

MODERNIST AND REFORMIST ISLAMIC THOUGHT:  
A Comparative Study of the Contribution of Sir Sayyid Ahmad  
Khan and Muhammad 'Abduh to Religious Literacy

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the contributions of two outstanding figures of the 19th century, who were major catalysts for Islamic reform through education, namely, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) of South Asian decent and Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905) from Egypt. This paper specifically highlights their views on modernist Islamic perspectives. The method of documentary research was deployed in data collection. The researcher also made use of content and comparative approaches in data analysis. The findings reveal that despite the fact that both scholars had some slight differences in their ideas on modernity, particularly their attitude towards the West, they agreed that Muslims should interpret Islam on the basis of reason in order to meet the changing circumstances of Muslim society. The aim of education in their view was to rescue Muslim societies from their decline and to demonstrate the compatibility of Islam with modern Western thought and values. They desired and campaigned for *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and denounced *taqlid* (blind and unquestioned reading of one school of thought). The paper recommends that Muslim scholars should understand each other no matter how much they differ even on matters of religious significance. They should not let their difference of opinion divert them from the core of Islamic practice. Dissenting voices even on a religious subject need not be a matter of dissension within the *ulama* or the *ummah*.

## PREAMBLE

Islamic modernism appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in response to European colonization of the Muslim world. Earlier modernism had appeared in Europe in response to Enlightenment thought which relied heavily on rationalism and science. Muslim modernists wanted to defend religion against the onslaught of rationalism. Muslim modernism must be understood in the context of European colonization because the ideas of modernism penetrated into the Muslim world through colonization. In other words, Islamic modernists were influenced by the European Enlightenment and applied positivist and rationalist thought in order to reconcile Islamic traditionalist views with Western thought and values.

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (hereafter Khan) from the Indian subcontinent committed his life to the survival of the Muslim community in British India, and earned respect in their eyes as a result of an unsuccessful revolt against the British administration in 1857 due to a lack of organization in which not only Muslims but also non-Muslim participated. He was considered to be the Indian pioneer of modernity because he made a very significant contribution to the spread of modern education and rationalist thought among the Muslim elite in India. His efforts to establish a modern educational institution that later became Aligarh Muslim University in 1920 (modelled on Cambridge University) were especially recognized.

Sir Ahmad Khan was the eldest of the five prominent Muslim modernists whose influence on Islamic thought and policy was to shape and define Muslim responses to modernism in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Like the other modernists of his time, Khan was deeply concerned for the state of Muslims in a world dominated by European colonizing powers. As an educational and political leader of Muslims living under British colonial rule in India, he developed the concepts of religious modernism and community identity that marked the transition of

Mughal India to the formation of a representative government and the quest for self-determination.<sup>1</sup>

In the Middle East, Mufti Muhammad 'Abduh (hereafter 'Abduh) in Egypt, who sought to propagate the liberal reforms of Islamic law, education, and administration, is considered to be the father of Islamic modernism in the Arab World. The Arab nationalists embraced his views after the First World War. Many Egyptian nationalists adopted his stress on education as the means for gradual reform, believing that this was the way to achieve independence.<sup>2</sup> 'Abduh believed that education was the best way to achieve reform in all aspects of Egyptian society. His view was that without education, society would not produce intellectuals with the ability to interpret Islam according to the needs of modern Muslim society.

#### THE EMERGENCE OF ISLAMIC MODERNITY

It is important to note that by the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, European countries such as Great Britain, France, and Holland had penetrated and dominated much of the Muslim world from North Africa to Southeast Asia.<sup>3</sup> A variety of responses emerged from Muslims who were ready to be self-critical and to reflect on the causes of this situation. Their responses covered the whole spectrum from adaptation and cultural synthesis to withdrawal and rejection.<sup>4</sup>

The Islamic modernist movement sought to bridge the gap between Islamic traditionalists and secular reformers. Muslim

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1. Tauseef Ahmad Parray, "Islamic Modernist and Reformist Thought: A study of the contribution of Sir Sayyid and Muhammad Iqbal", *World Journal of Islamic History and Civilization*, 1(2): 79-93, 2011. p. 83.

2. Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905) "Centre for Islam and Science" Retrieved from <<http://www.cis-ca.org/voices/a/abduh.htm> on January 10, 2014.

3. John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 126.

4. *ibid.*

modernists combined the internal community concerns of the eighteenth-century Muslim revivalist movement with the need to respond to the threat of European colonialism and the demands of modernity. Like secular reformers, Islamic reformers responded to European colonialism and influence by their perception of the 'Success of the West'. The West was strong and successful; Muslims were weak and subject to domination, reliance and dependence on the West. They believed that the sources of the West's strength had to be assimilated.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast with pre-modern revivalist movements, Islamic modernism was a response both to continued internal weaknesses and to the external political and religio-cultural threat of colonialism. Most of the Muslim world faced the powerful new threat of European colonialism. The responses of modern Islamic reformers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the impact of the West on Muslim societies resulted in substantial attempts to reinterpret Islam to meet the changing circumstances of Muslim life.<sup>6</sup>

In reaction to the penetration of Western capitalist modernity into all aspects of Muslim society from the Arab world to Southeast Asia, a significant number of Muslim intellectuals began to compose the general outlines of a new intellectual project that is often referred to as 'Islamic modernism.'<sup>7</sup>

The most prominent intellectuals who pioneered the modernist visions and agendas were Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897) and Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905) in the Middle East and Sir

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5. John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 55.

6. op. cit., Esposito, 1998, p. 125.

7. John L. Esposito, *Contemporary Islam: Reformation or Revolution in The Oxford History of Islam*, (Esposito, J. L., ed.). New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 644-45.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) and Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) in South Asia.<sup>8</sup>

## KHAN AND 'ABDUH: CONTEMPORARY SCHOLARS

The life and thought of the above-mentioned modernists are important because of their keen interest to rescue the Muslim life from decline and to respond positively to the challenge of colonialism. Their reforms have been beneficial to contemporary Muslims societies because they insisted that education was the way to reform Muslim society. In what follows, I will provide brief biographies of these two personalities.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan, the most prominent early leader of the modernization movement among Indian Muslims, was noted especially for his advocacy of social and educational reforms. He came from a noble family and was brought up in his grandfather's house, as his father had died early. He did not receive a traditional madrasah (seminary) education but studied the Qur'an in Arabic and Persian classics. As an employee in the British colonial judiciary, he was greatly affected by the failed struggle for independence of (1857). Ahmad Khan became active in analysing both the causes of the revolt and the reasons for what many perceived as the backwardness of Muslims in scientific and social fields. He concluded that a program of education that incorporated both modern subjects and a respect for Islamic values could address the needs of Muslims.

In 1875, Khan established the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh in North India, offering English-medium higher education. His journal *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq* (Refinement of Morals) was a showcase of modernist thought featuring his articles and those of like-minded supporters. Prevalent themes in his writing include 'demythologized' Qur'anic interpretation,

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<sup>8</sup>. See Richard C. Martin, Said Amir, and Marcia Hermansen (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, New York: Macmillan, 2003.

presenting the sacred text to be in harmony with science and reason, criticism of hadith (sayings of the Prophet), and calls for renewed *ijtihad* (independent reasoning and interpretation). In the passage that follows, Sir Sayyid was knighted in 1888 by the British Empire- presented the case for renewed Islamic theology, capable of assuring an appropriately scientific and rational understanding of religious truth.<sup>9</sup>

In order to know more about Khan's life, it is important to note that from 1859 until his death in 1898 he came to be more and more preoccupied with the problems of Muslim education in India. In 1868, he adopted a westernized way of living, developed cordial social contacts with British officialdom and visited England in 1869-70. In 1876, he retired to devote his time entirely to the institution of modern education that he was developing at Aligarh<sup>10</sup> and his concern was the survival of Muslim community in India. He protested against the Muslim traditionalists who dismissed the British as enemies of Islam and the British who regarded the Muslims as politically, militarily, and economically marginal and incapacitated because of their allegiance to Islam. This showed that Khan's mission was the betterment of the Muslim societies in order to produce intellectuals who could respond to the challenges of modern life. Despite his contribution to Muslim society, he encountered much criticism from Muslims who were anti-colonial and who rejected most of his modernist ideas and thought patterns because of his connection with the British.

Muhammad 'Abduh was one of the most prominent figures of Islam in the context of the history of Islam in Egypt. Born to a peasant family of modest means in the Egyptian Delta, he received a modernist traditional Islamic education in his hometown. He continued his education at the celebrated al-Azhar

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<sup>9</sup>. Aziz Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 31-32.

<sup>10</sup>. *ibid.*

seminary. During Afghani's sojourn in Egypt (1871-1879), 'Abduh became closely associated with him and his reformist ideas. In 1882, he joined Afghani in Paris, where they produced the famed journal of *al-Urwa al-Wusqa* (the strongest Link), which agitated against imperialism and called for Islamic reform and unity. 'Abduh returned to Beirut, where he taught for several years before being pardoned by the Egyptian ruler. Returning to Egypt, he served as a judge and then as one of Egypt's leading religious officials, an al-Azhar administrative board member and as Egypt's Legislative Council member. 'Abduh devised programs for the reform of the educational system, the Arabic language and the education of girls. He laboured to introduce reforms in al-Azhar, the religious endowment administration and the court system. 'Abduh's influence extended beyond Egypt, inspiring reformists throughout the Islamic world.<sup>11</sup>

'Abduh was instrumental in the development of the intellectual and social reformist dimensions of Islamic modernism. He taught the compatibility of revelation and reason, condemned the blind following of tradition (*taqlid*), and championed the legitimacy of and the need for the reinterpretation of Islam to respond to the demands of modern life. 'Abduh worked to reform the *ulama* and, in particular, the curriculum of al-Azhar University and the religious courts. He provided a rationale for the reform of Islamic Law, arguing that while laws concerned with the worship of Allah were immutable, Islam's social legislation was capable of substantive change.<sup>12</sup>

It should be noted that 'Abduh's central approach to Western thought was the selective adaptation of the best it had to offer. He

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<sup>11</sup>. Muhammad 'Abduh, *Laws Should Change in Accordance with the Conditions of Nations* and C. Kurzmana, *The Theology of Unity*. See *Modernist Islam* (1840-1940), United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2002.

[https://books.google.com.ng/books/about/Modernist\\_Islam\\_1840\\_html?id,](https://books.google.com.ng/books/about/Modernist_Islam_1840_html?id,) p. 3. (Retrieved on 10 January 2014).

<sup>12</sup>. op. cit., Esposito, 1992, p. 57.

advocated the idea of modernity for the progress and strength of Muslim societies from their backwardness due to the unavailability of Muslim intellectuals who could reinterpret Islam based on rationalism in order to respond to the challenges of modern life. Hence, he laid down his modern ideal based on rationalism, liberalism, nationalism, and universalism in Islam. For him, Islam was a comprehensive way of life, which encompassed different aspects of life. Hence, Islam was compatible with the data of reason.

### CONTRIBUTION TO EDUCATION

As already stated, both the above-mentioned modernists were concerned with education as an ultimate goal for the reform of Muslim society. Hence, the two scholars believed that the independent interpretation of Islam (*ijtihad*) was not only confined to selective individuals but was meant for all Muslims in order to confront the challenges of modern life. Most of their writings expressed their special interest to produce a new generation of Muslim leaders through educational reforms. Thus, before going into further detail regarding their contribution to education, it is necessary to highlight their views on *ijtihad*.

### KHAN'S VIEW ON IJTIHAD

Khan argued that the survival of Islam depended on the rejection of the unquestioned acceptance (*taqlid*) of medieval interpretations of Islam and the exercise of *ijtihad* in order to produce a fresh interpretation, which would have relevance and validity for modern life. On the one hand, he placed himself within the revivalist tradition of Shah Wali Allah by maintaining that a return to pristine Islam necessitated purifying Islam of many of the teachings and interpretations of the *ulema*. On the other hand, Khan differed with Shah Wali Allah and other eighteenth-century revivalists because of his method. His exercise of *ijtihad* was not simply to use reason to get back to the original



interpretations of Islam, which had been obscured by scholasticism (*ulema*), but to reinterpret Islam in the light of its revealed sources. It should, however, be noted that the extent of his use of reason, the degree to which he reinterpreted Islam and his borrowing from the West marked him off from revivalists of the previous century.<sup>13</sup>

Khan's argument was that where there was a conflict between the Qur'an and reason, reason should prevail. This argument lacked any ground in Islam because it contradicted the authentic teachings of Islam; hence nature is the sign, which testifies the existence of Almighty Allah and shows the metaphysical evidence of the existence of Allah. Thus, in an attempt to introduce new sciences, someone should not say that reason prevails over the text (*Al Qur'an*). Allah promised that He would protect the Qur'an from any corruption and falsehood before and after it was revealed.

The Qur'an, therefore, is a complete message from Allah, which is not in need of addition or subtraction because nothing has been left without the needed explanation. Khan's emphasis was that the Qur'anic text, which contained miraculous or supernatural language, could not be interpreted metaphorically or allegorically. This was the practice of those who had doubt in their mind. By trying to interpret something unknown or ambiguous, they were causing *fitnah*.<sup>14</sup>

Islam forbids anyone to interpret the Qur'an from selfish desire or on the basis of allegory. The Prophet (PBUH) strongly warned against such practices. Therefore, without any guidance or knowledge of Qur'anic exegesis, it was totally forbidden. In line with this statement, the Prophet (PBUH) says, "Whoever says something in matters of the Qur'an with his own desires, let him find his place in the Hell Fire." On the basis of this hadith, Muslim

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<sup>13</sup>. *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup>. For more details on this issue, refer to the Qur'an, *Surah al-Imran* (3:7).

scholars like Ibn Taymiyyah emphasized that to interpret the Qur'an without the knowledge of exegesis was to invite condemnation by this *Hadith*<sup>15</sup>.

Similarly, the traditional *ulama* criticized Khan on his argument that the Qur'an could be interpreted allegorically or metaphorically. It was for this reason that some Muslims, particularly those who were anti-colonialist, had never agreed with his reformist thought despite the contribution that he had made to Muslim society. Besides, Khan relied almost exclusively on the Qur'an for his interpretation of Islam. Since he was not a scriptural literalist, he interpreted the Qur'an on the basis of rationalism. Carl Brown, a political scientist, pointed out that Khan insisted that Islam was 'completely compatible with reason and with nature. This meant that any supernatural events in religion, even the Qur'an, could be correctly interpreted allegorically or psychologically. In short, since he was very much a 19<sup>th</sup> -century advocate of science and positivism, Khan's ideas ran afoul of the traditional *ulema*.<sup>16</sup>

Khan argued that it was only through practicing *ijtihad* that Muslims would confront the challenges of modern life. As stated earlier, his views on the interpretation of some Islamic issues contradicted the mainstream Islamic teaching. It is important to note that the above explanation is not meant to condemn Ahmad Khan's views but rather to expose unacceptable errors. Ahmad Khan needs to be understood for his effort to free Muslim society from European colonialism despite his care to remain loyal to the British.

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<sup>15</sup>. See *al-Tibyan Fi 'Ulum al'Qur'an* by Aliyu al-Sabuyyni.

<sup>16</sup>. Retrieved from 'www.voices of a new *ijtihad*', Centre for Dialogue, New York University. Accessed on February 10, 2019.

### 'ABDUH'S VIEW ON *IJTIHAD*

'Abduh was convinced that independent interpretation (*ijtihad*) on the basis of the sources of Islam while rejecting blind imitation (*taqlid*) was the only way to achieve the transformation and to restore the unity of Muslim society. It should, however, be noted that the basis for 'Abduh's reformist thought was his belief that religion and reason were complementary and that there was no inherent contradiction between religion and science which he regarded as the twin sources of Islam. The basis of the Muslim decline was the prevalence of un-Islamic popular religious beliefs and practices such as saint worship, intercession and miracles and the emergence of creativity and dynamism due to Sufi passivity and fatalism as well as the rigid scholasticism of the traditionalist *ulama*, who had forbidden fresh religious interpretation.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, his critique was like a double edged sword but his intention was to reform Islam in the context of the development of thought and scientific progress in the contemporary world. Islam did not need be over protected as it has its own inner strength. He wanted to re-equip Muslims to face modernity and its challenges.

Based on the above presentation of their views, it may seem that Khan's use of reason contradicted the views of his modernist contemporaries, particularly the views of 'Abduh, because Khan's use of reason was far more rationalist than that of 'Abduh, who believed that there was no fundamental contradiction between religion and science. While 'Abduh believed that religion and reason functioned on two different levels or spheres, Khan was influenced by nineteenth-century European rationalism and natural philosophy, much of which he regarded as consonant with the rationalist principles of the *Mut'azilah* and ibn Rushd (Averroes), who believed that Islam was the religion of reason and nature. There could be no contradiction between the word of God (*Verbum Dei*) and the work of God (*Opus*

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<sup>17</sup>. op. cit., Esposito, 1998, p. 130.

*Dei/nature*): 'If that religion is in conformity with human nature ... then it is true.' Khan said that Islam was in total harmony with the laws of nature and was, therefore, compatible with modern scientific thought. Reason and the laws of nature governed Khan's interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunna and his treatment of such questions as evolution, miracles and the existence of angels. Khan believed that the Qur'an was the final authority in practice but his rationalist approach meant that where a seeming conflict existed between text and reason, reason prevailed.<sup>18</sup>

### KHAN'S VIEWS ON EDUCATION

There is no doubt that Khan made an important contribution to educational reform through the spread of modern education and rationalist thought among the Muslim elite in India. His approach to Islamic reform was both theoretical and practical. In addition to his prolific writings, which included a multivolume commentary on the Qur'an, he stressed the need for the practical implementation of educational reform by suggesting the following efforts:<sup>19</sup>

- To create an atmosphere of mutual understanding between the British government and the Muslims.
- To persuade Muslims to abstain from the politics of agitation.
- To produce an intellectual class from among the Muslim community.

It is interesting to note that, although Aligarh Muslim University was modelled on Cambridge University, it soon assumed a form and personality of its own. Meant primarily for Muslims, it was interdenominational, offering theological education to Sunni as well as Shi'i as well as welcoming a fair percentage of Hindu students. It aimed at the liberation of ideas, broad humanism, a

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<sup>18</sup>. *ibid.* p. 135.

<sup>19</sup>. *ibid.* p. 136.

scientific worldview, and a pragmatic approach to politics. It strove for a steady increase of educated Muslims in the government services. It smoothed the transition of the younger generation of Muslim elite from almost medieval conservatism to at least superficial modernism. It was to produce the leadership for Muslim political separatism in India, as a counter-balance to the growing influence of the Indian National congress.<sup>20</sup>

In 1886, Khan had also founded the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental Educational Conference for the general promotion of Western education in Muslim India and the promotion of Urdu as a secondary language in all government and private schools. In addition, to emphasize the necessity for educating women as essential for the balanced intellectual development of future generations and to formulate a policy for the higher education of Muslim students in Europe, who were discouraged from marrying abroad in order that they should remain involved in the problems of their own land of origin.<sup>21</sup>

John Esposito writes that Khan combined theory with practice, seeking to implement his ideas and to train a new generation of Muslim leaders. His prolific writing was accompanied by his leadership in many educational reforms. He founded a translation society (in which he translated some of the Qur'anic verses based on rationality as clearly discussed in his *Tahzib al-akhlaq*) in order to make western thought more accessible. He also promoted Muslim journals and set up Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College (Aligarh Muslim University), which was modelled on Cambridge University.<sup>22</sup>

Khan's educational programme, which was to change the intellectual, political, and economic destiny of Muslim India, had its humble beginnings in the critical year of 1859. From that date

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<sup>20</sup>. Aziz Ahmad, p. 37.

<sup>21</sup>. *ibid.* pp. 37-38.

<sup>22</sup>. *op. cit.*, Esposito, 1999, pp. 644-45, 47 and 49.

onwards, the use of English as the medium of instruction was one of the main planks of his programme. In 1864, he founded a scientific society for the introduction of Western sciences primarily among Muslims in India. The society translated works on physical sciences into Urdu and published a bilingual journal. In addition, he founded a modern school at Ghazipur and in 1868 promoted the formation of educational committees in several districts of Northern India.<sup>23</sup>

### MAJOR WORKS BY KHAN

In an attempt to explain the contributions of Khan to education, mention should be made of his major works on modernity. It is through these works that he described his views on modernity and his mission for the survival of the Muslim community in India. His three works on the uprising of 1857 are:

- *History of the Mutiny in Bijnor* (1858)
- *Causes of the Indian Mutiny* (1858)
- *Loyal Muhammadans of India* (1860)

According to Aziz Ahmad, the above-mentioned works are indispensable source material for any serious study of the contemporary context.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Khan's journal *Tahzib al-Akhlaq* (refinement of morals), named after the famous ethical treatise of ibn Miskawah, but apparently modeled on Addison and Steele's *Spectator* and *Tattler*, published articles on a wide range of subjects from public hygiene to rational speculation and gave the Urdu language the capacity to convey novel intellectual concepts. Through its critical pages, modernism emerged as a potent force in India and considerably changed the course and the direction of Islam.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>. *ibid.* p. 37.

<sup>24</sup>. *op. cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>25</sup>. *ibid.* p. 38.

## 'ABDUH'S VIEWS ON EDUCATION

In order to discuss the contribution of 'Abduh to education, we could begin by noting the changes he introduced to the curriculum of al-Azhar University and the wisdom of the articles in his journal (*al-Urwa al-Wusqa*) and the knowledge contained in his commentary on the Qur'an (*Tafsir al-Manar*). The following questions could be asked: What did 'Abduh want to achieve by changing the curriculum of al-Azhar? What was the main purpose of his journal *al-Urwa al-Wusqa*, and what were the main ideas contained in it? Did his *Tafsir al-Manar* express contemporary Islamic thought?

'Abduh believed that the key to rejuvenating Egyptian society lay in the reform of the Islamic educational system, starting with al-Azhar, which was the leading centre of Islamic learning in the world at the time. Al-Azhar trained and graduated Muslim scholars, judges, teachers, and preachers for Egypt and beyond and was the seat of religious knowledge, authority, and orthodoxy. 'Abduh regarded the reform of al-Azhar and the revival of religion as two features of the same activity. The reform of al-Azhar, he once remarked, 'would be the greatest service to Islam; its reform signifies the reform of all Muslims as its decadence is a clear sign of their depravity. It is also necessary because reordering religion in the light of modern conditions is an impossible task without reorganizing and restructuring the site of religious power that defined and authorized what was Islamic and what was orthodox.'<sup>26</sup>

Without going further into the situation of al-Azhar, it is clear that 'Abduh suffered a lot from Muslim traditionalists who held that *taqlid* was the only way to refute the idea of colonialism and European domination. 'Abduh totally rejected the idea of *taqlid* because he felt that *taqlid* was what had led to the 'Muslim

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<sup>26</sup> Samira Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition: Reform, Rationality and Modernity* California: Stanford University Press, 2009, p. 99.

conservatism' in science and technology as well as to the decline of Islam. The followings was the curriculum of al-Azhar before 'Abduh's time:

- Philosophy, jurisprudence, and Sufi orders
- Islamic logic, rhetoric and astronomy.

No secular subjects like history or algebra were allowed nor were any of the modern sciences as they were considered worldly subjects that could turn students away from the study of religion.<sup>27</sup>

When 'Abduh was put in charge of reforming al-Azhar in the 1890s, he was aware that reforms should be affected gradually and with the support of influential *'ulama* from within the institution itself. This sort of reform, he often stated, had to be implemented from below and from within in order to be effective and successful. Although he truly distrusted the efficacy of the use of power, he did on occasion have to resort to its use. In this particular case, however, as quoted by Rashid Rida, his biographer and most trusted friend, 'Abduh did not trust the Khedive, the British administration. Least of all did he trust the old-guard at al-Azhar. He accused them of corruption as well as of the abuse of power to serve their own selfish interests. In his own words:

I intend to reform al-Azhar by convincing the Muslim scholars in charge of the institution of the need for change and not through the powerful hand of the government and its laws. There really is little difference between the corrupt rules that govern al-Azhar and the present government, whose rules are passed by a dictator, the Khedive himself. I would not call on or let a foreign hand infiltrate this institution. I will not permit the government

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<sup>27</sup>. *ibid.* p. 100.



interceding in matters relating to this institution since this government itself is run by a foreign power.<sup>28</sup>

Many reforms were introduced immediately after 'Abduh took over. The first measure toward its centralization was the creation of an administrative council (*majlis idarat al-Azhar*) made up of three selected Azhari scholars and two outside officials (one was 'Abduh himself and the other a friend of his, 'Abdel Karim Salman). The council was to meet twice a month to discuss and recommend measures regarding all affairs relating to the institution, both administrative and pedagogical. At the time that this council was set up,

Hassuna al-Nawawi, a renowned Hanafi scholar open to the idea of reform, was appointed as rector of al-Azhar. In 1895, to boost the power of the council, al-Nawawi was then appointed the chairman.<sup>29</sup> Briefly summarized, the most important measures considered by the council were the following:

- Rectifying the huge discrepancy in wages by regulating the salaries of teachers and staff on the basis of qualification, merit, and length of service.
- Restructuring al-Azhar's principal source of income, namely, the religious endowment funds, which resulted in a quadrupling of its revenues.
- Rearranging of the curricula and method of teaching, which required that all students take courses in the core subjects (*'ulum al-makasid*) of *tawhid*, *tafsir*, *fiqh*, *Usul al-fiqh*, and *akhlaq* (morals) and in instrumental linguistic subjects (*wasa'il*) that included algebra and arithmetic.

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<sup>28</sup>. *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup>. *ibid.*

- Secular subjects such as history, geography, philosophy, social economy, and natural sciences were also introduced in the form of electives. To secure a diploma, students were required to pass an examination in all core subjects and some of the electives. The new curriculum was intended to discourage students from studying extensive glosses and commentaries and commended the acquisition of the essentials of religious sciences, stressing the importance of cultivating moral character.
- Creation of a library with branches in the various departments of the university and in the main mosques of Cairo, Alexandria and in the other towns and villages of Egypt where preparatory schools were set up.<sup>30</sup>

It was mentioned earlier that ‘Abduh worked to reform the *ulama*, in particular, the curriculum of al-Azhar University. His passion for reform had begun to develop at Ahmadi Mosque, Tanta and Jami’al al-Azhar, Cairo. The encounter with the conservative system of learning inspired him to undertake reform and embark on transforming the obsolete curricula where ‘the students were to read texts, their commentaries, the glosses on the commentaries and the super glosses on the glosses,’<sup>31</sup> without critical analysis and comprehension. He introduced ground-breaking initiatives to systematize the syllabus and method of teaching and learning and he was ready to compete with the style of Western education by observing ethical and moral discipline and by including science, philosophy, history and other classical literary studies in the curriculum. ‘Abduh’s strategic focus to undertake change at al-Azhar was highlighted by Yvonne Haddad in her recent article on ‘Abduh’s reform program in which she wrote:

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<sup>30</sup>. *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup>. Ahmad N. Amir, Abdi O. Shuriye, Ahmad F. Ismail, ‘Muhammad Abduh’s Contributions to Modernity’, *Asian Journal of Management Sciences and Education*, Vol. 1, No. 1, April 2012.

'Abduh's first experience with learning by rote, memorizing texts and commentaries and laws for which he was given no tools of understanding, was formative in his later commitment to a thoroughgoing reform of the Egyptian educational system.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, in his letter to his European compatriot, 'Abduh criticized the educational policy introduced by the Egyptian government, which was administered by the British. He tried to initiate reform and transform the whole structure of curricula and fees as well to provide the basic necessities of schools teachers. He emphasized the need to uplift the standard of al-Azhar and asked the British to make Egypt a strong and liberal nation. He wrote:

The Egyptian government spends only two hundred thousand Egyptian pounds on education out of an income of twelve million pounds. It also keeps raising schools fees to the point where education is becoming a luxury that ornaments a few rich homes ... There are only three schools for higher education in Egypt: the schools of law, medicine, and engineering. The other components of human knowledge are denied to the Egyptian who is only superficially exposed to some of them in secondary schools ... The government plan seems to be firstly, to assist primary schools where reading and writing are taught. Secondly, to reduce the spread of education in the country as much as possible. Thirdly, to limit secondary and higher education to very narrow circles ... I do not see what the British will gain from this. On the contrary, it should be in the interest of the British to have a strong and free nation in Egypt. The more wealthy we are, the richer the source they can draw upon.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>. *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>. Imarah Muhammad, *Al-A'mal al-Kamilah* (Complete Works of Muhammad 'Abduh), Vol. 3, Beirut: n.p. and Khoury, Nabil Abdo, "Islam and Modernization

The above clearly shows the curriculum that was proposed by 'Abduh in his efforts to respond to the conservatives. 'Abduh proposed such changes so that al-Azhar would produce students who could respond to the challenges of modern life. Furthermore, in his journal *al-Urwa al-Wusqa*, 'Abduh advocated the introduction of modern and local sciences into Al-Azhar. He described the kind of prejudice against modern sciences among the administration of Al-Azhar and related that Al-Ghazali and others had considered the study of logic and similar disciplines obligatory for the defence of Islam.<sup>34</sup> He also wrote that new and useful sciences were essential for our life in this age and were our defence against aggression and humiliation and the strong base for our happiness, wealth and strength. In his words: 'We must acquire these sciences and we must strive for their mastery.'<sup>35</sup> However, his commentary on the Qur'an (*Tafsir al-Manar*) contains Islamic thought that was influenced by other, contemporary thinkers.

'Abduh's contribution to educational reform includes his ideas regarding the distinction between laws that are subject to change and those that are not. He sought to provide an Islamic rationale for the selective integration of modern ideas and institutions into Islam. He distinguished between Islam's inner core or fundamentals, consisting of those truths and principles which were unchanging as well as other levels of Islam, which were concerned with society's application of the immutable principles and values of Islam to the changing needs of each age. Hence, he maintained that while regulations of Islamic law governing worship (*ibadat*), such as prayer, fasting, pilgrimage were immutable, the vast majority of regulations concerned with social

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in the Middle East: Muhammad 'Abduh, An Ideology of Development" (Unpublished PhD Thesis, State University of New York, Albany, 1976).

<sup>34</sup>. Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905).

Retrieved from <http://www.cisca.org/voices/a/abduh-mn.htm> on January 10, 2014.

<sup>35</sup>. *ibid.*

affairs (*mu'amalat*), such as penal, commercial, and family laws were open to change.<sup>36</sup> This is equivalent to the ideas of Ibn Khaldun's on rationalism, according to which each person can decide on the right action.<sup>37</sup>

'Abduh believed that the crisis of modern Islam was precipitated by the failure of Muslims to uphold the distinction between the immutable and the mutable, the necessary and the contingent. 'Abduh followed this approach in carrying out reform in law, theology and education. His reformist ideas were incorporated into the legal rulings set forth in a journal, *al-Manar* ('The Beacon' or 'Lighthouse'), which he published together with his protégé, Rashid Rida. 'Abduh followed the Maliki law school's principle of public welfare and gave fatwas that touched on many issues including Bank interest and the status of women in Islam.<sup>38</sup>

#### MAJOR WORKS OF 'ABDUH

- *Tafsir Surat al-Asr*, (1903), Cairo.
- *Tafsir Juz' Amma*, (1904), al-Matb. Al- Amiriyya, Cairo.
- *Tafsir Manar*, (1924), 12 volumes.
- *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Hakim al-Mustahir bi Tafsir al-Manar*, (1954-1961), 12 volumes with indexes, Cairo.
- *Fatihah al-Kitab, Tafsir al-Ustadh al-Imam . . . Kitab al-Tahrir*, (91382) Cairo.
- *The Theology of Unity*, (1966), (trans.), Ishaq Mas'ud and Kenneth Cragg, London.
- *Durus min al-Qur'an*, (no date), (ed.), Tahir al-Tanaka, Dar al-Hilal, Cairo.

'Abduh's ideas were met with great enthusiasm but also with tenacious opposition. They are still a subject of contention today,

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<sup>36</sup>. op. cit., Esposito, 1998, p. 132.

<sup>37</sup>. 'Ibn Khaldun's Social Structure Analysis', *Indian Journal of Applied Research*, Vol. 4 (3), March 2014.

<sup>38</sup>. op. cit., Esposito, 1998, p. 131.

nearly 80 years after his death, as questions of modernism and tradition have re-emerged in the Muslim world. Although he did not achieve his goals, 'Abduh remains a continuing influence and his work, *Risalat al-Tauhid* (The Theology of Unity), is the most important statement of his thought.<sup>39</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muhammad 'Abduh, who came from different continents, played a significant role not only in introducing the Muslims in their own countries to the challenge of modernity but the entire Muslim community as well. Both scholars adopted *ijtihad* as the mechanism for solving religious issues facing the Muslim *ummah*. They firmly believed that each individual Muslim was allowed to resort to *ijtihad* to improve their religious, social, economic and political life. Moreover, no effort to reform Muslim society could be successful without promoting education for all. Both Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muhammad 'Abduh totally rejected the idea of *taqlid*, because in their view it was one of the major reasons for the stagnation of Muslim society.

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muhammad 'Abduh were prominent scholars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who exposed the hidden agenda of Western society. They supported the idea of modernity, which required Muslims to understand Islam with the aid of reason because they saw no contradiction between the Qur'an, science and reason. Allah had called upon human beings to use their intellect to understand the universe. Furthermore, Muslims were asked to use their faculty of reason to reject conservative or traditionalist ideas, which were opposed to the values of modernity. Despite the fact that Ahmad Khan accepted the Qur'an as the final authority in Islam, his rationalist philosophy meant that reason would prevail in case of an apparent conflict between the sacred text and reason. For 'Abduh,

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<sup>39</sup>. <http://www.cis-ca.org/voices/a/abduh-mn>

on the other hand, science and reason were complementary to the Qur'an and so there was no need for reason to prevail over the Qur'an. For 'Abduh, modernity should always be seen through the lens of Islam. Hence, whenever a conflict between reason and the Qur'an appeared, the ultimate authority would be the Qur'an.

These two outstanding figures of the 19<sup>th</sup> century built a solid foundation for the understanding of modernity from the perspective of Islam and they convinced thousands of Muslims never to adopt ideas that would contradict the teachings of Islam. However, they also held that it was irrational for an educated Muslim to totally disregard Western thought and values. Differences of opinion regarding religious beliefs and practices should never be used as a mechanism to reject the ideas of others. Instead, Muslims should use their intellect to examine Western ideas and values and to accept those that did not contradict the pristine teachings of Islam. However, Muslims should reject those ideas that went against the basic teaching of Islam. Justice should be done to everyone, regardless of differences of thought, religion and nationality. According to these two great scholars, Islam would become a universally respected religion if Muslims followed these basic precepts.

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