Muhammad Abduh and the Reform of Muslim Education

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Muhammad Abduh and the Reform of Muslim Education

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Abstract

Abduh tried to revive the tradition of rationalism. His success was mixed due to resistance from traditional circles. Nevertheless, the boldness and freshness of his ideas call for renewed efforts to carry on where he left off. It is clear that many of the challenges he struggled with are still with us today and have to be addressed. Among these is rigid conservatism and a deep-seated anti-rationalism, characteristic of what passes for “traditional” views.

Introduction

Education remains an issue in Islam. Illiteracy is high. Skills for the job market have to be enhanced. Progress may be achieved by means of reform. The need for reform has been recognized since the days of colonialism.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the Muslims came in direct contact with the West, they were suddenly confronted with a realisation of their utter backwardness and impotence in almost every aspect of life. This generated an intellectual crisis in the Muslim intelligentsia, producing in its wake a whole crop of apologists, revivalists and modernists. On the religious plane, the Muslim modernists like Abduh and al-Afghani attempted to meet the challenge by restating Islam in the light of the contemporary situation.¹

Prominent among the reformers in the Muslim world in the nineteenth century were Jalaluddin al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida. All shared the aim of bringing Muslims from illiteracy and backwardness. This paper focuses on Abduh.

Post-colonial Egypt

Egypt was an Ottoman vassal state from 1517. Napoleon Bonaparte entered Egypt in 1798. Egypt at that time was in a state of weakness. After the French evacuation from Egypt in 1801, there was a breakdown. The British took power in 1882.

Muhammad Ali Pasha (1805-1841) was appointed as wali of Egypt in 1805, by the Ottoman sultan, during a war between the Ottomans, Mamluks, and Albanian mercenaries. The war started in 1802 and ended in 1807.²
The dynasty he established remained in power until the 1952 revolution. On account of the many reforms he initiated in just about every sphere of Egyptian life, he became known as the founder of modern Egypt.

The ulama wanted ʿAli Pasha to rule with consultation. However, he restricted the power of the ulama of al-Azhar that helped him to power.

Local despotisms flourished in the Arab lands at large and the economy sank to subsistence levels. Egypt’s new energetic ruler strove to transform a backward country of a vast population into a state powerful enough to counter further assaults from Europe and also to maintain its de facto independence from the Ottomans in Istanbul.3

Ali Pasha established polytechnics, as well as educational institutions to provide training in agriculture, engineering, and music. Another approach to modernization was to send students to study abroad.4

Muhammad Ali Pasha sent … scholars, doctors, engineers abroad for training for the newly established schools … When they returned to their country, they became instrumental in modernising Egyptian society. Efforts were made to translate scientific and technical works in Arabic.5

These efforts aimed at transferring knowledge from the developed world to Egypt. Egypt became more open with the establishment of the printing press.

Another important step … was the establishment of its first printing press in 1882, which published books in Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman-Turkish. The first Egyptian newspaper, al-Waqaʿiʿ al-misriyyah (Egyptian events), appeared from this press.6

These changes provided the foundation for modernization of Egypt in the nineteenth century. The process was characterized by an ongoing tension between the rationalists (modernizers) and the traditionalists (followers of tradition).

Personal life

Muhammad Abduh “was an Egyptian jurist, religious scholar and liberal reformer, regarded as the founder of Islamic Modernism.” Recently, he is increasingly being portrayed as “the founder of the so-called Neo-Mutazilism.”7

Abduh was born in 1849, in the Nile Delta, and died at the age of 56, on 11 July 1905. His father was Turkish while his mother was Arab. He received traditional Islamic education at Tanta. He was frustrated with it. There was excessive rote learning.
He did not enjoy the way the teaching was done as students were not allowed to ask questions neither during the lesson nor after. He eventually ran away after 18 months … [he] wrote later that he had not learned anything during the time he spent there … ⁸

Enrolling in al-Azhar in 1866, he studied logic, philosophy and mysticism. He was a student of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. Abduh graduated from in 1877 with a degree of *alim* (teacher).

During the next two years, he taught logic, theology and ethics at al-Azhar. In 1878 he became Professor of History at the Teachers College that later became a part of Cairo University. He also taught Arabic at the School of Languages.

In 1872 Abduh met al-Afghani at al-Azhar. The latter was to have a profound impact on Abduh during a two-decade association. They aimed at the revitalisation of Muslim community, especially in ethics and present-day knowledge.

“Al-Afghani stressed the point that Islam and science were not only compatible, but that, of all religions, Islam was the friendliest to science.”⁹ For his part, “Abduh advocated the reform of Islam by bringing it back to its pristine state and casting off what he viewed as its contemporary decadence and division.”¹⁰

Abduh believed that “Muslim nations could not become stronger and prosperous again until they acquired from Europe the sciences which were the product of its activity of mind, and they could do this without abandoning Islam, for Islam taught the acceptance of all the products of reason.”¹¹ This required legal, educational and political reform.

Abduh was much impressed by the striking contrast between the two civilisations— the one flourishing and the other decaying. He eagerly studied the causes which led to the growth of Western civilisation. It was thus after his return to his country from his first visit to Europe that he soon became absorbed in the manifold activities of social reform and public welfare.¹²

Afghani was expelled from Egypt in 1879. Abduh was exiled to his native village. After returning from internal exile, Abduh was appointed chief editor of the short-lived, albeit influential *al-Waqa’i al-Misriyyah*, a national newspaper that was committed to reform.

He felt there was a need for renewal (*tajdid*) in theology. Abduh was committed to reforming all aspects of Egyptian life. He felt that education was the right way to achieve this.¹³ “He was in favor of a good religious education which would strengthen a child’s morals and a scientific education which would nurture a child’s ability to
reason. In his articles he criticized the luxurious lives of the rich, corruption and superstition."

Because of his support of the Urabi revolt of 1882, which demanded independence from the British, Abduh was expelled from Egypt for six years.

He spent a few years in Lebanon. There he participated in the establishment of Islamic education. He was allowed to return to Egypt in 1888.

He was in favour of a religious as well as a present-day education. He criticised corruption, superstition and inequality. He expressed his ideas in a journal, al-Manar, (Lighthouse), in addition to the newspaper.

Abduh was among the early Arab Muslims to travel to Europe. In 1884, he traveled to Paris, France, where he co-published the Firmest Bond, al-Urwah al-Wuthqa, a revolutionary journal with his mentor al-Afghani.

The journal was opposed to British rule and propagated pan-Islamism. It focused on addressing the weaknesses of the Muslim ummah. It became one of the most influential journals in the Arab world. Eighteen issues were published between March to October of 1884.

Abduh also visited Britain. There he participated in discussions about Sudan and Egypt. After a brief time in Tunisia, he returned to Beirut in 1885. Here he found work as a teacher. During his stay in Beirut he participated in interfaith dialogue, with the purpose of enhancing relations among Jews, Christians and Muslims.

He returned from exile in 1888. Three years later, in 1891, he was appointed judge in the Courts of Native Tribunals and a consultative member of the Court of Appeal. In 1895 he was appointed to the administrative board of al-Azhar University.

In addition, he also served as member of an advisory board to the Egyptian khedive, the ruler of Egypt. In 1899 he became Grand-mufti of Egypt, a position he held until his death. His views endeared him to the British but alienated him from nationalist leaders.

He traveled a great deal and met with teachers at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. He worked for improving the conditions for both students and staff, and for reforming al-Azhar University.

He studied law and read a number of European works in Vienna and Berlin. He concluded that Muslims suffered from an ignorance of their own religion and from the despotic rule of unjust rulers.
His best-known work was the *Risala al-Tawhid*, *(Treatise on the Unity of God).* In it, he attempted to articulate the Islamic perspective in agreement with the empirical disciplines.\(^\text{18}\)

The work draws on the talks he gave in Beirut, and addresses the unity of God, the Qur’an, prophethood, and ethics. He tried to articulate a vision of Islam that is consistent with an adaptation to contemporary realities without veering from Islam.

**Educational reforms in Egypt**

At one time the Azhar University had been a great centre of learning. However, with the rise and entrenchment of *taqlid*, Islamic learning began to decline:

> Al-Azhar too lost much of its vitality and … could hardly play any role in the regeneration of Muslim society. The syllabi were reduced to a sterile repetition of scholastic medieval dogma. The traditional sciences – based on divine revelation and, therefore exempt from any criticism – became finally established as the basis of Azharite study … The rational sciences which included philosophy, rhetoric, logic, and astronomy, were relegated to the background and subordinated to the traditional sciences.\(^\text{19}\)

The study of astronomy was restricted to ascertaining the time for prayer and the beginning of the lunar months. The study of arithmetic was restricted to determining inheritance. History, geography, physics or chemistry were not taught at all, as they were looked down upon as merely worldly sciences. A well-known graduate of al-Azhar related his experience as follows:

> It was a life of unrelieved repetition, with never a new thing, from the time the study year began until it was over … Throughout these studies it was all merely a case of hearing re-iterated words and traditional talk which aroused no chord in my heart, nor taste in my appetite. There was no food for one's intelligence, no new knowledge adding to one’s store.\(^\text{20}\)

However, Abduh believed firmly in the mastery the modern disciplines, and he saw no conflict between reason and revelation. “Abduh, being an ardent advocate of Islamic renewal and a believer in the harmony between reason and revelation, advocated legal and theological reform and called for universal education.”\(^\text{21}\)

While initially there was only the traditional, religious system of education, over the years there emerged a tradition of secular education in Muslim Egypt.\(^\text{22}\) The emerging educational system comprised three stages: primary, secondary and tertiary, followed by a four-year specialisation.\(^\text{23}\)
Obstacles to reform

However, the reform movement was resisted by the traditional establishment, which regulated Egyptian existence and hindered efforts at reform. Medieval perspectives predominated.

The conservative reaction favours the status quo of the Muslims and abhors change in whatever form and under whatever banner. The upholders of this view are those scholars who accept the works of some authors (generally belonging to the 8th - 9th century A.H.) as the final and unquestionable authority on Islam. Any deviation from their stated opinion is regarded as a deviation from Islam itself … The door of ijtihad, they contend, is firmly closed because on the one hand no one is any more qualified for it and on the other there is no need for it. The authoritative books in use contain all the satisfactory answers to all the valid questions.24

Abduh was to run into entrenched resistance, in particular the culture of blind imitation or taqlid. “The conservatism of its Ulemas was recognized by Abduh as the greatest obstacle.”25 He went on to challenge blind following of tradition:

Islam reproves the slavish imitation of the ancestors that characterizes the leaders of the religions. With their instinct to hold timidly to tradition-sanctioned ways, saying, as they do: ‘Nay! We will follow what we found our fathers doing.’ (Surah 31.21) and ‘We found our fathers so as a people and we will stay the same as they’. (Surah 43·22.) So the authority of reason was liberated from all that held it bound and from every kind of taqlid enslaving it, and thus restored to its proper dignity, to do its proper work in judgement and wisdom, always in humble submission to God alone and in conformity to His sacred law. Within its bounds there are no limits to its activity and no end to the researches it may pursue.26

Abduh articulated a remarkably wide space for the activities of human reason. This set him apart from most of his traditional contemporaries.

The real Islam, he maintained, had a simple doctrinal structure, it consisted of certain beliefs about the greatest question of human life and certain general principles of human conduct. To enable us to reach these beliefs and embody them in our lives both reason and revelation are essential. They neither possess a separate sphere nor conflict with each other in the same sphere.27
He did not believe, however, in the wholesale adaptation of current ideas, without regard to their suitability. He supported selective adoption of viewpoints, and just as long as they remained in harmony with the Islamic worldview.

The task of raising the whole nation from a state of backwardness to a higher level of culture and civilisation, Abduh believed, was not merely a matter of imitating the secular West. It was his conviction that the programme of moral regenerations of his people must have its roots in the real and enduring values of religion … the greatest educator [inculcating] in the people the qualities of justice, mercy and magnanimity.28

He had a particular understanding of religion. It was important to know what could change without causing any harm, and what had to remain constant.

Challenge of taqlid

Taqlid or the indiscriminate imitation of the work of early scholars, emerged at the time of the formation of the four schools of sunni jurisprudence. The work of the jurists became the primary source of the Shariah. The Qur’an and sunnah were relegated to “remote” sources.

Scholars were required to refer to the precedent of their predecessors, the early jurists, and were prohibited from referring to the Qur’an and sunnah. This produced an intellectual dependency of the later scholars on the early scholars.

Henceforth, the gate of ijtihad, i.e. independent legal reasoning, was declared closed by most of the Muslim theologians and for about a thousand years the religious life of Muslims were regulated by taqlid, i.e. ‘the adoption of the utterances or actions of another as authoritative with faith in their correctness without investigating his reasons’. The ‘consensus’, attained at in the second and third centuries of Islamic history led to the stagnation of intellect and the promulgation of new ideas was more or less forbidden. The task of later scholars was confined to explaining and commenting on the decisions of early theologians.29

Muslim thinkers argued that the alleged irreconcilability of Islam with contemporary thought was due to medieval views, and that “on the contrary Islam, rightly understood in its original form, was not only in full agreement with the assured results of scientific investigation but was even in closer harmony with them than any other religious system.”30

However, the supporters of tradition held firmly to the view that all matters relating to religion are the prerogative of jurists.31
According to the traditionalists, the right to interpret Islamic scriptures belonged exclusively to the early generations of Muslim scholars. This negated the right of the later generation to interpret Islam in its own way. ʿAbduh revolted against this exclusive attachment to the past and declared that precedence in time was no ground for preference. He stressed the right to individual freedom in matters of belief and in the interpretation of religion and declared that the privilege of a layman and non-expert to interpret Islam according to his own understanding must not be suppressed.32

In fact, there could be no contradiction between Islam and science; on the contrary, he said, Islam was an ally of science and there was complete harmony between the two. Islam, he said, encouraged the study of natural phenomena to which there were many references in the Qur’an.

If rightly interpreted, science could be brought to conform to religion. In his commentary of the Qur’an, ʿAbduh tried to harmonise the new scientific discoveries of the modern age with the Qur’anic references to natural phenomena.33 He was critical of the conservative establishment:

The larger part of the specialists are affected with the disease of traditionalism (taqlid). They believe and then demand proof, but only on condition that the proof shall agree with their belief. If they are confronted with what counters their belief they will have nothing to do with it. Indeed: they oppose it tooth and nail, even if it means jettisoning rationality altogether. The way of most of them is first to dogmatise and then to lay claim to proof. Rarely one finds among them any who first prove and then believe.34

Abduh’s emphasis on rationality extended to his perception of traditions:

As for items which have only one narrator, he to whom the tradition has come, who has satisfied himself of the truth of what it contains, is obliged to believe it. But he to whom It has not come, or receiving it had misgivings about its validity, he cannot be blamed as an unbeliever if he withholds acceptance of it, since it is not verified by sustained narration.35

In this he anticipated the efforts of later jurists, such as Muhammad Ghazali, to take a more rational approach to what presented itself as “tradition.”36 Indeed, Abduh considered reason, within the limits provided by revelation, to be the standard for differentiating truth and falsehood.
the Qur'an ... espoused the high role of reason and confirmed its competence as the ultimate means to happiness and the criterion between truth and falsehood, worth and loss.\textsuperscript{37}

In this he was a precursor of subsequent writers who made comparable calls.

It is reason which distinguishes between true wahy And (\textit{sic}) false, between misleading lies, fabrications, and myths. Likewise, it is reason which enables humans to choose and face the consequences of the choices they make.\textsuperscript{38}

The call for the rehabilitation of reason sets the modernists apart from traditionalists, in so far as the traditional view places tradition above reason. The superiority of tradition in relation to reason is reflected in the perception that tradition must be followed, no matter how weak, even where it departs from the “dictates of reason.”

This stance is hardly sustainable in view of the fact that ascertaining what is an authentic tradition requires the use of reason. An inference reached without the use of reason amounts to conjecture, lacking credibility.

The rationalists were faulted for “subordinating” revelation to reason. It is ironic that traditionalists subordinate both reason and revelation to tradition. The latter is evident from the espousal of the rule that “tradition judges the Quran.”

In this, jurists effectively reversed the relationship between tradition and the Quran. It is improbable that the consequences of this \textit{faux pas} are any less troubling than those produced by the rationalists’ subordination of revelation to reason. It appears that further reflection is required.

For the subordination of revelation to tradition had far reaching consequences. It paved the way for the entrenchment of the concept of the abrogation of revelation by tradition, where a lesser authority (tradition) effectively overrides a higher authority (Quran).

This allowed traditional punishments to take precedence at the expense of those specified in the Quran in respect of particular offenses (e.g. adultery) or prescribe punishments for acts for which the Quran prescribes no punishment except in the hereafter (e.g. apostasy).

The subordination of reason to tradition disabled reason and in this way facilitated the entry of “unwarranted accretions” into tradition. In different words, the subordination of revelation and reason to tradition resulted not just in rulings that appear to be at variance with the Quran but also appear to represent Islam in an unattractive manner.
Abduh’s thought

Afghani emphasized pan-Islamism. Abduh, by contrast, focused on education.

In the 1870s, Al-Afghani lived in Cairo and spent most of this time in teaching, introducing an interpreting Islamic philosophy that included restricting rational inquiry to the elite while encouraging orthodoxy among the masses.39

Abduh is known as a reformer, but also as a salafi. He famously noted that, “I went to the West and saw Islam, but no Muslims; I got back to the East and saw Muslims, but not Islam.”

Abduh wanted to achieve an integration of Islamic tradition and western contemporaneousness. He argued, along the lines that would be echoed later by Fazlur Rahman, that Muslims should not remain beholden to medieval interpretations of Islam. There was a need to keep up with the times. Each generation had the right, and even the responsibility to interpret Islam in the light of its own conditions, prevailing at the time.

Mohammad Abduh wanted to make Islam compatible with nineteenth-century rationalism. According to him Muslims could not simply rely on the interpretations of texts provided by medieval clerics, they needed to use reason … He said that in Islam man was not created to be led by a bridle, man was given intelligence so that he could be guided by knowledge. According to Abduh, a teacher’s role was to direct men towards study. He believed that Islam … reproved the slavish imitation of tradition.40

The reason is that the process of explanation is affected by the perspective of the commentator, which in turn is affected by the experience of the person. He or she will therefore focus on passages in the Qur’an that appear relevant to him or her.

Endowed by his Creator with reason, man was to be guided by knowledge. The role of teachers was to facilitate the attainment of knowledge. According to Abduh, Islam does not endorse an unquestioning adherence to tradition, but has within itself, mechanisms for initiating reform when necessary.

He opposed compulsion in Islam. He critiqued what he felt were errors arising in popular expressions of sufis. He promoted peaceful co-existence of various faiths and worked for good relations between Coptic Christians and Muslims. However, he could also be strict.
Abduh it must be realised was not a friend of free thought … When appointed as editor of the official magazine he became the ex officio censor of literature and books. He advocated a stern supervision of what the people were allowed to read … He used his authority to prevent the circulation of books which he considered to be corrupting or a waste of time.41

His opponents call Abduh an infidel, while his supporters view his as a sage, reviver of religion and reformer. He saw no conflict between reason and revelation. He was against polygamy. He believed that Islam in fact frees humanity from slavery. He also supported equal rights and rejected from juristic exclusivity in the explanation of Islam.

Conclusions and recommendations

The problems that Abduh struggled to resolve remain. Education in parts of the Muslim world retains few of the features that Abduh tried to reform. What is required is the political will to promote reform.

Efforts at reform are at times perceived as a threat to tradition and traditional way of life. Moreover, the challenges posed by the so-called Islamic State challenge the legitimacy of established regimes.

For these reasons, it is probable that reform will proceed in a gradual way. It is to be hoped that the Muslims will take to heart the experiences of earlier modernists such as Muhammad Abduh, and utilise what is best in their work for the further advancement of the Muslim as well as the world. It is recommended that:

• Learning methods that are more in keeping with the requirements of modernity be utilized
• The curriculum be broadened to include present-day disciplines
• Institutions that promote reform be established and supported

Endnotes


4 “Many young Egyptians belonging to the elite class were sent to Europe to study military science, technology, medicine, agriculture, and languages, etc. It was these people who upon their return home from abroad assumed various administrative and executive posts in the government and became officers and engineers at various states enterprises.” Aasia Yusuf, “Islam and Modernity: Remembering the Contributions of Muhammad ʿAbduh (1849-1905),” *Islam and Civilisational Renewal*, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 357.


