MUḤAMMAD ‘ABDUH: ISLAM AND URBANITY
IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY ARAB WORLD

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ABSTRACT

The Islamic religion has been such an integral part of the Arabic world that it has become part of every Muslim’s psyche. Its precepts and laws govern every aspect of life from the cradle to the grave. Most Islamic traditions were conceived in antiquity, during turbulent times of religious warfare, conquering forces and short life expectancies. During the nineteenth century, modern Arab intellectuals wanted to emulate the urban progress (new urbanity) that had been occurring in Europe but they faced opposition from religious traditionalists who strongly rejected the idea as being hostile to the Islamic faith. This paper examines how Muḥammad ‘Abduh managed to bridge the gap between secular modernists and religious traditionalists by reinterpreting Islamic doctrine with a contemporary outlook, and by emphasising how the Islamic faith could shield the people from the moral temptations, traps and pitfalls that modern European people were facing.

Field of Research: Intellectual history, discourse between religious and secular thinkers, Muḥammad ‘Abduh.

Introduction

The Islamic religion has been the cornerstone of Arabic society since the seventh century CE. Islam governed the thoughts, spirituality and lifestyle of Muslims for so many generations that any opposing ideas or contradictory opinions were immediately rejected by its faithful followers. The only way to win the favour of the people was (and still is) to respect and abide by their religion. All the Arab rulers knew this, and so did unsanctioned leaders such as Napoleon. When Napoleon’s French campaign successfully invaded Egypt in 1798 their presence was understandably treated with reluctance and distrust. Napoleon, the masterful tactician, was fully aware of the importance of the Islamic religion in the Arab world. He had to exploit the Arab people’s religious devotion to achieve his political ambitions and win their approval. Throughout Syria and Egypt you could see the prophet’s name and extracts from the holy Quran inserted into propaganda posters pasted onto walls in prominent locations. These posters had statements and directives in the Arabic language using the commonly accepted Muslim style of starting with the bismillah, and ending with praise to the name of Allah. Napoleon gained favour by showing his admiration and respect for the Islamic religion and traditions by attending religious rituals. At the height of Napoleon’s power, Muslims thought it would be wise to downplay the Prophet’s annual birthday celebration so as not to offend their occupiers. Napoleon, always an astute diplomat, proclaimed that everyone should commemorate this austere occasion. He ordered his troops to decorate the cities with festive colours, and encouraged the people to celebrate the day. Napoleon even announced that he and his army were so inspired by the people’s piety that they were willing to convert to Islam.
Reforms Begin

In 1801, Muhammad ‘Ali led a successful military operation to expel the occupying French campaign, then four years later, in 1805, he became the Governor of Egypt. Muhammad ‘Ali was no stranger to change. He changed careers from tobacco merchant, to naval officer, to military leader and finally to Governor. He learnt from experience that flexibility and adaptability are paramount to successful endeavour. This attitude became more prevalent as he learnt more about what was happening in the world. When he became aware of the urban progress in Europe he knew that the Arab world would have to follow suit or be left behind. He also knew that the Arab people would only accept such changes if they complied with Islamic principles.7

Muhammad ‘Ali’s first agenda as the new Governor was to overhaul the education system. The established traditional model of education was dominated by Islamic thought and authority. Muhammad ‘Ali adopted a new, European style, model of education. This model focussed on modern science, and contemporary European ideas (which were forbidden by the traditional schools), and it had no religious component.8 As students from the traditional and modern schools graduated, and took their places in society, a really obvious knowledge gap began to emerge. Graduates from the traditional schools were well versed in Islamic lore but knew little about modern science. Graduates from the Modern schools were very knowledgeable in scientific matters, but their knowledge about Islam was limited to what they learnt outside of school.9 The two different styles of education were producing two different types of people. Traditionalists, who were conservative, devoutly Islamic and opposed to any new ideas imported from Europe; and modernists, who were liberal thinkers, willing to accept new ideas and eager to see European-style urbanity in their own environment.10

Muhammad ‘Abduh

One of the major issues challenging new urbanity in the Arab world was religion. Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905), was the most prominent figure to deal with this issue. Al-sheikh Muhammad ‘Abduh an Islamic jurist, religious scholar and liberal reformer, pointed out that the modernists were eager to adopt urbanity and all that it promises, whilst the traditionalists were reluctant to accept any changes, believing that they were foreign influences which were antagonistic towards Islamic sensibilities.11

When widespread reforms began to change the face of established Arabic institutions, there was an attempt to update the existing legal system by introducing new European secular laws.12 ‘Abduh spoke up against being too hasty in adopting new European trends because some trends were not compatible with sharia law. He emphasized that new laws did not have to be introduced because existing laws, which have been in place for centuries, could be modified to suit the changing conditions of the new Arab world.13 ‘Abduh, in his capacity as the Chief Mufti of Egypt, initiated legal reform by reviewing sharia law and modifying the laws that could be modified so that they were more accommodating to the emerging new urbanity. ‘Abduh was considered to be the first person to publicly criticize the divided education system and he dedicated much of his time to bridging the knowledge gap between the traditional and modern people.14 Muhammad ‘Abduh addressed this issue by looking for some kind of middle ground where Islamic principals allow or, better yet, endorse the changes required for new urbanity. This meant that Islamic texts would have to justify each element of change and if an element of change was not acceptable it would have to be modified or rejected altogether. Of course this, in turn, meant that the new urbanity would turn out to be less European and more Arabic in style and substance. Also, ‘Abduh encouraged traditionalists to let go of the antiquated ideas of the past, and to move on from past glories. He asked them to hold on to the timeless essence of their faith and use it to usher in a new age of civil splendour. He
reminded the modernists of the many ways in which Islam was a catalyst for urbanity in the past and how Islamic culture flourished during the European Dark Ages. He urged them to not dismiss Islam as a strict, and forbidding religion but to see it as a guiding principal which will preserve and protect the integrity of the people. Ṭāhir Ḥikmat kept himself well informed about the changes occurring in Europe and embraced those ideas which would most contribute to the advancement of Islamic society. His psyche was a synthesis of rationalism, liberalism, nationalism and, most importantly, the universalism of Islam. Believing that the rigid structures of Islamic culture were holding back what was essentially a logical and fluid religion, Ṭāhir Ḥikmat reinterpreted the religious texts from a universal perspective, using modern reason, with the aim of reconciling European and Islamic principles. On top of all this, Ṭāhir Ḥikmat promoted the principles of social needs and general welfare.

Broadly speaking, Ṭāhir Ḥikmat endeavoured to condemn “tradition” (taqlid). Tradition which was mindlessly followed by people who had no idea why the tradition exists. On the other hand, Ṭāhir Ḥikmat upheld the principle of “diligence in religion” (ijtihad). A diligence which urges people to think about the reasons behind religious precepts and beliefs. These principles were not accepted by most scholars of the respected and influential al-Azhar university, but they were accepted by those who had received a modern Western education. His ideas were openly supported by his young followers and those who belonged to the Europeanized section of the population. His most influential supporters were those drawn from “the higher ranks of the legal professions, teachers in the higher Government schools, and heads of Government departments.” Ṭāhir Ḥikmat’s huge contribution to al-Azhar was profound. His convictions enabled him to reform the teaching methods delivered within the al-Azhar. His efforts liberated the al-Azhar from the authority of traditional sheikhs and from the conservative trends in the schools.

Because he championed the religious thinking of the Arab world in which he lived, Ṭāhir Ḥikmat massively influenced the entire Islamic world. For this reason he is widely considered to be one of the founders of Islamic modernism. He reconciled new urbanity with established religion. Ṭāhir Ḥikmat’s progressive ideas were so strong and influential that they overshadowed his religious devotion. Most historians seem to have reached a similar conclusion about him: The British diplomat Evelyn Baring Cromer (1841-1917), considered Ṭāhir Ḥikmat to be an Agnostic. The English writer Wilfred Scawen Blunt (1840-1922) likened Ṭāhir Ḥikmat’s religious belief to his own: “I’m afraid Ṭāhir Ḥikmat’s belief in Islam is weak; like my belief in the Catholic Church.” Later, Hourani stated that the Ṭāhir Ḥikmat’s thinking created a constant tension between the two demands (Islam and urbanity). However, researcher Chris Barker, contradicted these opinions when he declared that Ṭāhir Ḥikmat was a religious giant. Ṭāhir Ḥikmat left an important legacy of religious autonomy which he brought about by dismantling obsolete conservative traditions. The influential newspaper, al-‘Urwa al-Wuthqa, summarized how Ṭāhir Ḥikmat’s work contributed to the new urbanity in six main points. Ṭāhir Ḥikmat identified the historical issues which have led to the decline of the Arab community, and presented solutions to these problems; he replaced the despair in Muslims’ thinking with a hope of victory; he called for a steadfast commitment to the principles of Muslim fathers and ancestors; he fought against the accusation that Muslims were unable to achieve any progress as long as they remain committed to the principles of Islam; he provided the people with information detailing political changes and events; and lastly, Ṭāhir Ḥikmat supported relations between the Arab world and other nations.

Conclusion

Many commentators analysed the Islamic reforms led by Muhammad Ṭāhir Ḥikmat. His work drew considerable attention and praise from around the world. To this day, historians continue to write about how his reforms influence intellectual trends. The West paid particular attention to what Ṭāhir Ḥikmat did with their Western concepts of new urbanity. Their observations were published in books.
such as: Modernism in Egypt, in 1993, by Charles Adams; Modern Trends in Islam, in 1947, by the Hamilton Gibb; and Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, in 1962, by Albert Hourani. Each of the abovementioned books credit ‘Abduh as being the link between the Islamic community and European urbanity. ‘Abduh explained his position about the issue of religion and urbanity in his book al-Islam Din al-’Ilm wa-al-Madaniyyah (Islam: the Religion of Science and Urbanity). As a sheikh, ‘Abduh identified three main reasons for supporting the new wave of urbanity. Firstly, the essence of the Islamic religion is not inconsistent with urbanity. In fact, the Islamic religion contains fertile soil for the seeds of urbanity. Islam will never stand in the way of urbanity, because its principles actually encourage it. Secondly, Islamic ethics will allow Muslims to prevail against the temptations which demoralised many urbanised Europeans. Thirdly, below the superficial trappings of urbanity (such as modern buildings, elegant fashions, gourmet cuisines, and polite graces), there is a vast treasure trove of deeply rewarding and enlightening fields of endeavour such as science, philosophy, art and literature. ‘Abduh called for freedom of reason, and supremacy of intellect. These two ideals reflected his rationalist and modernist views. He believed that, the renewal of Islam and Muslim society could be achieved through legal and social change as well as western secular modernization. Abduh’s determination to reconcile the essence of Islam with the necessity for progress was one of the strongest forces that led the Arab world towards a new urbanity. When considering the friction between Arab and Western culture, which is reported in the media every day, one may wonder why new reforms, in the spirit of Abduh’s successful reforms, are not being implemented today.

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References (Arabic)


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Prior to the nineteenth century “urbanity” was a vague concept in the Arab world. Words such as ḥadara and ‘umrān were used to mean “civilization” as it pertains to the human condition and urban society as a whole. During the course of the nineteenth century, other words such as taqaddum (advancement) and taraqqī (progress) were used to try to convey the same meaning as “urbanity” but they were inadequate in their scope. A new word had to be created to define urbanity. Tamaddun became that word. It derived from madinah which translates literally into “city” or “town”. In turn, the word madīna was derived from madana which means “urbanize” or “civilize.” He ambiguously stated that, regardless of its origin in European languages, “urbanity” and “city” are synonymous terms. For more on this point, see Ibn Khaldūn, Tārīkh Ibn Khaldūn: al-Musammā Kitāb al-ibnūr wa-Dīwān al-Mubtada wa-al-Khabar fi Ayyām al-abar fi A'Mn : al-Mnot methodological Āṣarahum min Dhawī al-Sultān al-Akbar (Cairo: Maṭba’at al-Naḥda, 1936). See also Ahmad Fāris al-Shīdāyā, Kanz al-Raḡa’īb fi Muṭnakhbāt al-Jawā’ilīb (Cairo: Maṭba’at al-Jawā’ilīb, 1871). See also Muhammad Abdul Jabbar, Perspectives of Civilization (Kuala Lumpur: The University of Malaya Press, 1985).


The struggle had monumental impact to the younger intellectuals who were distinctively influenced by ʿAbduh’s prominence psyche and ideas, such as Mustafa ʿAbd al-Raziq and his brother, ‘Ali ʿAbd al-Raziq who wrote extensively on the Sheikh and his theories, (Aswita Taizir 1994) Muhammad Farid Wajdi, Muhammad Husayn Haikal, Taha Husayn, Amin ‘Abbas Mahmud al-Qaqad, Ibrahim ʿAbd al-Qadir al-Mazini, Dr. Mansur Fahmi, and other luminaries. Some influential ulama from the “Manar Party” and the Azhar Group also express strong favours and supports for his ideas such as Sheikh Ahmad Abu Khatwah (d. 1906), Sheikh ʿAbd al-Karim Salman and Sheikh Sayyid Wafa, Sheikh Muhammad Khalil, Sheikh Hassunah al-Nawawi (1840-1925), Sheikh Muhammad Bakhit, Sheikh Muhammad Mustafa al-Maraghi, Sheikh al-Sayyid ʿAbd al-Rahim al-Damardash Pasha (1853-1930), Ibrahim Bey al-Lakani (d. 1906), Ibrahim Bey al-Hilbari, Ibrahim Bey al-Muwaillhi (1846-1906), Hifni Bey Nasif (1856-1919), Ahmad Fathi Zaghful Pasha (1863-1914), Sayyid Mustafa Lutfi al-Manfulati (1876-1924), Muhammad Hafiz Bey Ibrahim (1873-1932), and many others.


Evelyn Baring Cromer, or as he was known Lord Cromer, held the international position of Control which oversaw Egyptian finances after the Khedives’ mismanagement. In addition, during the British occupation he
was an agent and Consul-General in Egypt from 1883 to 1907. In fact, Chromer criticised all religions, not only Islam, however other intellectuals started to write that Islam accept new urbanity and the only way to promote urbanity into Islamic community is by following the urban model of Europe.