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Muhammad ‘Abduh’s Conception of Religion in His Risālat al-Tawhīd

Muhammed Abduh'un Risāletü't-Tevhīd'inde Din Anlayışı

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ÖZET

Bu makale, on dokuzuncu yüzyılda Avrupa’da ortaya çıkan düşünce akımlarının özellikle de pozitivistimin Muhammed Abduh’un din anlayışını nasıl etkilediğini incelemektedir. Çağdaş İslam düşüncesi literatüründe kimi zaman bir selefi kimi zaman da bir reformcu olarak çizilen Abduh portresi onun uzlaştırma çabasını ortaya koymuş olsa da pozitivistimle kurduğu entelektüel ilişki yeterince araştırılmamıştır. Bu araştırma, Abduh’un ne pozitivistimi benimsediğini ne de bütünüyle reddettiğini; seçici bir üslupla *Risâletü’-t-Tevhîd* adlı kelim eserinde pozitivist ilerleme düşüncesinin belirli unsurlarını din anlayışına entegre ettiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Abduh, pozitivist fikirlerle Avrupa kolonyalizminin Osmanlı ve Mısır coğrafyasına nüfuz ettiği bir dönemde karşılaşmıştır. Bununla birlikte, Comte’un “üç hâl kanunu”nu pozitivist şemadan farklı bir şekilde İslamî perspektiften yorumlayarak, ilâhî dinlerin ilk aşamaları olan Yahudilik ve Hristiyanlıktan sonraki en ileri aşamada yer alan İslam’ın entelektüel olarak en rasyonel dini temsil ettiğini ileri sürmüştür. *Risâletü’-t-Tevhîd*’de İslâm’ı akıl ve bilim ile uyumlu bir din olarak tasvir etmiştir. Abduh ile Comte’un dine yaklaşımlarını analiz eden bu makale Abduh’u modernite ile gelenek arasındaki gerilimde yol alan kritik bir figür olarak konumlandırmaktadır. Bu bağlamda hocası Cemaleddin el-Afgânî, Abduh’un entelektüel gelişiminde etkisi olan önemli bir isimdir. Abduh’un, bilimsel rasyonalizmle ilişki kurabilen ancak sekülerliğe teslim olmayan yeni ilm-i kelam inşası, modern İslam düşüncesinin kendine özgü bir yapısının oluşmasına katkıda bulunmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Abduh, Din, *Risâletü’-t-Tevhîd*, Selefilik, Pozitivistim.

ABSTRACT

This research examines Muḥammad ‘Abduh’s encounter with nineteenth-century European scientific rationalism, focusing particularly on the positivist thought of Auguste Comte. In contemporary Islamic thought literature, ‘Abduh is sometimes portrayed as a salafī and sometimes as a reformer; however, while his efforts for reconciliation are evident, his engagement with Positivism has not been sufficiently explored. This article argues that ‘Abduh neither adopted Positivism uncritically nor rejected it outright; rather, he developed a distinctive intellectual strategy of selective appropriation, integrating certain positivist idea of social progress into a theologically grounded framework shaped by *Risālat al-Tawḥīd*, his reformist theological work. ‘Abduh encountered positivist ideas at a moment when European colonialism was penetrating the Ottoman and Egypt territories. However, ‘Abduh integrated Comte’s “law of three stages” to monotheistic religions representing Judaism and Christianity as primitive stages of intellectual development which constituted the highest and most rational expression of human understanding. In *Risālat al-Tawḥīd*, he portrayed Islam as a religion uniquely compatible with reason and scientific inquiry, thereby countering positivist narratives of inevitable secularization. By analyzing ‘Abduh’s and Comte’s approaches to religion, this article situates ‘Abduh as a key figure navigating the tension between scientific modernity and religious tradition. In this context, his master Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī is a critical character who influenced ‘Abduh’s intellectual personality. His construction of a new science of kalām which is capable of engaging scientific rationality without surrendering to secularism, contributed to shaping a distinctive trajectory of Islamic modernism.

Keywords: ‘Abduh, Religion, *Risālat al-Tawḥīd*, Salafism, Positivism.

INTRODUCTION ¹

Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905) is mostly considered a modernist or reformist Muslim thinker as opposed to being traditionalist or conservative. However, it is not easy to categorize him as his works include signs of both modern and traditional genealogies. Although many researchers, such as Albert Hourani, present ‘Abduh both a modernist and a fundamentalist thinker, he cannot be considered a fundamentalist such as Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb. Nevertheless, Samira Haj compares ‘Abduh with ‘Abd al-Wahhāb and considers ‘Abduh as “neither a traditionalist nor a liberal, but as a Muslim reformer who was critical of both traditionalist religious authority and colonial modernity”.² Besides, Bernard Haykel mentions that the reformist tradition, which ‘Abduh belongs, is sometimes referred as ‘enlightened salafism’ as he distinguishes it from traditional salafism.³ Similarly, Sait Ozerverli evaluates ‘Abduh as a reviver of “Salafī rationalism” in his study on the new approaches to *kalām*.⁴ Further, Itzchak Weismann defines the tradition of synthesis between ‘*ulamā* and Sūfīs in the post-Ghazālī period as “the reformist middle way”⁵ in which we can read ‘Abduh too. In this paper, I look at ‘Abduh’s *Risālat al-Tawhīd* (Theology of Unity), published in 1897, from Haj’s and Weismann’s perspective as I discuss his position on the concept of religion.

Muhammad ‘Abduh: A Renewer in the 19th century Cairo

Muhammad ‘Abduh, born in Egypt in 1849, is an important figure in the contemporary Islamic thought. Though it was officially part of the Ottoman Empire, Egypt gained a near-autonomous status under the rule of Muhammad ‘Ali (d. 1849) who emerged as a military leader after Napoleon’s invasion in 1798. This was a high period of reform and transformation in both the Ottoman Empire and Egypt. Thus, ‘Abduh joined struggles to reconcile European modern science with traditional Islamic knowledge.

¹ This article is an expanded version of a paper titled “Muhammad Abduh’s Approach to History of Religions” presented at MESA’s 48th Annual Meeting in Washington DC on November 24, 2014.

² Samira Haj, *Reconfirming Islamic Tradition* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009), 71.

³ Bernard Haykel, “On the Nature of Salafī Thought and Action”, *Global Salafism Islam’s New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 35.

⁴ M. Sait Ozerverli, “Theology in the Ottoman Lands”, Sabine Schmidtke (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, (Oxford Academic, 2016), 14.

⁵ Itzchak Weismann, “Between Sūfī Reformism and Modernist Rationalism: A Reappraisal of the Origins of the Salafīyya from the Damascene Angle”, *Die Welt des Islams*, New Series, 41/ 2 (July 2001), 206-237.

Two figures influenced him in ‘Abduh’s life. First Sheikh Darwīsh who encouraged him to pursue knowledge of true belief. He learned logic, philosophy, and mystical theology from that shaykh while he was in Tanta. Second, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, with whom he met when he was studying at the University of al-Azhar during al-Afghānī’s stay in Egypt. ‘Abduh joined his informal classes in his house studying the *Ishārāt* of Ibn Sīnā. Although a disciple of al-Afghānī, ‘Abduh was a more systematic thinker than his guide, according to Hourani.⁶

‘Abduh was exiled from Egypt due to his activities in the ‘Urābī Pasha revolt (1881-1882) against British colony. In 1884, he went to Paris and there together with al-Afghānī they published *al-‘Urwat al-Wuthqa* (The Firmest Bond), a pioneering newspaper. Then, he went to Beirut and gave Islamic theology (*Tawhīd*) lectures in a school. Based on these lectures he composed *Risālat al-Tawhīd*. In 1888 ‘Abduh was allowed to return to Cairo and in 1899 he became Mufti of Egypt. He was the master of Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, who was also a leading figure of modern Salafism. Riḍā and ‘Abduh published *al-Manār* (The Lighthouse), a monthly journal on Qur’anic exegesis.⁷

‘Abduh’s Relationship with Modern Western Ideologies

Ottoman scholars gave different responses to European philosophies such as positivism, materialism, and naturalism that were introduced into the Islamic world in the nineteenth century.⁸ Since the nineteenth century, Muslim intellectuals believed in the superiority of European civilization and thought. According to the account of Hourani, Muḥammad ‘Abduh was an admirer of modern Europe. He read the European thought of his age and was influenced by the nineteenth century French thinkers, such as Auguste Comte (1798-1857) who aims to extend rational methods of natural sciences to society.⁹ In my opinion, ‘Abduh came into contact with his contemporary European thinkers, however he was a critique rather than a follower of European civilization. For Hourani, ‘Abduh’s purpose was to show that Islam contained in itself the potentialities of a rational religion, social science and moral code which could serve as the basis of modern life. Thus, he argues

⁶ Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 130.

⁷ Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 134-5.

⁸ Talha Komay, “Son Dönem Osmanlı Alimlerine Göre İnkâr Nedenleri”, *Genç Mütefekkirler Dergisi* 6/1 (2025), 23.

⁹ Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 137-8.

that the principles of Islam can be reconciled with modern secular thought.¹⁰ It is true that he tried to show the rational side of Islam, which is appropriate with modern society. In his article on “Islam and Christianity”, in which he answers Farah Antun’s arguments for secularism, ‘Abduh emphasizes that reasoning and thinking about the cosmos necessarily lead to existence of the Creator.¹¹ He presents that logical reasoning (*al-naẓar al-‘aqlī*) in order to attain belief as the first principle of Islam.¹² David D. Commins sees ‘Abduh’s rationalization as a defense against secularists in his book on Islamic reform. However, he notes that there was a rational tradition in Islamic civilization itself beginning from the ninth century onwards.¹³

‘Abduh’s Conception of *Tawhīd* and the Salafism

While maintaining to use reason, Muḥammad ‘Abduh argues for a return to righteous forefathers and the fundamentals of Islam, i.e. the Qur’ān and the Sunnah. Because of this ‘Abduh has been seen as a representative of modern *salafī* movement. However, ‘Abduh conceives *salaf* as being rational, since they used logical methods and principles. This is different from Wahhābī understanding of *salaf*. In fact, emerging in the eighteenth century, Wahhabism became one of the revivalist movements of the nineteenth century. These movements argued that the reason for backwardness of Muslim societies is that they have strayed from the correct practices and understanding of the first generation of Islam. So, they criticized Westernization movement. Muḥammad ‘Abduh was against Westernization only regarding matters that were in conflict with religion. ‘Abduh says that after the time of the prophets, religion fell into the hands of those who could not understand it or lapsed into extremism.¹⁴ Wahhabis at the time were also opposed to new scientific works and technology.¹⁵ Conversely, ‘Abduh was in favor of Western science and technology.

The founder of Wahhabism Muḥammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhāb was trying to revive pure devotion of worship to God alone. He composed *Kitāb al-Tawhīd* (The Book of Unity)

¹⁰ Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 40.

¹¹ Muḥammad ‘Abduh, *al-Islam wa al-Nasraniyya ma‘a al-‘ilm wa al-madaniyya* (Cairo, 1938), 62.

¹² ‘Abduh, *al-Islam wa al-Nasraniyya*, 69.

¹³ David Dean Commins, *Islamic Reform: Politics and Social Change in Late Ottoman Syria* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 31.

¹⁴ ‘Abduh, *al-Islam wa al-Nasraniyya*, 79.

¹⁵ Commins, *Islamic Reform*, 97.

in which he supports true monotheism against idolatry.¹⁶ Moreover Wahhabis condemned Sūfī practices and criticized Ottoman ‘ulamā. They claimed that many political leaders and religious elite had deviated from true Islam.¹⁷ This was mainly due to Wahhabis’ strict understanding of the concept of *tawhīd*. Hence, they describe themselves as *muwahhīdūn* and see majority of other Muslims as idolaters.

Tawhīd is a central concept in ‘Abduh’s thought as well. In the beginning of prolegomena, he defines *tawhīd* and explains its doctrine. According to this explanation *tawhīd* is the belief that God is one in His essence and His actions. Also, he notes that *tawhīd* was the great purpose of the mission of the prophet Muḥammad.¹⁸ In *al-Manār* ‘Abduh defines *tawhīd* as a concept contradicting with *shirk* (polytheism/association with God), a big sin that God does not forgive. He states that *tawhīd* emancipates humans from slavery of each and every man and all heavenly and earthly things, and it makes him a free, generous, and precious person. The happiness and the misery of the afterworld are also related to *tawhīd* and *shirk*.¹⁹ For ‘Abduh, *tawhīd* is not only recognizing the unity of God, but also a social and moral principle.

Comparing these two different perspectives on the principle of *tawhīd*, ‘Abduh’s arguments and his position can be understood better. ‘Abduh’s understanding of *tawhīd* relies on demonstrative knowledge, however Wahhābī theology is against reasoning, rather they claim to use only Qur’ān and Sunnah to find the principles of creed and their proofs. Wahhabis believe that literal interpretation of religious texts should be the only sources of Islamic theology. Thus, they reject allegorical or metaphorical meanings of such foundational texts.

Comparative Religion in Theology: *Risālat al-Tawhīd*

While *Risālat al-Tawhīd*²⁰ is a treatise on Islamic theology, it has a somewhat different content and genre compared to traditional theological works. As Marwa ElShakry states

¹⁶ David Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and the Saudi Arabia* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 11.

¹⁷ Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission*, 133.

¹⁸ Muḥammad ‘Abduh, *Risālat al-Tawhīd* (Būlāq: al-Maṭba‘ah al-Kubrā al-Amīriyah, 1898), 4.

¹⁹ Muḥammad ‘Abduh and M. Rashid Rida, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Ḥakīm (Tafsīr al-Manār)* (Cairo: Matbaat al-Manar, h. 1328), 5/149.

²⁰ In the introduction of *Risālat al-Tawhīd*, the translator notes that here “Tawhīd” means “the Theology of the Divine Unity”. The translator (Kenneth Cragg) does not translate the *Risālat* as it does not only mean a “treatise”, but also contains the meanings of “mission and message”. (Muḥammad ‘Abduh, “Introduction”, *The Theology of Unity*, tr. Ishaq Masa'ad, Kenneth Cragg (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966), 12.)

it is not a detailed book and has a didactic approach to theology. It only sets out ‘Abduh’s basic theological ideas.²¹ Moreover, Kenneth Cragg argues that this book might be called *Risālat al-Tajdīd* as it renews the shape and arguments of Islamic thought.²²

This treatise starts with the first chapter of the Qur’ān i.e. surat al-*Fātiḥa* (*Opening*). This seems different from previous Islamic theological works in the sense that they started with an established prayer often with *ḥamdala-salwala*. This might show his emphasis on the Qur’ān. After this surah ‘Abduh goes on explaining how this book was published.

“In 1303 (AH), I was invited to teach some sciences in *Madrasat al-Sulṭāniyyah*. Among them there was the science of God’s unity (*ilm al-tawḥīd*). I saw that the students were complaining that the small handbooks (*mukhtaṣarāt*) about this science did not explain enough, the long textbooks (*muṭawwilāt*) were above from their understanding and the medium textbooks (*mutawassiṭāt*) were written for another time period. Then I realized that the more appropriate thing was to lecture for their level and to make students write down my lecture. Therefore, my dictations were different according to their status and closer to the competence (*kifāyat*) of the student. I decided to make my dictations not difficult to understand for the first grade.”²³

Here ‘Abduh states that classical kalām textbooks did not meet the expectations of contemporaneous students. Thus, he saw a need to rearticulate theological issues using terms familiar for that level of students. At that time, many scholars believed that the study of *Kalām* needed to be revitalized. This might be explained by the school that ‘Abduh was teaching at; *Sulṭāniyya* was a modern school in Beirut and its students were from the Syrian elite.²⁴ Therefore, he engaged thoughts both from classical theological scholars and from modern thinkers with whom the students were familiar.

There was a long gap between publication of the treatise and his lectures, as he returned to Egypt after the Khedive pardoned him and was appointed as a judge in a town. Consequently, ‘Abduh failed to retain any material from those lectures and forgot much

²¹ Marwa ElShakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860-1950* (The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2013), 172.

²² Muḥammad ‘Abduh, "Introduction", *The Theology of Unity*, trans. Ishaq Masa'ad, Kenneth Cragg (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966), 22.

²³ Muḥammad ‘Abduh, *Risālat al-Tawḥīd*, Būlāq: al-Maṭba‘ah al-Kubrā al-Amīriyyah, 1898, p. 2. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

²⁴ Mark Sedgwick, *Muhammad Abduh* (Oxford, New York: Oneworld Publications, 2010), 60.

of them. Then he asked his students to send him his dictations from their notebooks. One of the students had written verbatim everything that ‘Abduh had taught them. Though glad to have the notes, he realized that they needed to be shortened for his book. For example, in chapters dealing with the creed (‘*aqāid*), ‘Abduh states that he followed the forefathers’ (*salaf*) way and did not reflect the successors’ (*khalaf*) views.²⁵ This statement might also be an indication of his adherence to predecessors’ method rather than successors’.

‘Abduh describes the subject matter of the book, i.e., ‘*ilm al-Tawhīd* (science of divine unity) noting that it is also called ‘*ilm al-Kalām* (theology) which refers to a debate in early Islamic history, but he prefers *Tawhīd*. Either way, this science examines the existence of God, His attributes, prophets, their qualities, their message and prophecy. In fact, *tawhīd* means that the belief of God’s unity in His essence and His freedom in creation.²⁶ *Tawhīd* is derived from *waḥdat* (divine unity) which is one of the principles of *Wājib* (Necessary Existence), i.e. God. He is one in terms of His essence, His attributes, His existence, and His acts. This means that no existent is equal to Him. He is unique in terms of existence and action.²⁷ Based on the principle of *waḥdat*, the religion of Islam came with the unity of God in His essence and His acts.²⁸ This is similar to how classical figures such as al-Taftāzānī (d. 792/1390) and al-Jurjānī (d. 816/1413) conceive the subject matter of this science.²⁹

‘Abduh also relates a brief history of this science, from the emergence of al-Khawārij to the time of al-Baiḍāwī (d. 685/1286), very much in line with classical narratives. Likewise, his classification of knowledge into possible (*mumkin*), necessary (*wājib*) and impossible (*mumtani*) resonates with the post-classical theology books.³⁰ They all include the attributes of God, human acts, the concept of good and evil, prophethood, the possibility of revelation, and the Qur’ān. What really distinguishes ‘Abduh’s enterprise

²⁵ ‘Abduh, *Risālat*, 3.

²⁶ ‘Abduh, *Risālat*, 4.

²⁷ ‘Abduh, *Risālat*, 26.

²⁸ ‘Abduh, *Risālat*, 97.

²⁹ See al-Taftāzānī, *Sharh al-‘Aqā’id* (Istanbul: Maṭba‘at Maktab al-Ḥarbīyah, 1279 (1862), 2; al-Sayyid al-Sharīf al-Jurjānī, *Sharh al-Mawāqif*, (Istanbul: Dar al-Tiba‘ah al-Amira, 1894), v.1, 26.

³⁰ ‘Abduh, *Risālat*, 15. al-Jurjānī, *Sharh al-Mawāqif*, 56-57.

from traditional theology is his emphasis on reason and rationality, the idea of progress, and the history of religions.³¹

In the prolegomena ‘Abduh indicates that this science was known for religions before Islam. Every religion had theologians who protect and support their religion. However, they proceeded very little towards rational evidence in their explanations. Thus, there was a struggle of minds (*munāzi‘ al-‘uqūl*) in science and the speculators of religion in silencing with the creed. However, Qur’ān speaks to the reason and its method differs from previous scriptures. The Qur’ān came and followed a different method in religion than its previous holy scriptures. In this method, the Qur’ān reports views contrary to its teachings and attacks them with rational proofs. It presents the order of the universe and its laws particularly addressing the human reason. For the first time in history, reason and religion became brothers in a holy scripture on the language of a prophet with clear declaration. There are some issues of religion, which could only be believed by the way of reason such as the knowledge of God’s existence.³²

In the following pages of *Risālat al-Tawhīd*, ‘Abduh gives the common definition of religion (*dīn*):

“The Book (Qur’ān) states that the [meaning of] religion of God in all times is acknowledging His oneness in Deity, surrendering only to Him, obeying His orders and prohibitions which are beneficial to humanity (*maṣlaḥat li-l-bashar*) and a mainstay for happiness on earth and in the hereafter. It [religion] is included within the books, which were descended upon to the chosen ones among the messengers. It asks the minds to understand it and calls for continuing to act according to it. This meaning of religion is the principle, to which one returns when the wind of disagreeing blows and it is the balance, by which the statements are weighed when we do justly with it.”³³

This is a general definition for all religions. Yet, ‘Abduh notes that manners of worship and forms of rituals are different in each religion. Rules for a religion differs from the previous one. According to ‘Abduh, the reason for these differences is the Mercy and Compassion of God. Since, God knows the best religion for each nation (*‘ummaḥ*) and

³¹ Al-Ṭaḥṭāwī’s evolutionary creation also includes this kind of three stages. See Rifā‘a al-Taḥṭāwī, *An Imam in Paris*, tr. Daniel L. Newman (London: Saqi Books, 2004), 102-105.

³² ‘Abduh, *Risālat*, 4-6.

³³ ‘Abduh, *Risālat*, 105.

time.³⁴ Similar to when God first created the human species, He did not give man any knowledge at birth. Human species must develop (*kamāl*) according to the divine instinct (*al-fiṭra al-ilāhiyya*).³⁵

‘Abduh offers three levels for the history of religions. At the beginning of human history, religions and human beings were like infants, a stage when humans can only perceive things with their senses. When religions first came, humans were like infants in terms of understanding which things are beneficial for them. Human beings in this state cannot understand a religion with logical evidence, because their intellectual abilities are not yet developed. Therefore, primitive religions included a lot of miracles and gave absolute orders and prohibitions. Although people did not know the meanings of these religions, they still obeyed them.³⁶ Here ‘Abduh uses the metaphor of human infancy to explain the primitive stage of religions. Perhaps this religion corresponds to Judaism, in ‘Abduh’s thought, which God depicted as sentimental in the Old Testament.

In the second stage, he provides a historical perspective on major religions that tells the story of Christianity: Over time human beings gained more and more consciousness. Soon a religion came which called for love and compassion. This religion made people renounce the world, turned their hearts towards the highest realm of angels, and closed the doors of mercy to the rich. A few centuries later, humankind became incapable of upholding the tenets of this religion. The guardians of this religion fell into the desire for power, accumulating wealth and property. They deprived reason of thinking, claiming that religion was against reason and science. So, the principles of religion collapsed. This situation continued until Islam came.³⁷ Although ‘Abduh does not name specifically this religion, it is clear that he is alluding to Christianity. Since one of the reasons for the revelation of the Qur’ān is repairing the previous revelations. Also, he emphasizes that the institution of this religion is not tolerant to reason and science unlike Islam. This assertion is against Renan’s claim. Since, at that time Orientalists, such as Ernest Renan in his “Islam and Science”, claimed that Islam was opposed to the development of science. Thus, for ‘Abduh, Christianity was the real obstacle for progress, not Islam.

³⁴ ‘Abduh, *Risālat*, 105.

³⁵ ‘Abduh, *Risālat*, 106.

³⁶ ‘Abduh, *Risālat*, 106.

³⁷ ‘Abduh, *Risālat*, 106-107.

‘Abduh sees Islam as the last religion of mankind based on his progressive approach to history. He states that when humanity reached adulthood, Islam came in order to speak to reason. Islam came when human beings as a species were at the age of puberty, which is the age when human beings become responsible with regard to their duties, according to Islamic law. This responsibility is related to the development of consciousness, as it is believed that this is the age when the human mind is fully formed and capable of making decisions. Thus, Islam speaks to reason and understanding in humanity, as opposed to senses in the primitive religions, or love and compassion in the middle period of humanity. Moreover, Islam is comprehensive as it speaks to all of the human faculties. Thus, it commands purifying both the body and the soul, and invites people to use all their inside and outside powers.³⁸

‘Abduh asserts that Islam integrates morality and reason. Ammeke Kateman highlights how ‘Abduh deals with these two issues in his reinterpretation of religion. The first concerns the preservation of morality, and the second concerns the role of human intellect. For ‘Abduh, religion produces and maintains morality within society. Islam embodies moral values and, human intellect is central for acquiring moral knowledge. Also, ‘Abduh emphasizes the close relationship between religion and reason, noting that the Qur’ān encourages to study of the natural world. The intellect is bestowed upon humanbeings as a means of discovering the truth and understanding the revelation. This shows the significance of human intellect in Islam.³⁹ In this way, ‘Abduh reinterpretes Islam through the lenses of ethics and reason.

The Progressive View in European Thought

‘Abduh talks about three stages of human development and the correspondence of it in human history. This division of three stages has some similarities to Comte’s theory of three stages in his well-known work *Cours de Philosophie Positive* (Course of Positive Philosophy), published in six volumes between 1830-42. In this work, Comte claims that human beings intellectually developed in three historical stages. The first is the theological stage in which the human mind supposes the origin of all natural phenomena is the action of supernatural beings. This belief was perfected in a single Being instead of

³⁸ ‘Abduh, *Risālat*, 108.

³⁹ Ammeke Kateman, *Muḥammad ‘Abduh and His Interlocutors: Conceptualizing Religion in a Globalizing World*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2019), 97.

various deities. In the second stage, i.e. the metaphysical, the mind supposes abstract forces inherent in all beings. In this stage men establish the Nature as the cause of all phenomena. The final is the positive stage in which men study the laws of the universe with reasoning and observation.⁴⁰ Comte corresponds these stages with the progress of mind and states,

“... If he [man] looks back upon his own history, that he was a theologian in his childhood, a metaphysician in his youth, and a natural philosopher in his manhood.”⁴¹

Here Comte argues that human history resembles development of an individual’s mind. This implies that as the societies developed, science and reason replace religious thinking. This positivist rationality at that time was very influential. Emergence of positivism transformed the notion of religion.

We can also read ‘Abduh's theory as an evolutionary approach to faith and religion. This evolutionary perspective was prevalent in the nineteenth century discourses on history and biology. Since Charles Darwin published his book *The Evolution of Species* in 1859, which presents one of the most influential ideas of evolution during this period both in the Islamic and the Western world. For instance, as Elshakry shows, ‘Abduh advocated that evolution was a process of social development and most of his ideas on the evolution of society originated from the traditional Muslim thought especially from that of Ibn Khaldun.⁴²

Elshakry points out that ‘Abduh easily reconciled evolution with revelation. For him the Qur’ān was compatible with modern ideas of evolution. He interpreted verses compliantly with it.⁴³ Thus, he reconfigured Comte’s progress theory in his discussion of history of religion. Besides, ‘Abduh was influenced by Spencer’s thought. For instance, as Elshakry writes, ‘Abduh's ideas on reformation of al-Azhar’s education system was based on Herbert Spencer’s (d. 1903) arguments about education, morality and family.⁴⁴

As complementary to ElShakry’s research, Betül Avcı examines how the late nineteenth century Ottoman intellectuals adopted the idea of linear progress and theory of social

⁴⁰ Auguste Comte, *Positive Philosophy*, tr. Harriet Martineau, (New York, C. Blanchard, 1858), 26.

⁴¹ Comte, *Positive Philosophy*, 27.

⁴² Elshakry, *Reading Darwin*, 176.

⁴³ Elshakry, *Reading Darwin*, 175.

⁴⁴ Elshakry, *Reading Darwin*, 19.

evolution advocated by Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer in order to reform classical Islamic thought.⁴⁵ Avcı argues that Muhammad ‘Abduh interpreted the history of Islamic revelation through the lenses of Enlightenment notions of progress, rationalism, and positivism.⁴⁶ Specifically, she notes the influence of Spencer’s evolutionary theories on ‘Abduh’s perspective to the history of prophets. For ‘Abduh, as human society progresses linearly from simpler to superior, Islam represents the most developed stage of human intellectual evolution.⁴⁷ Avcı concludes that while traditional Islamic worldview presents a cyclical account of history ‘Abduh appropriated a linear progressive account of human maturation through stages.

Religion and Prophethood

‘Abduh’s understanding of religion is also related to his views on the prophethood. According to ‘Abduh, prophethood teaches which deeds bring people happiness both in this life and the hereafter. Prophets typically clarify why certain religious commands beneficial and certain prohibitions are harmful. Also, human reason alone cannot determine what will be rewarded or punished in the hereafter.⁴⁸ ‘Abduh believes that humanity needs *risālat* (prophetic message) in two ways. First, the human soul continues to live after death. So, there is an eternal life of either happiness or unhappiness based on deeds in this world. Man does not have the ability to know what is going to happen in the hereafter without a guide from God. Secondly, the nature of man needs to live together with his species. But man has desires and ambitions and competes with others. The human species also needs love to continue its existence. Therefore, prophethood is a grace from God given to humanity.⁴⁹

This idea of living together is very similar to Ibn Khaldun’s (d. 1406) concept of group solidarity (*‘asabiyya*). In his *Muqaddimah* he connects religion with this concept of *‘asabiyya*. For Ibn Khaldun, dynasties can be established and protected by group solidarity. He quotes the Qur’anic verse⁵⁰, which says that religion is the origin of great

⁴⁵ Betül Avcı, “Becoming European While Remaining Muslim”: Muslim Responses to Modern Ideas of Progress and Rationalism, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, vol. 60, no.4, Fall 2025, 598.

⁴⁶ Avcı, “Becoming European While Remaining Muslim”, 597.

⁴⁷ Avcı, “Becoming European While Remaining Muslim”, 605.

⁴⁸ ‘Abduh, *Risālat*, 51.

⁴⁹ ‘Abduh, *Risālat*, 55-68. ‘Abduh adds that these ideas do not include predecessors’ and successors’ views.

⁵⁰ Qur’an 8:63.

dynasties and royal authorities and utilizes this verse to support his theory, arguing that it indicates that authority results from superiority and superiority comes from group solidarity.⁵¹ Ibn Khaldun believes that religion extends the life of a dynasty as it eliminates jealousy and envy from people. Religious people have the same vision and goals. He asserts that when religiousness changes, the dynasty is destroyed.⁵² Therefore, he thinks that *'asabiyya* is necessary to the Muslim community.⁵³ In short, for Ibn Khaldun religion is an important source of group solidarity and provides the social order for the best governance.

As mentioned above, 'Abduh might have used Ibn Khaldun's ideas on society and humanity. He also argues that there is an instinctive feeling in human that he needs the other members of the community.⁵⁴ Moreover, as Elshakry points out, 'Abduh delivered lectures on Ibn Khaldun and evolution of human society in 1878. In these lectures, he argued that Ibn Khaldun shared a number of critical social theories with Auguste Comte.⁵⁵ As we can see, the relationship between 'Abduh and Comte is not just based on a resemblance of ideas shared in the same epoch. Rather, there is a textual interaction as 'Abduh's lectures on Ibn Khaldun show.

Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī: Muḥammad 'Abduh's Master

Though European intellectuals such as Comte and Spencer had an influence on 'Abduh's thinking, his master on both classical and contemporary thought was the prominent Muslim reformist Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897). In 1884, together they published an Arabic newspaper *al-Urwa al-Wuthqā* in Paris. al-Afghānī traveled throughout the world and when he was a teenager when he first came into contact with Western thought in India. He went to Istanbul and Cairo where he advocated for the revival of Islam.⁵⁶

Al-Afghānī wrote a book entitled *The Refutation of The Materialists*, which is confronting the Neicheri sect, i.e. the views of Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) and his followers. This book is a defense of religion against materialism. It shows how Muslim philosophers'

⁵¹ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddima*, trans. Rosenthal (Princeton University Press, 1967) 1/319.

⁵² Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddima*, 320-2.

⁵³ Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddima*, 414.

⁵⁴ 'Abduh, *Risālat*, 61.

⁵⁵ ElShakry, *Reading Darwin*, 176.

⁵⁶ Nikki R. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism. Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn "al-Afghānī"*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 12-14.

rationalist interpretation of religion had an impact on al-Afghānī. He is concerned with the practical qualities of religion for social order. Al-Afghānī emphasizes the social and political aspect of religion. For al-Afghānī, religion is “a foundation for the civilization and progress of people and tribes”.⁵⁷ Religion has an important effect on social order, great advantage for civilization and their contributions to the relations among people. It preserves the coexistence of individuals in a peaceful way.⁵⁸ According to al-Afghānī, religion provides three qualities for human: shame, trustworthiness, and truthfulness.⁵⁹ He had a huge influence on ‘Abduh’s understanding of religion. Al-Afghānī also emphasized the social utility of religion. In *Risālat al-Tawhīd* ‘Abduh argues that humanity needs the messengers of God for the social order. The messengers train the souls of people to preserve each other’s rights in the society. He underlines that they establish the ties with love between men so that they sustain the society and support each other. The strong helps the weak, the rich to the poor.⁶⁰ This argument is very similar to what al-Afghānī states.

Al-Afghānī also wrote an article entitled “Answer to Renan” in response to Ernest Renan’s racist criticism of Islam. The French orientalist Renan, in his 1883 lecture at Sorbonne on “Islam and Science”, as briefly stated above, argued that Islam and the Arabs are hostile to science. According to Renan, Islamic philosophy and science were originally non-Arab, it was Greek or Persian. Muslim mind is incapable of learning any philosophy or science. For Renan, Islam diminished the differences between races except Persians, because Persians are Shī‘īs not Muslims.⁶¹ In response, al-Afghānī is not different in criticizing religions as he concurs with Renan that they are against science and reason. He does not spare Islam, as many other Muslim contemporaries did. Rather al-Afghānī says that Muslim religion is dogmatic and hostile to philosophy.

The first argument of Renan is that Islam is opposed to the development of science. Al-Afghānī answers that no nation at its origin is capable of being guided by pure reason or of distinguishing good from evil. He states that “whether it be Muslim, Christian or pagan

⁵⁷ Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, 141.

⁵⁸ Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, 141.

⁵⁹ Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, 144-147.

⁶⁰ ‘Abduh, *Risālat*, 77.

⁶¹ Ernest Renan, “Islamism and Science”, *The Poetry of the Celtic Races and Other Peoples*, trans. William G. Hutchison (London: W. Scott, 1896), 85-86.

that all nations have emerged from barbarism and marched toward a more advanced civilization".⁶² This as well is an evolutionary account for all religions. Al-Afghānī affirms that Islam tried to stifle science and stop its progress. Similarly, Catholic Church was fighting against the scientific truth.

The second argument of Renan is that Arab people do not like metaphysical sciences or philosophy. Al-Afghānī disagrees with Renan on this point, as he rejects racism. Al-Afghānī affirms that the Arabs were ignorant and barbaric in origin, however, he adds that they revived the sciences and developed them. This is the proof of their natural love for sciences.⁶³

There is a rich scholarship on al-Afghānī, but I would like to briefly note contributions of Nikki Keddie and Margaret Kohn. In her study, Keddie states that al-Afghānī praises Renan as a fellow rationalist thinker and he is very similar to Renan about the hostility of Islam to the scientific spirit, but he replaces Renan's racism with evolutionary views. For Keddie this response to Renan was directed to an elite Western audience. In fact, al-Afghānī is far from being the orthodox believer. She also claims that al-Afghānī is inconsistent and contradictory in himself.⁶⁴

An essay by Margaret Kohn investigates the concepts of progress and civilization in al-Afghānī's thought and how non-European thinkers both assimilated and contested these concepts. For Kohn, al-Afghānī was both a modernist and an anti-imperialist thinker. He praised modernization with science without Western hegemony. Al-Afghānī's critique against secularism was political, not theological. Thus, religion is an important source for the political power and the struggle against imperialism. In order to understand al-Afghānī's puzzling position, she uses Francois Guizot's conception of civilization. For example, they both saw morality as the key to progress; and religion as the key factor in the moral and intellectual development.⁶⁵

Al-Afghānī has an alternative approach. While defending rationalism and critical thought, he maintained the social function of religion. He argues for the necessity of both religion and science. Like many nineteenth century thinkers, he held a progressive view of history,

⁶² Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, 183.

⁶³ Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, 184-185.

⁶⁴ Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, 89-90.

⁶⁵ Margaret Kohn, "Afghānī on Empire, Islam, and Civilization", *Political Theory*, June 2009, 37/3, 401.

and he sees religion as the trigger of this progress. This was the current view of that time based on which ‘Abduh produced his ideas.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, concurring with Samira Haj, I challenge the assumption that Muḥammad ‘Abduh is not a modernist who severely deviated from traditional Islamic theology. Instead, I assert that ‘Abduh incorporated European modernity into the Islamic tradition. Comparing ‘Abduh’s ideas with those of al-Jurjānī, al-Taftāzānī, Ibn Khaldun and Auguste Comte, we can see elements of both classical Islamic theology and modern evolutionary theories. Both ‘Abduh and Comte benefited from enlightenment ideas about history. They both see a progress or evolution in human faith, from primitive to rational. In other words, religious development parallels progress in humanity and civilization. By considering these various sources of ideas, we can better appreciate the epistemological formation of modern Muslim thought. Moreover, ‘Abduh’s treatise on theology shows that there is a need to reform *‘ilm al-Kalām* or *‘ilm al-Tawḥīd*. He, thus, states that the new approach in *Kalām* should defend Islam and take advantage of the benefits of modern sciences. *Risālat al-Tawḥīd* is a key work to understand the change in nineteenth century and the continuity from twelfth century intellectual thought. Consequently, instead of categorizing Muḥammad ‘Abduh as either a modernist or traditionalist, we can emphasize his hybrid thinking.

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It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited.

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