of these cases in premodern history is, without doubt, the previously mentioned controversy between the Hanbalis and the Mu’tazilites. The latter referred to themselves as the *ahl al-tawhid*, and although they generally refrained from accusing individuals of unbelief, it was often implied in their writings that the theories of Others were in violation of the most basic tenets of Islam. When the caliph al-Ma’mun (d. 833) joined the debate and sided with the Mu’tazilites, this accusation led to the public prosecution of the Hanbalis. This included a series of interrogations known as the *mihna* (literally meaning “ordeal,” “trial,” a derogatory term chosen by later critics of this policy), which lasted fifteen years and led to the imprisonment of numerous scholars of renown fame. The intervention of a caliph into a theological controversy is nearly unique in the history of Islam, and modern historians have heavily debated al-Ma’mun motivations in instigating the *mihna* (Hurvitz 2016). Some scholars have claimed that al-Ma’mun was led by a sincere belief in Mu’tazilite rationalism that pushed him to attempt reshaping Islamic theology;¹³ others have emphasized the political dimensions of the *mihna* and interpreted al-Ma’mun actions as an attempt to strengthen the caliphal spiritual authority by undermining the scholars’ monopoly on religious interpretations.¹⁴ Whichever angle takes, the study of *mihna* is particularly useful “to examine how scholarly power was constructed, what means of persuasion the scholars devised, and how they applied them to different socio-cultural strata” (Hurvitz 2016: 658).

'Abduh was well aware of the danger inherent in accusing fellow Muslims of *shirk* or *kufr*: his constant criticism toward "useless controversies" can be understood in this light. He relentlessly promoted the need to find a compromise between apparently contradictory theological positions and to overcome the differences between the various schools of jurisprudence (*madhahib*), rationalism and mysticism, and even between Sunnis and Shias. He consistently avoided employing the accusation of *kufr* or *shirk* against specific groups of individuals: to him, "the only real *kafir* is he who closes his eyes to the light and refuses to examine rational proofs" (Hourani 1970: 148).

The philosophy of the Enlightenment, and particularly universalism and rationalism, had a marked influence on 'Abduh's conception of *tawhid*: he "read widely in the European thought of his age" and "had some contacts with European thinkers" (Hourani 1970: 135). Pointing to his admiration for European Enlightenment, some early Western commentators of his work have tended to overlook 'Abduh's creative agency and to suggest, more or less subtly, that he did little more than translate the dominant ideas of modern Europe into Islamic terms, even risking "to distort if not to destroy the precise meaning of the Islamic concepts, or to lose what distinguished Islam from other religions and even from non-religious humanism" (Hourani 1970: 144). More recent scholarship has contested these claims in the context of a more general criticism toward a teleological view of modernity as a product of the West, holding an inherent value.¹⁵ This scholarship has claimed that late nineteenth-century Islamic reformism was "the product of a process of confluence, [. . .] a tale of 'transition,' not of 'translation'—and one that remained unfinished" (Arsan 2013: 377). 'Abduh was not a blind imitator of European thought, nor was he an uncritical follower of the Islamic tradition; his universalist and humanist conceptualization of *tawhid* was the result of the overlapping and intertwining of elements from both worlds, a "synthesis between classical rationalism and modern socio-political awareness" (Abu Zayd 2006: 31). In comparing his theology with that of the classic scholar al-Ghazali (d. 1111), Malcolm Kerr has remarked how "Abduh describes material well-being as having an importance on its own which even 'takes precedence' over acts or expressions of devotion. [. . .] for Ghazali, the need is to show that worldly prosperity is no impediment to religion, and is in fact necessary for it as a means to an end; and the end is faith" (Kerr 1966: 118).

In short, 'Abduh's main contribution to the conceptual history of *tawhid* can be recognized with this marked shift in emphasis from the theological to the sociopolitical articulation of faith, from a theocentric conception of religion to a distinctively humanist one.

THE LEGACY OF MUHAMMAD ‘ABDUH

The conception of *tawhid* as a tool for social change and a symbol of religious as well as political unity became increasingly central in Muslim thought as the Islamic world continued to experience political fragmentation and socio-economic setbacks. The issue of political Islam, which made its appearance under colonial occupation, erupted in the aftermath of World War I. One of the consequences of the war was, in fact, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the partition of its former Middle East territories into the League of Nation mandates, and the correspondent emergence of an assorted galaxy of anti-colonialist nationalist movements. Corollary to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire was the abolition of the Caliphate by the newly founded Turkish parliament in 1924, a move widely considered to be “one of the key events of the political genesis of the modern Middle East” (Guida 2009: 275). At the time of its abolition, the Caliphate had long since lost its political power. However, it had maintained the fundamental symbolical function of representing the unity of the *dar al-Islam*, of being the “flag holder” of the Islamic *umma*. The symbolic void left by the loss of the Caliphate pushed Muslim thinkers to increasingly raise questions concerning the nature, the features, and the function of a legitimate Islamic political authority: for instance, should a single overarching political structure such as the Caliphate rule the *umma* to preserve its unity, or should politics be left to national states? What modern political system could best fit the requirements of Islam? Was there such a thing as an “Islamic” political authority?

Muhammad ‘Abduh’s intellectual heirs discussed these issues extensively, and scholars often draw a distinction between “liberal” followers of his thought and “conservative” or “radical” ones through their different political conceptions. ‘Ali Abd al-Raziq (d. 1966) is cited as one of the first models of the former group; in his famous book *Al-Islam wausul al-hukm*, he pushed the audacious claim that no mentioning of the Caliphate—in its specific meaning as a political institution—could be found in the Qur’an or the Sunna; hence, “political authority and government, however indispensable for implementing Islamic ideals, do not belong to the essence of Islam and do not constitute any of its cardinal principles” (Enayat 1982: 64). On the other side of the spectrum is Rashid Rida, ‘Abduh’s direct disciple and coauthor of the Qur’anic commentary *Tafsir al-manar*, whose role was crucial in the development of political Islam, especially as he introduced the idea of a national Islamic state as a viable alternative to a global Caliphate (Enayat 1982; Abushouk 2019).

In the following decades, *tawhid* became more and more popular in Islamic political literature, with scholars of very different backgrounds and positions reclaiming it as the fundamental pillar of the Islamic worldview. Sayyid Qutb

(d. 1966), the most influential of the radical followers of 'Abduh's teachings, made *tawhid* the center of his understanding of Islam and the cornerstone of his entire theology.¹⁶ In Qutb's thought, *tawhid* became the foundation of a totalitarian view of Islam, according to which not only God and the cosmos but also *society* is conceived as an organic whole that does not allow for internal division—be it social, ethnical, tribal, or national—nor any form of sovereignty (*hakimiyya*) that belongs to something other than God. In Qutb's view, *tawhid* became the theological basis for affirming the need for a rigorous Islamic state where God was the sole legislator and His law, the *shari'a*, the ultimate source of any political or juridical authority. Little room is left for tolerating diversity, although it should be stressed that the primary focus of Qutb's radical criticism is society, not individuals. The exceptional emphasis conferred on the sociopolitical aspects of the doctrine of *tawhid* and its fundamental role in guiding an Islamic revolution can also be found in radical Shi'i discourse: for instance, 'Ali Shariati (d. 1977) transformed *tawhid* into a platform for revolutionary action, the foundation for the achievement of social justice and political change (Machlis 2014). The *tawhid*-based revolutionary worldviews of radical thinkers such as Qutb or Shariati were driven by an absolute idealism that left no room for doubt or compromise with the ruling power; an ethical intransigence that contains within the seeds of extremism. Their followers have sometimes taken this radical intransigence to its most tragic conclusions: for instance, violent Sunni extremists have often made reference to Qutb's theory to launch accusations of *takfir* against anyone deemed to be an enemy of Islam, as well as to justify taking up arms against those in power.¹⁷

If some Islamist groups and thinkers have relied on *tawhid* to justify religious chauvinism, totalitarianism, and political violence, others have reclaimed it as a conceptual tool for addressing differences, in order to promote religious pluralism and uphold social justice and gender equality. For instance, South African scholar Farid Esack has referred to *tawhid* in denouncing the Apartheid policy as *shirk* and used it to promote interreligious solidarity among the oppressed, making the concept one of the fundamental hermeneutical keys of an Islamic theology of liberation (Esack 1997). In her gender egalitarian exegetical work, the African American scholar amina wadud has developed what she calls "the *tawhidic* paradigm" as a tool to contrast the dominant discourse that has constructed gender relations in a vertical line that sees God at the top, the male figure in the middle, and the female individual at the bottom. In her words, "the *tawhidic* paradigm becomes the inspiration for removing gender stratification from all levels of social interaction: public and private, ritual and political. Not only does it mean the I and Thou are equal, but also it means that I and Thou *are one within the oneness of Allah*. Social, liturgical, and political functions become determined by the

capacity of both women and men in a larger realm of education, dedication, and contribution with no arbitrary exclusion of women from performing any of these functions” (wadud 2006: 32).¹⁸

CONCLUSIONS

Tawhid, defined as the belief that God is One and has no peers, is considered the fundamental pillar of Islam. All major issues that inflamed the theological disputes in the formative and classical ages of Islam stemmed directly from the necessity to reconcile the plurality of this world (and God’s signs) with the uncompromising affirmation of *tawhid* as found in the Qur’anic text. By the nineteenth century, however, theological reflection had entered a process of decline and fossilization. Therefore, reviving the religious discourse and generally the Muslim capacity for rational reasoning became a fundamental task for Islamic reformist thinkers such as Muhammad ‘Abduh.

The *Risalat al-tawhid* was conceived with this precise purpose. It was part of an intellectual effort aimed at reviving Islamic thought as the only way to contrast cultural and political subjugation to Western colonialism. ‘Abduh viewed *tawhid* not merely as a theological concept but rather as a tool for social reform and cultural transformation. In doing so, he represented a marked epistemological break in Islamic exegetical history, which had a lasting effect on subsequent Islamic political thought.

In fact, *tawhid* emerged as a powerful symbol of religious and political unity after the political fragmentation that resulted from the colonization of the Muslim world and continues in the postcolonial era. Throughout the twentieth century, Muslim thinkers have generally agreed on the fundamental importance of *tawhid* in defining the sociopolitical ethos of Islam but have sharply disagreed on how to put it into practice. This has given rise to exclusivist, inclusivist as well as pluralistic interpretations.

Muhammad ‘Abduh was a precursor to all these tendencies, and it would be rather futile to engage in a debate over which interpretation should be considered closer to the original or even “truer” to the Qur’anic text. Rather, it would be beneficial to answer Farid Esack’s call for a “conscious denial of objectivity” (Esack 1997: 103) and to reformulate the question in terms of *for whom* and *in whose interest* are certain interpretations preferred over others: “truth, for the engaged interpreter, can never be absolute” (Esack 1997: 111).

In the end, as the Qur’an itself states, “God leaves whoever He will to stray and guides whoever He will—no one knows your Lord’s forces except Him” (74: 31).

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NOTES

1. Theology is also known as *‘ilm al-kalam*, “because the chief point on which the scholars were in disagreement was whether the Qur’anic word (*kalam*) was created or pre-existent, and also because [theology] is based on rational demonstration.” ‘Abduh (1994: 17).

2. Given the time of its translation, it is unsurprising that Cragg’s use of language—which describes the theology of *tawhid* as “aggressive,” “militant,” or even “crusading”—bears signs of the Orientalist assumption that Islam was spread by the sword. Linguistic choices notwithstanding, Cragg makes a valid point in highlighting the assertive character of *tawhid*.

3. All Qur’anic translations of verses cited here are by M.A.S Abdel-Haleem (2004).

4. Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1209) was a Persian Sunni theologian. A critical Ashari and a philosopher, al-Razi wrote *al-tafsir al-kabir*, a commentary widely considered to be the most notable expression of the methodology of *tafsir bi-l-ra’y*, in which the authors examine the Qur’an relying on the methods of dialectic theology and rationalist philosophy.

5. Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, *al-tafsir al-kabir*, translated in Hamza and Rizvi (2008: 535).

6. Not surprisingly, given the fact that the belief in One God is the basis of all Abrahamic religions, very similar controversies have also developed in Christian and Jewish theological disputes. For a comparative exploration of the concept of *tawhid* in classical Islamic theology and earlier Christian and Jewish commentaries on Genesis, see Aradi (2013). For a short introduction to the history of *Kalam* in the formative age of Islam, see van Ess (2006).

7. Ibn Arabi (d. 1240) was an Andalusian philosopher, theologian, and mystic, whom the later tradition called *al-shaykh al-akbar*, “the greatest master” for his extraordinary contribution to the development of Islamic philosophy and Sufi thought.

8. All translations from ‘Abduh’s treatise are mine.

9. ‘Abduh’s ambiguous attitude toward Mu’tazilism is best exemplified by his early defense of the Mu’tazili doctrine of the creation of the Qur’an, which was included in the first edition of the *Risala* but removed from later editions. To quote

Malcolm Kerr, “Abduh appears to accept the spirit of the Mu’tazilite rationale but carefully eschews Mu’tazilite terminology” (Kerr 1966: 111).

10. ‘Abduh’s autobiography, translated and quoted in Hourani (1970: 140–141). Influenced by the sharp criticism of *taqlid* and the emphasis on *ijtihad* promoted by reformist scholars such as Muhammad ‘Abduh, Western scholarship on the topic has historically tended to conceive *taqlid* and *ijtihad* as binary opposites. This perspective has been criticized by more recent works, which have re-evaluated the relation between *taqlid* and *ijtihad* as more complex than it is usually understood (Ahmed 2013).

11. Rallying behind the slogan “Egypt to the Egyptians!,” the so-called Urabi revolution sought to overthrow the rule of the aristocratic elite, a minority of Turkish-Circassian origin, over the majority of the Arab-speaking population, that was essentially excluded from all centers of power. Worried that the new Urabi government would have curtailed its economic interests in the country, the British imperial power then intervened with a military action, first bombing the city of Alexandria and then occupying all Egypt, proclaiming it an English “protectorate.” For more information on the Urabi revolution, see Cole (1999).

12. The doctrine of *takfir* has received growing attention from Western scholars, mainly because of the centrality it holds in contemporary Islamic radicalism. For a thorough examination of the subject of *takfir* in a diachronic perspective that spans the entirety of Muslim history, see Adang et al. (2016).

13. The very first monograph published in English on the topic (Patton 1897) advanced this thesis, and heavily influenced later literature.

14. For a recent work that put the *mihna* in the broader context of a struggle between political-religious authority in the formative and classical ages of Islam, see Turner (2013).

15. Recently published Kateman (2019) focuses specifically on Muhammad ‘Abduh. For a more general analysis of the complex relations between modern thought and Islamic reformism, see Abu Zayd (2006).

16. A few scholars have depicted the relation between Qutb’s thought and that of the *Salafiya*s one of rupture rather than continuity; this view is shared by centrist (*wasati*) Islamic thinkers such as Yusuf Qaradawi and Tariq Ramadan as well as by secular observers (Ramadan 1998; Moussalli 1992). I nevertheless agree with Olivier Carré that there is a “direct filiation” between Qutb’s radical ideas and earlier Islamic reformism (Carré 1984). Filiation does not imply full agreement: Qutb’s might indeed be labeled ‘Abduh’s most rebellious son, but the family resemblance remains undeniable.

17. To some analysts, this connection between Qutb’s writings and contemporary violent extremism is so evident that the word “Qutbism” is considered more proper than “Jihadism” to describe Islamist groups that legitimize and use weapons in the fight against secular powers to establish an Islamic state. As I have argued elsewhere (Picchi 2017), this identification of Qutb as the forefather of modern violent Islamic extremism, which led many self-declared “moderate” thinkers and groups to distance themselves from his writings, is the result of a partial reading of his thought. It does not take into account his writings as a whole, nor the complexity of his theories.

18. The I-Thou-God model is borrowed from the work of the Christian philosopher and theologian Martin Buber (1958).

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