

The Persistence of Traditionalism *and* Rationalism

The 1980s and 1990s have witnessed avid public interest around the globe in the revival of traditional religions, particularly Islam. The resurgence of religion in contemporary Islamic societies is extremely broad and varied, however. It cuts across political movements, social classes and ethnic boundaries. It finds sympathetic support among both the middle and the working classes – among university students and faculty, engineers, physicians, and other professionals as readily – indeed, often more readily – than it does among the traditional ulama. Nonetheless, because it is sometimes associated with violence, the resurgence of Islam is viewed by Western media as well as many academics as a potential threat to non-Muslim societies.¹ The code word for Islamic resurgence as “threat” to Western and Westernized societies is “fundamentalism” – a term that has come to connote “extremism” in common parlance. The concern with fundamentalism dominates contemporary discourse – public as well as academic – about modern Islam. That concern creates a distortion of contemporary Muslim theology that we turn now to correct in the remaining pages of this volume. We will continue to develop the argument that Islamic rationalism is also an aspect of Islamic resurgence, in dialectical tension with resurgent traditionalism, as it has been throughout much of Islamic history.

Our aim is to show that the rational and critical spirit of Mu‘tazili theology, found in such texts as the one by ‘Abd al-Jabbar translated in chapter 5, is still alive in Harun Nasution’s debates about Islamic rationalism with traditionalists and modernists, and this has intellectual overtones throughout modern Islamic thought. We will also argue that the opponents of Islamic

modernism, the traditionalists, are not “irrationalists,” but rather they are proponents of a scripturalist rationalism, a rationalism put solely in the service of revelation.

The resurgent interest in renewing the Islamic spiritual and intellectual heritage is in fact quite diverse and complex. Moreover, it is not very new. It is true that many who urge the revival and implementation of Islamic teachings in modern society – “Islamists” (Ar. *islamiyyun*) as they are often called – are inspired by the traditionalist interpretation of Islam by figures like Ahmad ibn Hanbal, whom we have already discussed, and the fourteenth-century Hanbali reformer Ibn Taymiya, whom we will discuss in more detail below. Others, however, have drawn from different or additional resources in the rich heritage of Islamic thought, including the Mu‘tazili *mutakallimun*. Some modernists have found the Mu‘tazili doctrines too heterodox; many of these have nonetheless opted against the social and confessional exclusivism of traditionalists by subscribing to the more orthodox rationalism held by the Maturidi *kalam madhhab*. On the whole, however, modernist interpretations of Islam have been eclectic in their appropriation of ancient and modern texts and intellectual currents. In particular, modernist Muslim theologians have applied the spirit of rationalism, formerly ascribed to Mu‘tazili *mutakallimun*, to broader social and political issues affecting Islamic societies today. It is in this broad sense, which is not focused narrowly on specific doctrines, that the classical Mu‘tazili teachers and their works have become referents in the writings of many modernist (and post-modernist) Muslim intellectuals.

One of the characteristics of both modernist and traditionalist theology is that both “madhabs” challenge the claim of the ulama to be the sole legitimate interpreters of Islamic sacred texts. In a speech before several thousand faculty, students and ulama in 1943, the Shaykh (Rector) of al-Azhar, Mahmud Shaltut, advanced the argument that the medieval ulama had been true scholars of Islam, who did not blindly follow the opinions of their teachers; rather, they thought independently.² Both modernist and traditionalist (including Islamist) theologians have emphasized that each Muslim has a right and a duty to employ independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) in interpreting and deploying Islam in the world. On the other side, both trends in interpretation have condemned the antonym of *ijtihad*, namely, *taqlid*, blind reliance on tradition or on the interpretation of the ulama. The dialectical tension between modernists and traditionalists, then, has little to do with which texts should be read and who has the authority to interpret those texts. Qur’an and Sunna are among the essential texts of Sunni and Shi‘i modernists and traditionalists alike, and both groups believe that every Muslim in principle has a right and a duty to interpret and implement these texts.

For traditionalists, however, *ijtihad* is based on the hermeneutical conceit that all interpreters must find a single, original meaning in the sacred texts of Qur'an and Sunna. Modernists interpret *ijtihad* to mean that Muslims must find the contextual meaning of Qur'an and Sunna for changing historical and political situations. The difference between the two groups is not over texts but rather interpretation. And, as in the age of Ahmad ibn Hanbal and his opponents among the Mu'tazila, a chief concern is whether revelation judges reason or reason judges revelation.

Modernist writers diverge in their approaches to these issues. In the next three chapters, we will focus on how Harun Nasution has attempted to persuade modernist Muslims of the need for Mu'tazili rationalism, indeed, Mu'tazili kalam, in contemporary Islamic societies. In the latter part of this volume, we will assess the views on rationalism held by other modernist Muslim thinkers, such as Fazlur Rahman (Pakistan/United States), Mohammed Arkoun (France), Hassan Hanafi (Egypt), and the feminist Fatima Mernissi (Morocco), none of whom would say, with Nasution, that they were Mu'tazilites, but all of whom have valued in one way or another the contribution of the Mu'tazila to Islamic intellectual history. Interestingly, few modernist Muslim theologians discuss particular Mu'tazili doctrines. The actual doctrines that Mu'tazili mutakallimun debated with their enemies, then, are not always the issues that are debated in modern Islam. Rather, it is the first principle of Mu'tazili kalam that has attracted the attention of most modernists to Mu'tazili thought. Let us recall the opening argument of *Kitab al-usul al-khamsa*, where 'Abd al-Jabbar restates the traditional first principle of theological reflection as follows:

If it is asked: What is the first duty that God imposes upon you? Say to him: Speculative reasoning which leads to knowledge of God, because He is not known intuitively nor by the senses. Thus, He must be known by reflection and speculation.³

When asked how, in the absence of knowing that God exists, one comes to know that speculative reasoning is the first duty imposed by God, the Mu'tazili mutakallimun offered a circular argument (see chapter 5, ¶ 2). It is perhaps for this reason that many modernist Muslim theologians are not prepared to argue that God can be known, apart from revelation, by human reason alone. Nonetheless most would contend that the human intellect (*'aql*) must be put in the service of divine truth and the determination of human social responsibility. Traditionalists since Ibn Taymiya have also stressed the importance of reason in understanding divine revelation.

A distinguishing aspect of the difference between rationalists and traditionalists in modern Islamic thought is related to the Mu'tazili insistence on the ability of the human mind to grasp the divine moral imperatives, as well as their insistence on individual responsibility for all human acts. The role of theology in determining social and political action in the world is an issue with which contemporary Muslim theologians have grappled, as we shall see throughout the remainder of this volume. In a recent work on war and peace in Western and Islamic traditions, John Langan argues that the traditional Christian construction of theological warrants for the "just war" has evolved in modern times into the moral problem of how to eliminate war. In Langan's words, it "ceases to be a problem about God and history and becomes a problem about ourselves and our failure to do what our situation requires."⁴ So, too, modernist Muslim theologians are more concerned to develop rational Muslim responses to the challenges of the modern world than to attack the theological creeds of opponents, whether Muslim or non-Muslim. In this respect also, modernist and postmodernist Muslim theologians differ from their traditionalist opponents. "Doing theology" more broadly across religious traditions rather than within a single tradition seems to be characteristic of modernist theologians in the late twentieth century. Some would argue that this is characteristic of a postmodern theological activity.

The remainder of this chapter will explore further the revival of interest in theological rationalism in modern Islamic theology. We begin with the critique of blind (irrational) adherence to tradition mounted by the fourteenth-century traditionalist Ibn Taymiya, and revived in eighteenth-century Arabia by Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. The severe communal and ritual boundary lines drawn between Muslims and non-Muslims (or fallen Muslims) by contemporary traditionalists often contain discourses and interpretations of Islam that bear the name of Ibn Taymiya but reflect the stringent interpretations of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. We then consider the revival of rationalism and the formation of modernist Islamic theology in the person and writings of Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1906), who sought to accommodate the reasoning of Islamic theology to modern science. This, along with the discovery of Mu'tazili manuscripts in Zaydi Shi'a archives in Yemen convinced some Europeans that the end of nonprogressive forms of Islamic traditionalism was in sight – a conclusion and an understanding of Hanbali traditionalism that this book seeks to correct. Our purpose at this stage of the argument is not to provide a comprehensive history of modern Islamic thought, but rather to identify a trend that is often overlooked.

The Revival of Traditionalism: Ibn Taymiya (d. 1328)

Abu l-'Abbas Ahmad ibn 'Abd al-Halim ibn Taymiya, known honorifically as Taqi al-Din, "devout in religion," was born in the Mesopotamian city of Harran in 1263, just five years after the Mongol warlord Hugalü had destroyed the Abbasid capital, Baghdad – not that far away, even in the thirteenth century. Ibn Taymiya's family soon moved to Damascus, and there he studied Islam with his father and other teachers, eventually becoming a recognized Hanbali jurist and teacher of religious sciences. Later he traveled to Egypt and other urban centers of Islamic learning. He gained public attention as a vigorous Hanbali polemicist and soon made enemies among scholars of the other madhabs, especially the Shafi'i scholars. His scholarly career was frequently punctuated by political intrigues and reprisals arising from his own abrasive style as well as the instability of the Islamic world in the post-Abbasid Age.⁵

The disarray of the Islamic world in Ibn Taymiya's time is summarized under three major headings by Victor E. Makari: (1) the internal fragmentation of the Islamic world, especially evident in the collapse of the *Pax Islamica* of the Abbasid caliphs after 945; (2) the invasion of the central Muslim lands from the east by the Mongols in the thirteenth century, destroying the last vestiges of rule by the Abbasid caliphs; and (3) the invasion of Palestine and Syria from the west by the Christian Crusaders, bringing considerable violence to Muslim lives and property in that region.⁶ As an activist politically and theologically, Ibn Taymiya was directly involved in rousing public opinion to raise a jihad in Egypt against Mongol troops in Syria. On more than one occasion he was publicly censured, and even jailed, for his outspoken views, which he urged the public to adopt and to act upon. For example, shortly before his death, he was imprisoned in Damascus by order of the sultan for having earlier issued a fatwa (nonbinding legal opinion) which held that the Shari'a forbids the visiting of the tombs of saints and prophets – a popular practice in Muslim, Christian, and other Middle Eastern religious communities. In 1293, he urged Damascene Muslim society to execute a Christian who had been accused of insulting the Prophet Muhammad.⁷ He devoted numerous fatwas and polemical treatises to trenchant criticism of the Ash'aris, Shi'a, and popular Sufis, as well as non-Muslim confessional communities. When it was found that he continued to advance his views in writing while in prison, his books and writing materials were confiscated. He soon fell ill and died in 1328, reportedly a broken man.

To regard Ibn Taymiya as a Hanbali reformer is not to categorize him as a champion of irrationalism. Despite his sharp criticism of the Mu'tazili

rationalists (usually referred to as the Qadariya in his writings), Ibn Taymiya urged Muslims to utilize the faculty of rational knowledge in order to achieve intellectual certainty about the meaning of revelation. Recall that 'Abd al-Jabbar stressed that the role of reason was to bring rational human beings to faith in God, to wit, Islam. For 'Abd al-Jabbar, reason precedes faith.

Rationalism in the service of faith, on the other side, is evident in Ibn Taymiya's characteristic stress on *ijtihad*, independent reasoning, and his criticism of blind reliance or devotion (*taqlid*) to the traditional teachings and interpretations of the *ulama*. Starting with revelation (the Qur'an) and the Sunna of the Prophet as an epistemological condition *sine qua non*, Ibn Taymiya urged individual reasoning over against blind acceptance of the authority of the *ulama* to interpret the Qur'an and the Sunna. In this respect he was even critical of Hanbali traditionalism, for if any scholar's teaching was accepted without question it placed unwarranted power in the hands of that person or *madhhab*. Ibn Taymiya sought to destroy the divisive results of factionalism that arose out of sectarianism.

Equally important to Ibn Taymiya, tradition had become encrusted with popular innovations in practice, such as visits to saints' tombs – even Christian and other non-Muslim shrines.⁸ Hanbali reformers like Ibn Taymiya declared such practices to be innovations (sing. *bid'a*) that were condemned by the Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad and absent in the practice of the Salaf, the pious first three generations of Muslims who had transmitted the genuine Islamic tradition. Like Protestant Christian reformers two centuries later in Europe, Ibn Taymiya placed the rational responsibility for reforming and purifying religion on the individual believer, for he lost faith in the ability of the established religious authorities to reform themselves. In this respect, Ibn Taymiya's concerns about the dead weight of tradition on reform and renewal is echoed in the writings of modernist and postmodernist theologians, as we shall see.

Rationalism bound by servitude to the claims of revelation, however, is not the rationalism of the early Mu'tazila, nor is it comparable to the theological and political criticism by Muslim modernists and postmodernists. Ibn Taymiya's project, which reflected the Hanbali *élan* more generally, was to revivify the Muslim *umma* and strengthen its position over against its cultural enemies, by establishing its identity separate from non-Muslim communities and practices. The traditionalist instinct for communal survival through social and cultural separation can be seen in Islamist theological discourse today.

For Ibn Taymiya, as for many jurists and theologians, the political history of Islamic rule presented a problem. The caliphate had fallen to the Mongols in 1258, just before his birth. Effective control over Abbasid lands

beyond the capital city of Baghdad had been seized by Buyid (945) and Seljuq (1055) warlords, among others. In what sense could Muslims of either traditionalist or rationalist outlook any longer speak about the centrality of the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad in societies ruled by nominal Muslims and even non-Muslims? This was the problematic that Ibn Taymiya labored to resolve in a book titled *al-Siyasa al-shar'iya* (loosely, "Revelational politics" or "Politics according to revelation").⁹

In *al-Siyasa al-shar'iya*, Ibn Taymiya argued that all human society must be governed by a ruler who must extract obedience from his subjects, by force if necessary, to avoid social anarchy; in Sunni Islam, in order to have a more or less stable social order in which the requirements of the Shari'a can be carried out, it is worth putting up with nominal Muslim rulers, such as the Mamluks who ruled Egypt in Ibn Taymiya's time. The best Muslim polity in the Islamic mythos was the one instituted by the Prophet and made mighty by the rightly guided caliphs of the first generation. The breakup of the caliphate into numerous Islamic dynasties and kingdoms did not change the basic human social need for government. Specifically, Ibn Taymiya sought to accommodate the *Realpolitik* of the slave-soldier Mamluk government of Egypt to the central role he believed Islam should play in the growing cultural and religious pluralism of Egypt in the fourteenth century. Politically, the Mamluk state was governed by Turks and Caucasians, while guidance in religious and other local matters came from Arabic-speaking Egyptian ulama. The classical tension between the ulama and the ruling power in the Abbasid Age evolved into a conflict between the ulama and multiple, changing, and often non-Muslim governments with the rise of nationalism in the twentieth century.

The political state that Ibn Taymiya envisioned was to be governed in all aspects by the Shari'a. In exchange for just rule according to the Shari'a, Muslims would have to submit themselves to the ruler – even one who fell below or possessed virtually none of the ideal qualities of the Prophet Muhammad and his successors, the rightly guided caliphs of the next generation. Central to this argument was the role of *maslaha*, "public welfare," which is a key ingredient of Islamic jurisprudence and legal theory. Ibn Taymiya accommodated the Shari'a-minded conservatism of Hanbali traditionalism to the political vicissitudes of his time by arguing that the real intention of the Shari'a was the public good, *maslaha*. In all matters where the commands and prohibitions of the Qur'an and Sunna of the Prophet were silent or unspecific, the principle of *maslaha* could be considered identical to the intent of Shari'a.¹⁰

In effect, Ibn Taymiya was arguing for a polity, even if that should be a quasi- or non-Muslim state, that would transcend competing sectarian and

confessional political interests. This is the troublesome issue of *wilaya*, the power and authority of the state to uphold the word of God. This issue lies at the heart of the traditional contest between the caliphate and the ulama, and the struggle between modern government(s) (*hukuma*) and the Islamiyun over legitimacy.

Ibn Taymiya's legacy today can be measured in part by the popular revival of interest in his works since the 1960s.¹¹ This was the same period in which Mu'tazili works were edited and published in Arabic in great number. In the case of Ibn Taymiya, new editions and new printings keep appearing. Was Ibn Taymiya, then, the spiritual ancestor of contemporary Islamic fundamentalism, as so many analysts have argued? The answer to that question is a complicated *sic et non*.

Our conclusion is that Ibn Taymiya was a more rational and independent-minded thinker than many of his later interpreters seem to have appreciated. The harder line of separation between a strict Hanbali interpretation of Islam on the one side and Sufism, Shi'i Islam, popular cult practices, and non-Muslims on the other was the work of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, the eighteenth-century reformer who turned Ibn Taymiya's theology into political action far more successfully than Ibn Taymiya had been able to do.

The Political Enforcement of Traditionalism: Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1787)

Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab was born in 1703 in the Najd, the eastern region of Arabia which is nowadays associated with petroleum. This was a century before Napoleon landed with a platoon of French Orientalists in Egypt. Ottoman political order (*wilaya*) in the Gulf region was nonetheless in decline. Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's early education was under Hanbali teachers, whose madhhab predominated in the Najd. Later, he studied Islamic science in Mecca, Medina, Damascus and Basra. Like so many Muslims in the late Middle Ages and early modern times, he had gained some of his early religious education from teaching Sufis, whose spiritual qualities seem to have impressed him, but whose popularized cultic practices he soon came to see as an abomination of the true Islam. The latter he defined as the Mu'tazila and the Sufis had done, each in their own distinct way, according to the doctrine of divine unity (*tawhid*). Hence, his followers referred to themselves as the Muwahhidun, the purveyors of divine unity. (It will be recalled that the Mu'tazila, by the time of 'Abd al-Jabbar in the tenth century, referred to themselves as the *ahl al-tawhid wa l-'adl*, "the People of [divine] Unity and [divine] Justice.") 'Abd al-Wahhab and his followers are known outside his movement as the Wahhabiyyun, in English: "the Wahhabis."

Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s theological and political project was to rid the Muslims of the Najd of local popular cultic practices that had crept into the Islamic religious ethos and that were tolerated by the absent political landlords, the Ottoman sultans, and even the local Hanbali ulama. In this, he was carrying out the theological agenda of Ibn Taymiya and the Hanbaliya more generally. The term “puritanism” is often applied to the Wahhabi movement, but one must do so with a caveat. The desire for purity and simplicity of religious practice was a desideratum of seventeenth-century Puritan refugees in North America, as it was of the eighteenth-century Wahhabis in Arabia. The political circumstances were different, however. British Puritans were not driven by a reformist political agenda.

Like Ibn Taymiya, Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab soon ran afoul of financial beneficiaries of local shrine establishments, as well as the ulama and others committed to maintaining the religious status quo. He was forced to flee his home town of al-Uyayna and make a *hijra*, as it were, to al-Dar‘iyya. There he converted the local prince, Muhammad ibn Sa‘ud, to the Hanbali doctrine of Ibn Taymiya that Islamic revival is a necessary ingredient of successful political rule. It was in this political and intellectual marriage of reformer and ruler that the modern state of Saudi Arabia had its gestation. Modern scholarship has also attributed the rise of Islamic fundamentalism to Wahhabi/Saudi origins in the eighteenth century.¹² The problem with this view, however, is that for some scholars it is formed by looking backwards, from a contemporary concept of “fundamentalism” as religious reactions to modernity, to an Islamic movement that was largely unaffected by the European Enlightenment, secularization, and other cultural trappings of modernity. If Ibn Taymiya and Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab are the spiritual mentors of contemporary Islamiyun, it has to do more with their ability to wage culture wars with traditional opponents within Islamicate societies; the discourse against more modern enemies – the West, secularism, communism, etc. – is largely an extrapolation from disputes with the Shi‘a, Mu‘tazila, local popular religions, and Christians, among others.

A more accurate view is that the Hanbali élan, from Ibn Hanbal himself, Ibn ‘Aqil in tenth-century Baghdad, Ibn Taymiya in fourteenth-century Egypt, and Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab in eighteenth-century Arabia, was their ability to lead periodic critiques of vested political and religious interests and to unify popular sentiment against what they vividly identified as non-Islamic accretions in Muslim religious practice. It was a form of theological rationalism that began with revelation as the indisputable source of religious and political identity, and cultivated legal and scriptural reasoning in defense of that identity and as a tool for bringing fallen Muslims back to a narrowly

defined fold. Hanbali traditionalism, like the modernism we are about to discuss, can be seen as another form of rationalism: reasoning from texts and received truths that society generally accepts, but that require periodic reauthentication.

The Revival of Mu'tazili Rationalism in Modern Islam

In his 1957 article on the revival of Mu'tazilism in Islam, Rudi Caspar noted the ironic reversal of fortunes of the school. The Mu'tazila had begun in the eighth and ninth centuries as champions of Islam against non-Muslim enemies, as we have already seen. Mu'tazilism was defeated by a rising tide of traditionalism, which accused the Mu'tazila of doctrinal innovation (*bid'a*) and even unbelief (*kuf'r*).¹³ For two more centuries the Mu'tazila contended with traditionalists as well as the newer Ash'ari and Maturidi madhhabs. From the late eleventh to the early twentieth century, however, the Mu'tazili madhhab was declared to be anathema in most Islamic locales, and only the Ash'ari and Maturidi madhhabs of kalam were regarded acceptable in Sunni Islam.¹⁴ Within Sunni Islam, Hanbali traditionalism and Ash'ari kalam continued to be contentious. A rising tide of modernist criticism of traditionalism emerged in the late nineteenth century, in movements led by such figures as Muhammad 'Abduh in Egypt and Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898). Modernist interest in the Mu'tazila developed even further at mid-century, as we saw in earlier chapters, when an Egyptian team of scholars microfilmed a cache of Mu'tazili manuscripts in Yemen. This soon led to the discovery and publication of several important Mu'tazili works. Caspar (and others) viewed the renewed interest in Mu'tazilism among Muslim intellectuals as a trend that would turn the tide against Islamic traditionalism (and its post-modern offspring, fundamentalism).

Caspar linked the earlier twentieth-century revival of Mu'tazilism with the liberal intellectual and literary (Arabic) renaissance (*nahda*) of the late nineteenth century. The Nahda came in response, as Caspar thought, to the challenges of "the progressive but irresistible invasion of modern civilization imported from the Occident," which had the effect of attacking traditional Islamic thought, frozen in conservatism.¹⁵ Mu'tazilism appeared to some modern intellectuals as an indigenous but long-neglected Islamic response to historical change and external challenges. To others, the ancient Mu'tazili mutakallimun were nothing short of people with vain passions (*ahl al-hawa*), who could be accused of the concept of grave sin (*fisq*) which ironically the early Mu'tazila had introduced into Islamic theological discourse (see

chapter 5, ¶¶ 45–46). The Muslim theologian who perhaps contributed most to the renewed interest in the Mu‘tazili madhhab was the Egyptian theologian, educator and jurist Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1906). Like Ibn Taymiya and Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, Muhammad ‘Abduh responded to perceived threats to Islam from social and political change. The difference lay in Shaykh ‘Abduh’s attempt, reminiscent of the Mu‘tazila, to articulate a view of Islam at home in a world of change and non-Muslim intellectual challenges. ‘Abduh faced challenges that differed from those that ‘Abd al-Jabbar and his predecessors had encountered in so far as the late nineteenth century brought to Islam the challenges of modernity and the politically and economically powerful “West.”

Theological Modernism: Shaykh Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1906)

Caspar’s belief that Islam was, like the West, progressing toward a more rational form of religion may have been based in part on Muhammad ‘Abduh’s rationalist predecessors in Egypt, such as Shaykh Rifa‘a al-Tahtawi. Al-Tahtawi (1801–1873) had been influenced by his teacher, Hasan al-‘Attar, one of the first Egyptian intellectuals to visit France and to appreciate the positive impact that knowledge of science might have on Egyptians. Al-Tahtawi came, as his name indicates, from a family of ulama in the Upper Egypt city of Tahta. He was among the scholars sent by Muhammad ‘Ali, the Turkish ruler of Egypt, to study in Paris. He was actually sent as an imam for the other Egyptian students, but after five years, from 1826 to 1831, he returned to Egypt a scholar of European philosophical and scientific thought. After his return to Egypt, he dedicated himself to translating French historical, philosophical and scientific works into Arabic. He had a politically troubled, but nonetheless influential, life as an educator and translator.¹⁶ Al-Tahtawi was followed by other nineteenth-century Muslim intellectuals, most of whom came from ulama families and received a traditional religious education but who were drawn to the new European thought becoming available in Arabic. Although the number of Muslim scholars so influenced was not large, it was clearly a trend. The most important figure in this trend by the end of the century was Shaykh Muhammad ‘Abduh.

Muhammad ‘Abduh was born in a village in Lower Egypt in 1849. His education was in the traditional Islamic mode, beginning in the Nile Delta city of Tanta and ending formally at al-Azhar University. He left al-Azhar in 1870 after four years of study, however, because of its archaic curriculum and pedagogy, which lacked the study of philosophy and theology. In the next

year he met the religious reformer and controversialist Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897), with whom he studied and with whom he later collaborated in bringing about reform in Egypt. The concept that many reformers such as al-Afghani and 'Abduh followed was that Islam could not meet the challenges of modernity (and the West) unless Muslims received a modern education that included science and other "rational" sciences. In his second book, published in 1879, while he was still strongly under the influence of al-Afghani, 'Abduh showed his Mu'tazili intellectual leanings in a commentary on the theological creed of a famous Ash'ari mutakallim, 'Adud al-Din al-Iji (d. 1355).¹⁷

'Abduh was later to face down considerable opposition in seeking the reform of the curriculum at al-Azhar University. He believed, as one Western biographer has pointed out, "that, if the Azhar were reformed, Islam would be reformed."¹⁸ 'Abduh received from al-Afghani instruction in the rationalism of early Islamic thought, which al-Azhar and other institutions would not teach. Even as a younger man, however, ideas of reforming Islam forced 'Abduh into exile.

'Abduh's exile from teaching at al-Azhar came not from conflict with students – many of whom were attracted by his probing intellectual style and methods driven by rational inquiry into the meaning of texts – but rather from the tradition-bound ulama who were then teaching on the faculty. One such was over a text that the young 'Abduh introduced to his class on kalam at al-Azhar. 'Abduh chose to use "The Creed of al-Nasafi" (*al-'Aqa'id al-nasafiya*) by al-Taftazani (a Maturidi mutakallim who had died in 1389), which was strongly Mu'tazili and critical of Ash'ari doctrine in its orientation. One elderly and reactionary Azhar professor, Shaykh 'Ulaysh, publicly challenged 'Abduh, asking "if he had given up Ash'arite teaching to follow the Mu'tazilite." 'Abduh replied: "If I give up blind acceptance (taqlid) of Ash'arite doctrine, why should I take up blind acceptance of the Mu'tazilite?"¹⁹ The tenacious emphasis on intellectual independence to read and think about Mu'tazili ideas, yet the insistence that Muslims should avoid doctrinaire acceptance of any, including the Mu'tazili, creed (*'aqida*, pl. *'aqā'id*) is characteristic of most modernist Muslim theologians, as we shall see in this and the following two chapters.

Muhammad 'Abduh spent 1885 in exile in Beirut. Reminiscent of Mu'tazili intellectualism and free thought in the early centuries, it is said of 'Abduh in Beirut that

[h]e took advantage of the throngs of the common people of all sects and nationalities, Sunnis, Shi'ites, Druses, Christians, Jews, who came to his house, to give expression to his views on religious matters. He treated all

with impartial courtesy, but never said anything except what he believed, whether in regard to religion or learning, customs or social affairs. He won the regard of all by his learning, his conduct, and his eloquence.²⁰

The lectures on Islamic theology (*kalam*) he delivered in Beirut were subsequently published under the title *Risalat l-tawhid* (Treatise on [divine] unity).²¹ In this work we see how profoundly Shaykh ‘Abduh felt the need to restore rationalism, earlier championed by Mu‘tazili mutakallimun, to the intellectual ethos of Islamic societies. In the first edition, he apparently defended the Mu‘tazili doctrine of *khalq al-qur’an*, “the creation of the Qur’an.” A few years earlier, in the commentary (*Hashiya*) on al-Ijī’s Ash‘ari creed, mentioned above, he again indicated his support for the traditional Mu‘tazili position. Interestingly, ‘Abduh removed mention of it in subsequent editions of the *Risala* when it proved to be too controversial. It remained for later figures like Mohammed Arkoun, whose style has been less irenic toward Islamic traditionalism, to challenge the Sunni dogma of the eternity of the Qur’an directly, as we shall see in chapter 10.²² Nonetheless, virtually every modernist Muslim has had to confront the problematic of the nature of the Qur’an, in one way or another.

Of particular importance to ‘Abduh’s appreciation of the Mu‘tazila was the conflict between religion and reason that had raged in Europe since the publication of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* in 1859. Writing less than three decades later, ‘Abduh held, as he said, that “we Muslims are fortunately under no necessity of disputing with science or the findings of medicine regarding the corrections of a few traditional interpretations [of the Qur’an]. The Qur’an itself is too elevated in character to be in opposition to science.”²³ In this respect, ‘Abduh’s modernist rationalism departed from the Mu‘tazili physics and metaphysics; most of the Mu‘tazila up to beginning of the eleventh century, when ‘Abd al-Jabbar flourished, had showed little direct influence from or curiosity about the Greek scientific treatises that were increasingly available in Arabic translation.²⁴ Along with certain trends in Christian theology (as well as the theory of Quranic interpretation later adopted by Fazlur Rahman, which we shall discuss in more detail below), ‘Abduh also applied reason to textual interpretation and to the larger task of seeing the whole message of a text and not just the meaning of an isolated verse used as a narrow proof text.

In an important passage in the *Risala*, ‘Abduh argued that reason (*al-aql*) could not be disparaged in comparison to religion (*al-dīn*), because reason guides humans in following and submitting to that which religion reveals.

If that be so,

[h]ow then can reason be denied its right, being, as it is, the scrutineer of evidences (*adilla*) so as to reach the truth within them and know that it is Divinely given? Having, however, once recognized the mission of a prophet, reason is obliged to acknowledge all that he brings, even though unable to attain the essential meaning within it or penetrate its full truth. Yet this obligation does not involve reason in accepting rational impossibilities such as two incompatibles or opposites together at the same time and point. For prophecies are immune from bringing such follies. But if there appears something which appears contradictory reason must believe that the apparent is not the intended sense. It is then free to seek the true sense by reference to the rest of the prophet's message in whom the ambiguity occurred, or to fall back on God and His omniscience. There have been those who have chosen to do either one or the other.²⁵

‘Abd al-Jabbar and the Mu‘tazila, of course, did not “fall back on God and His omniscience” as the traditionalists did; nor did Muhammad ‘Abduh and the modernists. By opening the door to accepting traditionalist theological interpretations as legitimate alternatives within *dar al-islam*, Muhammad ‘Abduh attempted to set a modernist course of open dialogue with theological opponents.

As the debate between postmodernists and Islamists has sharpened in more recent times, the quality of open dialogue has been harder to effect. The intrusion of outside voices in this debate (Orientalism), which has often been seen as excavating and reconstructing the very Islamic past to which Muslim reformists appeal, has destabilized the intra-Islamic character of the conflict. Theological discourse has become global in the postmodern world. This “new” situation recalls for some modernists the Mu‘tazili disputes in the Abbasid court with Christians, Jews, philosophers, atheists and others. The task of neo-Mu‘tazilism is to challenge modern opponents of Islam on their own intellectual grounds.

Many of the same arguments adduced by Muhammad ‘Abduh, as we have seen, were advanced and debated by Mu‘tazili mutakallimun, like ‘Abd al-Jabbar, writing some 850 years earlier. This had led Harun Nasution to conclude that Shaykh ‘Abduh was a Mu‘tazilite, not an Ash‘arite. For example, the importance of reasoning from evidences (*al-adilla*), which include scripture, is argued in ¶¶ 1–9 (chapter 5 above). Muhammad ‘Abduh’s *Risalat al-tawhid* was an exercise in kalam that in many passages reflected the rationalism of the earlier Mu‘tazila. Yet in other passages of his work, ‘Abduh reflects the Islamic puritanism of Ibn Taymiya and Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, a reading of ‘Abduh that Nasution did not appreciate, as we shall see in the

following chapters. Like these fourteenth- and eighteenth-century traditionalist reformers, 'Abduh sought to rid Islam of popular superstitions and undue outside influences. However, he did so, as we have shown, with less iconoclasm and more openness to dialogue with non-Islamic thought. In this respect, his approach was more in keeping with the spirit of Mu'tazilism.

Was Muhammad 'Abduh a modern-day Mu'tazilite, a champion of rationalism and liberalism in Islamic thought, or a traditionalist in the mode of Ahmad ibn Hanbal and Ibn Taymiya? The answer has to be an ambivalent yes: he was both. The question itself is based on a dichotomy in the study of Western historical theology between liberalism and fundamentalism in the early twentieth century. Western historians of Islamic thought, such as Caspar and Adams cited above, viewed the "'Abduh movement,"²⁶ we suggest, in light of the struggle against Protestant liberalism by Christian groups in Britain and America calling themselves "Fundamentalists." Such spectacular American religious controversies as the Scopes trial in Tennessee in 1925, over the teaching of the scientific theory of evolution in a high school science class, served to dramatize this conflict, which has dominated the taxonomies of religious groups by Western historians and social scientists ever since. It is still the claim of some educated Americans that scriptural cosmogonies should be taught in science classes as alternative scientific theories.

Caspar in particular saw in Shaykh 'Abduh's rationalism a trend toward accommodation to the religious liberalism and social progressivism that characterized European thought from the late nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth. There was not yet in 1957, when Caspar wrote, just five years after the Free Officers' revolution in Egypt led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, much reason to believe that Egyptians, at least, were not following a course laid out by 'Abduh toward greater modernism and liberalism in Islamic theology.

The studies by Charles C. Adams and Albert Hourani, on the other side, emphasize different aspects of Shaykh 'Abduh's thought. With many Europeans, 'Abduh came to believe in a social philosophy of progress. He traveled to England especially to meet the philosopher Herbert Spencer, whose writings he admired and one of which, on education, he translated into Arabic. He also held in esteem the great Russian literary figure and critic of the Russian Orthodox Church hierarchy Leo Tolstoy, to whom 'Abduh wrote on the occasion of the latter's excommunication from the Church.²⁷ 'Abduh's rationalism and philosophy of progress was not put forth as an attempt to model Islam on liberal Christianity, however; it was rather an attempt to demonstrate to Muslims, as well as to Europeans, that Islam was the most advanced religion of humankind.²⁸

‘Abduh argued for the inherent rationalism of Islam and its compatibility with, and even anticipation of, modern science. Like the early Mu‘tazili mutakallimun, but also like the Islamist groups of today, Shaykh ‘Abduh worked to arm Muslims with arguments that would be effective in the modern world in defense of Islam from external (European, Christian) attacks. And like the Islamiyun of today, he argued that the true Islam knew no national or political boundaries. A rationally based Islam was, for Shaykh Muhammad ‘Abduh, as for his publicist and dedicated follower, Rashid Rida, an Islam that educated its ignorant masses, brought them up from the poverty to which they were currently subjected, and thus restored the world greatness that once was Islam.

Shaykh Muhammad ‘Abduh had many followers in the next two generations of Egyptian (and other Muslim) intellectuals who sought to reincorporate aspects of Mu‘tazili rationalism into modern Islamic theology. The particular history of neo-Mu‘tazilism in Egypt is a fascinating topic that will require further research.²⁹ In our survey of the influence of Mu‘tazilism on the modern Muslim world we simply note, as we turn to later Muslim figures, that like Shaykh ‘Abduh himself, several rationalist modernists were shaykhs of al-Azhar. Like ‘Abduh, Shaykh Muhammad Mustafa al-Maraghi sought to modernize Islam through administrative and curricular reform of al-Azhar University. ‘Abduh’s most studied successor in this regard was Shaykh al-Azhar Mahmud Shaltut.³⁰ In 1943, Shaykh Shaltut delivered a lecture that was popularly received before a large audience of several thousand students, faculty and ulama at al-Azhar’s College of Usul al-Din. Zebiri summarizes his remarks as follows:

Like al-Maraghi . . . Shaltut began by praising the Azhar’s work in the Middle Ages in preserving the Islamic religion and the Arabic language. He particularly commended the fact that at that time the law was taught according to the various *madhahib* rather than just one, and the curriculum included several mathematical and rational sciences. He went on to explain that the situation deteriorated with the spread of the practice of *taqlid* . . . The spirit of sectarianism grew and people were obliged to confine themselves to a single *madhhab*. All this obstructed real intellectual progress, and the Azhar became increasingly isolated from the Muslim community.³¹

We can only speculate on what might have happened if Muhammad ‘Abduh and his followers in authority at al-Azhar University had been successful in persuading more conservative Azhari ulama to accept their reforms. As matters turned out, the theological debate about these reforms, and thus about

modernism and rationalism, was superseded by President Gamal Abdel Nasser's decision to impose a drastic Reform Law on al-Azhar in 1961. Zebiri points out that the earlier theologically based visions of modern Islam were replaced by secular, governmental policy. Perhaps there is a pattern to be seen here that is reminiscent of Caliph al-Ma'mun's attempt in the ninth century (discussed in chapter 2 above) to impose doctrine that suits the purposes of the ruler?

Islamic Traditionalism and Rationalism in South Asia

If Egypt was the primary Middle Eastern country in which Islamic modernism and traditionalism would contend with each other in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, India was the region of Asia that spawned similar trends. Both regions – the Middle East and South Asia – were subjected to European colonialism, from which they emerged in the twentieth century as “Third World” nations. There were important differences between these two centers of Islamic learning and revival, however. Egypt, like many Middle Eastern countries, has always been predominantly Muslim. India has always been predominantly non-Muslim (primarily Hindu, but also Sikh, *inter alia*), but nonetheless ruled by Muslims during the Mogul dynasty, which lasted from 1526 to 1858. Islam in India has always been a minority religion, yet South Asia has the largest number of Muslims of any geographical region. Some rulers in India, notably Akbar (*reg.* 1542–1605), were innovative in removing boundaries between Muslim and non-Muslim religious practices and communities.

The tendency toward religious pluralism in South Asian societies also produced opposite tendencies toward Islamic reform and the purification of Islam from non-Muslim, especially Hindu, accretions. Indeed, Wahhabism and non-Hanbali forms of traditionalism had parallel expressions in the South Asian environment, as did modernist expressions of Islamic thought. The traditionalist temperament to return to the Islam of the Salafiya and to remove all non-Islamic accretions from Hinduism and local popular religion was spearheaded by Shah Wali Allah al-Dihlawi (1702–1762), a contemporary and remarkably parallel figure to Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab. He lamented the decline of Islamic political power and religious unity in India, and he attacked the religious syncretism that in some ways could be seen as the heritage of Akbar's broad, almost boundaryless vision of religion. South Asian Islamic traditionalism intensified under the leadership of Ahmad Brelwi (1786–1831). Brelwi's theologically driven refusal to share religious

and cultural space with Hinduism and Indian popular religion got him killed in 1831 while he was attempting to form a separate Islamic state and lead a jihad against the rest of India.

Islamic modernism in India was led by Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898), an older contemporary of Muhammad ‘Abduh. Ahmad Khan had worked for the British East India Company as a young man and had come to believe that Muslims in India would have to come to grips with modern science and the more productive aspects of Western thought. In this regard he said: “If people do not shun blind adherence, if they do not seek that light which can be found in the Qur’an and the indisputable Hadith, and do not adjust religion and the sciences of today, Islam will become extinct in India.”³² He therefore set about to have Western works translated into Indian languages. He founded the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh which, until this day, has been the center of Islamic modernism in India.³³ That Ahmad Khan justified modernism and rationalism in the Islamic tradition of kalam can be seen in the following passage, quoted by Fazlur Rahman: “Today we are, as before, in need of a modern theology (*‘ilm al-kalam*), whereby we should either refute the doctrines of modern sciences, or undermine their foundations, or show that they are in conformity with Islam.”³⁴ Like ‘Abduh, Khan believed that Islamic teaching was compatible with modern science and thus he favored the latter alternative. Indeed, he seems to have come much closer than ‘Abduh to the epistemological position of the Mu‘tazila and of European rationalism, that reason precedes faith. His metaphysical framework, however, was inspired more by the emanationist doctrines of medieval Islamic philosophers, who spoke of God as First Cause. As the twentieth-century Pakistani modernist Fazlur Rahman (to whom we turn in chapter 10) notes:

Yet, such individual interpretations are not to be decried. They are not only statements of personal faith and expressions of the principles of liberalism but provided a leaven and fertilization of ideas for an eventual formulation of the Faith, and in this process they are necessary moments.³⁵

The modernist viewpoints of Muhammad ‘Abduh and Sayyid Ahmad Khan were articulated in Islamic environments that had been created, in part, by British colonialism. During the next century, the twentieth C.E., the British and other European empires were to fall. This, we have argued, allowed the older debates between traditionalism and rationalism to reemerge. In the following chapters, the story of Islamic modernism and neo-Mu‘tazilism continues, this time in Indonesia.

Notes

1. This Western view of Islam as a threat is analyzed and confuted by John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat*.
2. On Shaltut's reformist modernism, see Zebiri, *Mahmud Shaltut and Islamic Modernism*, p. 23 et passim.
3. See ¶ 1 of the text in chapter 5 below.
4. Langan, "The Western Moral Tradition on War," p. 87.
5. The most important work on Ibn Taymiya has been done by Henri Laoust; see especially his *Essai sur les doctrines sociales et politiques de Taqi-al-Din Ahmad b. Taimiya*. In English, see idem, "Ibn Taimiyya," *EP*.
6. Makari, *Ibn Taymiyyah's Ethics*, p. 7.
7. Mentioned in Lapidus, *Islamic Societies*, p. 184.
8. His famous treatise on the Islamic critique of popular religion, *Kitab iqtida' al-sirat al-mustaqim mukhalafat ashab al-jahim*, has been loosely translated by Muhammad Umar Memon in his *Ibn Taimiya's Struggle Against Popular Religion*. Memon's Introduction is a useful source of information about Ibn Taymiya.
9. Translated by 'Umar Farrukh, *Ibn Taymiyyah on Public and Private Law*.
10. Albert Hourani discusses Ibn Taymiya's political theology in his *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, pp. 18–22.
11. See the list of Ibn Taymiya's works in Arabic (and a few titles of works in English translation) in Makari, *Ibn Taymiyyah's Ethics*, pp. 227–231.
12. See, for example, Voll, *Islam*, pp. 59–60.
13. Caspar, "Un aspect de la pensée musulmane moderne."
14. We showed earlier that isolated pockets of Mu'tazilism survived the so-called "Triumph of Ash'arism" in the late eleventh century, mainly among the Ithna 'Ashari (Twelver) Shi'a in Iran and the Zaydi (Fiver) Shi'a strongholds in the Caspian region and in Yemen.
15. Caspar, "Un aspect de la pensée musulmane moderne," p. 142. Hassan Hanafi, discussed below in chapter 10, has analyzed a concept of "Occidentalism" as an Islamic counterpoise to "Orientalism."
16. See Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, esp. pp. 68–85 on al-Tahtawi; and Livingston, "Western Science and Educational Reform."
17. 'Abduh, *Hashiya 'ala sharh al-Diwani*.
18. Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt*, pp. 70–71.
19. From *al-Manar*, 8: 391; cited by Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt*, pp. 42–43. *Al-Manar* was the Egyptian journal published by 'Abduh's disciple Rashid Rida. On Shaykh 'Ulaysh, see Adams, p. 30.
20. Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt*, p. 64. Adams cites *al-Manar* 8: 463–464.
21. Muhammad 'Abduh, *Risalat al-tawhid* (Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-'Ulum, 1986). The *Risala* was first published by 'Abduh in Cairo in 1897. Muhammad Rashid Rida published a revised second edition in 1908. The fifth Cairo edition in 1926 was further revised, chiefly with added notes. The English translation is *The Theology of Unity*, trans. Ishaq Musa'ad and Kenneth Cragg (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966).

22. Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, pp. 142–143 interprets this as an example of 'Abduh's eclecticism and his tendency to "evade difficult questions." We think such a judgment is too facile and fails to comprehend the deep theological conflict surrounding any attempt to question the doctrine of the eternity of the Qur'an.
23. 'Abduh, *al-Manar* 9: 334–335, quoted and translated by Adams in *Islam and Modernism in Egypt*, p. 138.
24. The influence of Greek philosophy on the development of Islamic thought is a historiographical problem still under dispute among historians. See the works by Fakhry, Watt (*Formative Period*) and Wolfson in the bibliography.
25. 'Abduh, *Theology of Unity*, pp. 107–108 'Abduh, *Risala*, pp. 115–116.
26. Or "Manar Party." These terms are used by Charles C. Adams to designate the many Egyptians and other Muslims who, as he put it, "have been influenced by the teachings of Muhammad 'Abduh and have identified themselves more or less openly with the movement which he inaugurated" (idem, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt*, pp. 180, 205–268).
27. Ibid, p. 95.
28. The claim that modernity is in fact a product of Islam and that Islam is better suited than Christianity and other religions – or is in a position now to stand alongside or even to replace Christianity as the predominant world religion of modernity – has resonated among twentieth-century Muslim modernist and postmodernist thinkers, especially Hassan Hanafi, whose work we shall consider in chapter 10.
29. Neo-Mu'tazilism in Egypt from Muhammad 'Abduh to the present is the subject of a study by Ahmad 'Arafat al-Qadi, "Falsafat al-tarbiya 'ind al-mu'tazila wa l-ash'ariya" (The philosophy of education of the Mu'tazila and Ash'arites).
30. On Shaltut and Islamic modernism in Egypt more generally, see Zebiri, *Mahmud Shaltut and Islamic Modernism*, esp. chapters 2 and 3.
31. Ibid., pp. 22–23; summarized by Zebiri from Muhammad 'Abd al-Mun'im al-Khafaji, *al-Azhar fi alf 'am*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (Beirut and Cairo, 1988), 3: 14–16.
32. Quoted by Rahman, *Islam*, pp. 216–217, from Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Khutabat-i Sir Sayid* (Badalun, 1931), p. 55.
33. Voll, *Islam*, pp. 112–113.
34. Quoted by Rahman, *Islam*, p. 217, from *Letters ka Majmu'a* (n.p., 1890), p. 2101.
35. Rahman, *Islam*, p. 218.

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