



Islamic Modernism and Tafsir in Nineteenth Century Egypt: A Critical Analysis of Muhammad Abduh's Exegesis

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to examine the concept of Islamic modernism in nineteenth-century Egypt as expressed in Tafsir al-Manar, placing particular emphasis on Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905). The major focus of the paper is human reason ('*aql*') as perceived by 'Abduh and reflected in Tafsir al-Manar. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Quranic exegesis gained new momentum with the emergence of Islamic modernism. In Egypt, 'Abduh used tafsir as a major vehicle to disseminate his revolutionary thoughts. The central concept of his reform was that Islam could not face the challenges of modernity and the West unless Muslims learnt modern and other rational sciences. 'Abduh abandoned the traditional formula of tafsir in favour of the rationalist approach, which he believed was essential in order to demonstrate the viability of Islam to the modern period. Traditional exegetes, he argued, had wasted too much effort on delving into the 'technicalities' of grammar, theological disputes and other extraneous material. Tafsir, he maintained, had to be presented in a style adaptable to the demands of the society. Moreover, for the present situation of Muslims to be improved and for Islamic modernism to be sustained, the Quran had to be rationally interpreted. This paper examines the concept of Islamic modernism in nineteenth century Egypt, as expressed in Tafsir al-Manar, making particular reference to Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905). It evaluates his contributions to modern tafsir and analyse his rational approach in the interpretation of the Quran.

Keyword: Islamic modernism, Quranic exegesis, tafsir, Quran, interpretation, reform

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, modern scholars have been using *tafsir* as a tool to facilitate the process of their intellectual and religious reform. This is particularly true for 'Abduh, who concisely argued that traditional exegetes had deviated from the main teachings of the Quran by engaging in technicalities of Arabic grammar, theology, jurisprudence and other philosophical debates.¹ As a result, the approach to Quranic exegesis was reformulated to reflect the intellectual and socio-political settings of modern Egypt. 'Abduh, for example, considered reform a matter of exigency that can only be achieved by reinterpreting the Quranic text in accordance with the needs of the time.² Accordingly, he attempted to free religion from all shackles of blind imitation (*taqlid*), ignorance and stagnation, while encouraging the use of an interpretive reasoning (*ijtihad*). This formed the basis of Islamic modernism.³

¹ Muhammad Rashid Rida, *Tafsir al-Quran al-Hakim al-Mushtahir bi Tafsir al-Manar*, 12 vols, 2nd edn (Cairo: Dar al-Manar, 1947), I, 7, 18.

² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

³ H. A. R. Gibb, *Modern Trend in Islam* (Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1945), pp. 33-36; Rudolph Peters, 'Ijtihad and Taqlid in 18th and 19th Century Islam', *Die Welt des Islams*, 20 (1980), 131-145.

‘Abduh argued that acquiring modern knowledge and reconciling it with Islam were crucial for the progress of Muslim nations and their survival in the face of European ascendancy. Moreover, rational interpretation of the Quran was necessary in order to ensure its viability in the modern era.⁴ Consequently, he made rationalism the basis of his approach to modern *tafsir*.

The aim of this paper has therefore been to examine the concept of Islamic modernism in nineteenth century Egypt, as expressed in *Tafsir al-Manar*, making particular reference to Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905). The major focus of the paper is human reason (*‘aql*) as perceived by ‘Abduh and reflected in *Tafsir al-Manar*. The central question I want to address in this dissertation is to what extent ‘Abduh’s perception of the relation of reason to divine revelation influenced his methodology of *tafsir*.

This research is significant for several reasons. First, there has so far been little discussion about ‘Abduh’s rational approach in his *tafsir* and the literature on ‘Abduh as a modern exegete is still limited. J. M. S. Balton’s *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation (1880-1960)* (1968), for example, has tended to focus on modern Islam as reflected in modern Quranic commentaries and almost neglected ‘Abduh’s rational approach and his contribution to modern exegesis. Similarly, C. C. Adams’s *Islam and Modernism in Egypt* (1933) provides in-depth analysis of ‘Abduh’s career and views, paying too little attention to his contribution to modern *tafsir*.⁵

Preliminary work on ‘Abduh’s *tafsir* was undertaken by J. Jomier in his *Le Commentaire du Manar* (1954), which examined ‘Abduh’s method of exegesis in *Tafsir al-Manar*.⁶ However, he seems to have paid little attention to ‘Abduh’s apologetic and rationalist approach to interpretation. Analysis of the rational approach involved in modern *tafsir* was first carried out by Ignaz Goldziher, who briefly explored ‘Abduh’s principles of exegesis and his rational approach.⁷ In his survey of modern schools of exegesis, Muhammad Husain al-Dhahabi provides a very brief analysis of ‘Abduh’s rational interpretation and assessment of his school of exegesis.⁸ Abd al-Ghaffar Abd al-Rahim focuses on general evaluation of ‘Abduh’s school of *tafsir* and his disciples.⁹ Jane I. Smith also discusses briefly the features of *Tafsir al-Manar* and criticism directed at it.¹⁰ Similarly, Kate Zebri discusses Islamic modernism in Egypt and traces the development of modern *tafsir* in the twentieth century after ‘Abduh. However, she pays far too little attention to ‘Abduh’s rational approach in his method of *tafsir*. Moreover, a recent study by Fahd S. Rumi involved a survey of the modern rational school of *tafsir* and its principles of exegesis.¹¹ However, there has been little discussion of ‘Abduh’s rational approach and its impact on modern *tafsir*. There has only ever been one concise study of ‘Abduh’s rational approach to *tafsir*, by J. G. Jansen in his *The Interpretation of the Quran in Modern Egypt* (1974), which is not detailed enough.

In the light of the foregoing, it appears that ‘Abduh’s rational approach to *tafsir* is still largely unexplored. This paper will therefore analyse his rational approach in the light of views of modern scholars.

2. Muhammad Abduh: Intellectual Background

Muhammad ‘Abduh was born in 1849 in Mahallat Nasr, a small village in the Egyptian countryside, into a middle-class family.¹² He memorized the Quran and developed writing and reading skills at home before he reached ten years of age.¹³ When he was thirteen, he began to study at the Ahmadi Mosque in Tanta, the largest learning centre in Egypt, outside the Azhar.¹⁴ Having dissatisfied with the traditional teaching system,¹⁵ ‘Abduh decided to abandon his studies, but his maternal uncle, Shaykh Darwish, a devoted Sufi, persuaded him to return and introduced him to Sufism.¹⁶ This formed the basis of his mystical inclinations, which were to be expressed later in his first major work, the *Risalat al-Waridat* (Treatise on Mystical Inspirations).¹⁷

⁴ P. J. Stewart, *Unfolding Islam* (London: Garnet Publishing Ltd, 1995), p. 195; John L. Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*, 3rd edn (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 130-134.

⁵ See Charles C. Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt: A Study of the Modern Reform Movement Inaugurated by Muhammad ‘Abduh* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933).

⁶ See his *Le Commentaire du Manar* (Paris: G. P. Maisonneuve & Cie, 1954).

⁷ Ignaz Goldziher, *Madhahib al-Tafsir al-Islami*, trans. by ‘Abd al-Halim al-Najjar (Cairo: Madba’at al-Sunnah al-Muhammadiyah, 1955).

⁸ See Muhammad Husain al-Dhahabi, *Al-Tafsir wa al-Mufasssirun*, 3 vols (Cairo: Maktabat Wahbah, 2000).

⁹ See ‘Abd al-Gaffar ‘Abd al-Rahim, *Al-Imam Muhammad ‘Abduh wa Manhajuhu fi al-Tafsir* (Cairo: al-Markaz al-‘Arabi li al-Thaqafa wa al-‘Ulum, 1980).

¹⁰ See her *A Historical and Semantic Study of the Term ‘Islam’ as Seen in a Sequence of Quran Commentaries* (Missoula: University of Montana, 1982).

¹¹ See Fahd bin ‘Abd al-Rahman bin Sulaiman al-Rumi, *Manhaj al-Madrasah al-‘Aqaliyyah al-Hadithah fi al-Tafsir*, 2 vols, 2nd edn (Riyadh: [n.pub.], 1983).

¹² Muhammad Rashid Rida, *Tarikh al-Ustadh al-Imam al-Shaikh Muhammad ‘Abduh*, 3 vols (Cairo: Madba’at al-Manar, 1931), I, 9-20; Othman Amin, *Ra’id al-Fikr al-Misri: Al-Imam Muhammad ‘Abduh* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahdah al-Misriyyah, 1955), p. 19; Kenneth Cragg, ‘Muhammad ‘Abduh’, in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Modern Islamic World*, ed. by John L. Esposito, 4 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), I, 11-12.

¹³ Adams, p. 20; Yvonne Haddad ‘Muhammad ‘Abduh: Pioneer of Islamic Reform’ in *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*, ed. by Ali Rahnama (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1994), p. 30.

¹⁴ Amin, *Ra’id*, p. 18.

¹⁵ ‘Abbas Mahmud al-‘Aqqad, *‘Abqari al-Islah wa al-Ta’lim: Al-Ustadh al-Imam Muhammad ‘Abduh* (Cairo: al-Muassasah al-Misriyyah al-‘Ammah, 1952), p. 86.

¹⁶ Amin, *Ra’id*, p. 20; Adams, p. 24.

¹⁷ ‘Ammarah, III, 531.

‘Abduh went back to Tanta and continued his studies for four more years.¹⁸ Thereafter, in 1866, he took up his studies in the al-Azhar in Cairo. There, he joined the group of scholars who lectured on logic, philosophy and mystical theology.¹⁹ After spending three years there, he found the method of instruction unhelpful;²⁰ consequently, he underwent a spiritual crisis that paved the way for his full devotion to Sufism and an ascetic life.²¹

In 1871, ‘Abduh met Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1839-1897), an Iranian pan-Islamist, who was to influence his outlook decisively afterwards.²² ‘Abduh devoted most of his time to studying with al-Afghani until he had mastered subjects such as metaphysics and philosophy.²³ At this time, he began to make contributions on social and political subjects to the journal *al-Ahram*.²⁴ In 1877, ‘Abduh started his teaching career in al-Azhar after receiving his *al-‘Alamiyyah*²⁵ certificate²⁶, but also held informal lessons in his home.²⁷ He focused these lessons on the *Muqaddimah* of Ibn Khaldun because of its comprehensiveness in the analysis of Islamic civilization, history and administration.²⁸ Soon afterwards, in 1878, he was assigned to teach history and Arabic literature in *Dar al-‘Ulum* College.

In 1879, ‘Abduh was dismissed from his post and banned from engaging in any political activities. In the same year, al-Afghani was also expelled from the country.²⁹ The following year, however, ‘Abduh was recalled and appointed one of the editors of *al-Waqa’i al-Misriyyah*, the first Arabic newspaper, and finally became its chief editor,³⁰ a platform he used extensively to disseminate his liberal views. In a series of articles, for example, he repeatedly criticised the existing education system and the teachers, whom he accused of inefficiency and incompetence. For the nation to be developed, he argued, education had to be improved by uplifting the spirit of its citizens and undertaking wholesale reform of their character, ideas and performance.³¹ These systematic criticisms and revolutionary thoughts of ‘Abduh led to the creation of the Superior Council to the Department of Education, of which he was a member.³²

Following his involvement in the *Urabi* rebellion in 1882, ‘Abduh was sentenced to exile in Syria for three years.³³ Thereafter, he went to Paris in 1884 and joined al-Afghani in pursuance of their struggle.³⁴ In collaboration with al-Afghani, ‘Abduh founded a ‘secret organization’ called *al-‘Urwat al-Wuthqa* (the indissoluble bond), which published a weekly journal of the same name.³⁵ *Al-‘Urwah* was the first Arabic journal to appear in Europe which was used as a medium for propagating anti-Western ideas. Following its banning, ‘Abduh returned in 1885 to Beirut, where he was made a teacher in the *Sultaniyyah* School.³⁶ At this time he published his famous book *Risalat al-Tawhid* (Treatise on Monotheism), a work summarising his main philosophical and theological views, and other important literary works such as commentaries on *Nahj al-Balaghah* and a number of short commentaries on the Quran.³⁷

In 1888, ‘Abduh was pardoned to return to Egypt by the Khedive Tawfiq Pasha.³⁸ Although his intention was initially to pursue his teaching at the Dar al-Ulum College, the Khedive appointed him a judge in order to restrict his influence over his disciples.³⁹ In 1890, he became a counsellor at the Cairo Court of Appeal,⁴⁰ where he used the position ‘to promote the ends of justice and equity, and where possible to resolve the difficulties of litigation by compromise and reconciliation’.⁴¹ Later, he became a member of al-Azhar Administrative Committee that was meant to reform the education system of the institution.

Believing that al-Azhar occupied a strategic position of learning in the Islamic world⁴², ‘Abduh embarked on the introduction of sweeping reforms that would revive its educational system.⁴³ In 1899, he was appointed Grand Mufti of Egypt⁴⁴ and later became a permanent member of the Legislative Council.⁴⁵ Being convinced that no religion could

¹⁸ Rida, *Tarikh*, I, p. 23.

¹⁹ Adams, p. 31; Rida, *Tarikh*, I, 25.

²⁰ Amin, *Ra’id*, p. 20.

²¹ ‘Ammarah, I, 20.

²² Adams, p. 34.

²³ ‘Abdu al-Salam Kafafi and ‘Abd Allah al-Sharif, *‘Ulum al-Quran: Dirasat wa Muhadarat* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahdah al-‘Arabiyyah li al-Tiba’ah wa al-Nashr, 1972), p. 343.

²⁴ ‘Ammarah, I, 21.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 21.

²⁶ ‘Ammarah, I, 21.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, I, 22.

²⁸ Rida, *Tarikh*, I, 135-136.

²⁹ Adams, p. 47.

³⁰ Amin, *Ra’id*, p. 29. Adams, pp. 46-47.

³¹ Rida, *Tarikh*, II, 131-143.

³² Adams, p. 48.

³³ Amin, p. 30.

³⁴ Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 109-110.

³⁵ Adams, p. 58.

³⁶ Rida, *Tarikh*, I, 391-392.

³⁷ ‘Ammarah, pp. 27-28.

³⁸ Evelyn Baring Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, 3 vols (London: Macmillan and Co., 1908), II, 179-180.

³⁹ Adams, pp. 68-69.

⁴⁰ Rida, *Tarikh*, I, 420.

⁴¹ Amin, *Ra’id*, p. 38.

⁴² Adams, pp. 70-71.

⁴³ Adams, pp. 72-73; Rida, *Tarikh*, I, 427.

⁴⁴ Adams, p. 80.

⁴⁵ ‘Ammarah, I, 30.

flourish if its language died, Abduh founded the Society for the Revival of the Arabic Sciences and presided over it.⁴⁶ At this stage, for instance, they edited *al-Muwattah* by al-Imam Malik (715-796), as well as other substantial works on rhetoric and Arabic philology.⁴⁷

From 1899 until his death, 'Abduh devoted his time to lectures on Quranic commentary which he started from *Surat al-Fatihah* until he reached verse 125 in *Surat al-Nisa*'. 'Abduh died in 1905, leaving behind far-reaching intellectual legacies that include Quranic commentary, *Tafsir al-Manar*, legal *fatwas* and various articles in journals and newspapers.⁴⁸

3. Islamic Modernism: Concept and Historical Outline

Islamic modernism can be broadly defined as 'an intellectual stream of nineteenth-century Islamic thought that posited a golden age in the earliest generations in Islamic history', and wanted to 'simultaneously revive and reform Islam in its image as a bulwark against the encroachments of Western imperialist and colonialist power upon a decaying Islamic community'.⁴⁹ Therefore, modernists are 'those who have made an articulate and conscious effort to reformulate Islamic values and principles in terms of modern thought or to integrate modern thought and institutions with Islam'.⁵⁰ The aim of the modernist movement in Egypt was initially not to make 'any far-reaching theological reconstruction' but rather to establish an institution that would respond to the demands of the existing circumstances and to free the minds of people from the shackles of the blind imitation that was created as a result of 'sharp educational dichotomy'.⁵¹

Basically, Islamic modernism derived its inspiration from three components: first, the mystical and philosophical conceptions of al-Imam al-Ghazali; second, the Salafi conservatism of the thirteenth-century Islamic reformers, Ibn Taimiyyah (1263-1328) and his disciple Ibn al-Qayyim (1292-1350); and third, a reconciliation of Islam with modern challenges.⁵² The rational influence of al-Ghazali's writings remains the main feature of this movement, as is evident in *Tafsir al-Manar*, the Quranic commentary of 'Abduh and Rida.

The French invasion of Egypt in 1799 is seen as the turning point in the process of modernization.⁵³ Having witnessed the great military and economic superiority of the West, Muslims became conscious of their weakness and began to think of possible solutions to their problem. They soon realized that the cure for their ills was to be found in new sciences and technological techniques which, they believed, were the secret behind the progress of Europe. To this end, Muhammad 'Ali Pasha, the ruler of Egypt, embarked on massive economic and technological reforms.⁵⁴ For example, he founded European-style institutions for disseminating modern sciences and techniques and adopted western laws. In pursuance of his modernization project, 'Ali further dispatched a number of missions to the West in order to develop European thought and heritage.⁵⁵ It was this exposure to Western culture that motivated these students to become modern reformers in the subsequent years.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, 'Ali's reform did not last, as he was soon removed from power and his successors decided not to sustain his legacy; consequently, Egyptians soon went back to their dark ages. This situation forced Muslims to begin to question their perception of their religion and their commitment to it; and to seek explanations for western superiority at all times.⁵⁷

It was in these circumstances that Muhammad 'Abduh emerged as the 'father of Islamic modernism in the Arab land'.⁵⁸ 'Abduh was faced with two schools of thought which were diametrically opposed: one conservative, which practiced medieval Islamic traditions and resisted all changes, and the other secularist, embracing western institutions and values.⁵⁹ Using his independent method of intellectual inquiry, 'Abduh espoused 'a process of reinterpretation that adapted traditional concepts and institutions to modern realities, resulting in a transformation of their meaning to accommodate and legitimate change'.⁶⁰

'Abduh argued that Islam and modernism were compatible; however, this compatibility could be guaranteed only by 'a commitment to the revitalization of Islam in the face of European ascendancy, a revival that consisted in part in casting

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 30

⁴⁷ Adams, p. 85.

⁴⁸ 'Ammarah, I, 31.

⁴⁹ Rexanne L. Euben, 'Premodern, Antimodern or Postmodern? Islamic and Western Critiques of Modernity', *The Review of Politics*, 59 (1997), 429-459, (p. 437).

⁵⁰ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1979), p. 222.

⁵¹ Kenneth Cragg, 'The Modernist Movement in Egypt', in *Islam and the West*, ed. by Richard N. Frye (Hague: Mouton and Co. Publishers, 1956), 165-178, (p. 150).

⁵² Ignaz Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der Islamischen Koranauslegung*, (Leiden: [n.pub.], 1920), pp. 335-42, cited in Adams, p. 202.

⁵³ Mansoor Moaddel, *Islamic Modernism, Nationalism, and Fundamentalism: Episode and Discourse* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 39-40; A. S. Eban, 'The Modern Literary Movement in Egypt', *International Affairs*, 20 (1944), 166-178, (pp. 166-168).

⁵⁴ Stewart, p. 193; Cromer, p. 235; Hourani, pp. 42-53.

⁵⁵ Moaddel, p. 76; Richard C. Martin, Mark R. Woodward and Dwi S. Atmaja, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mutazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997) p. 129; Hourani, p. 53.

⁵⁶ J. Heyworth-Dunne, *Introduction to the History of Education in Modern Egypt* (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1968), pp. 104-223, 253.

⁵⁷ Stewart, p. 193.

⁵⁸ Esposito, *Islam*, p. 130.

⁵⁹ Hourani, p. 138.

⁶⁰ *Islam, Gender and Social Change*, ed. by Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press), p. xiv.

Islam as the religion of reason'.⁶¹ For 'Abduh, the cure for the ills of the Islamic community was to be found in eradicating innovative practices and returning to a pure Islam.

Al-Afghani pioneered a pan-Islamic movement to help Muslims consolidate their power over their lost territories after the fall of the Islamic caliphate.⁶² As Cragg notes, al-Afghani 'strove to galvanise Muslims into strong pan-Islamic fervour and action. Unity under the Caliph he believed to be the clue to destiny and fulfilment'.⁶³ Al-Afghani had a decisive influence on 'Abduh, which was to become the source of his inspiration.⁶⁴ In Paris, Al-Afghani collaborated with 'Abduh and undertook various reform activities such as editing *al-Urwah al-Wuthqa*, a radical journal that reflected their revolutionary spirit.

Unlike al-Afghani, who focused on political reform, 'Abduh insisted that a long-term internal reform of the education system was indispensable for the revival of Muslim community.⁶⁵ Having been disappointed by the backwardness of the Muslim *Ummah*, 'Abduh sought to revive the religion and make it relevant to the modern age by focusing on four key issues: the reformation of Islam by eradicating all innovations attributed to it; restructuring educational institutions; reconciling the teachings of Islam with modern discoveries; and defending Islam.⁶⁶

4. Islamic Modernism and Tafsir

The position of the Quran in the Muslim communities places the innovative approach to its interpretation at the forefront of nineteenth-century reform. In past centuries, the interpretation of the Quran had been restricted to traditional scholars, whose commentaries were more or less encyclopaedias of 'the technicalities and terminology of Arabic grammar', sectarianism and theological disputes. Consequently, benefiting from Quranic guidance was by no means easy.⁶⁷

Modernists rejected this form of Quranic commentary and sought to find an alternative interpretation that would reflect the actual message of the Quran and correspond with the needs of the modern age. 'Abduh set out to provide a plain *tafsir* that would be accessible to the general public, regardless of their social or intellectual background, in such a manner that would 'allow the Koran to speak for itself'.⁶⁸ In fact, 'Abduh's *tafsir* is an encyclopaedia which contains the summary of all his thoughts on religious and social reforms and the liberation of human intellect from the shackles of blind imitation,⁶⁹ and which 'represents the essence' of his theological teachings.⁷⁰

Tafsir al-Manar is the influential Quranic commentary to which 'Abduh devoted the last phase of his life.⁷¹ He started the *tafsir* from *Surat al-Fatihah* until he reached *Sura* 4: 125. Initially, the *tafsir* was in the form of a series of lectures at al-Azhar University, to which Rashid Rida (1865-1935) remained deeply committed. He would summarize the lessons, add his comments and later present them to 'Abduh for approval.⁷² These revised and enlarged notes were to be published in the subsequent editions of *al-Manar* magazine. After the death of 'Abduh, Rida continued with the *tafsir* independently. This commentary was later to become *Tafsir al-Manar*.⁷³ Thus, *Tafsir al-Manar* is a joint project which both 'Abduh and Rida used as a major vehicle to disseminate their reformist thoughts.

The central theme of *Tafsir al-Manar* is the need to accommodate rationalism and demonstrate the compatibility of Islam with modern thought.⁷⁴ This emphasis on making the Quran the sources of guidance involves rejecting anything that distracts attention from its main teachings. Indeed, a reader will understand the Quran better if he is acquainted with certain fields of knowledge such as grammar, rhetoric and theological controversies. However, placing emphasis on these issues in *tafsir* distances a reader from the aim of the revelation.⁷⁵

The main concern of 'Abduh and Rida in *Tafsir al-Manar* is the defence of Islam and the endeavour to establish its compatibility with modern civilization. To this end, they put special emphasis on the rational spirit of Islam in several ways; first, by harmonizing reason with revelation and defining their complimentary roles; second, by encouraging free

⁶¹ Euben, 'Premodern', (p. 434).

⁶² Fazlur Rahman, 'Islamic Modernism: Its Scope and Alternative', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 1 (1970), 317-333, (p. 318); Akbar S. Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992; repr. 2000), p. 30; Itzhak Weismann, 'Between Reformism and Modernist Rationalism: A Reappraisal of the Origins of the Salafiyya from the Damascene Angle', *Die Welt des Islams*, 41 (2001), 206-237 (p.232).

⁶³ Kenneth Cragg, *Counsels in Contemporary Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1965), p. 33.

⁶⁴ Adams, pp. 34-35.

⁶⁵ Cragg, *Counsel*, p. 33; Weismann, 'Between Reformism', p. 232; Nikki R. Keddie, 'The Pan-Islamic Appeal: Afghani and Abdulhamid II', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 3 (1966), 46-67.

⁶⁶ Gibb, p. 33.

⁶⁷ Jansen, p. 18.

⁶⁸ Jansen, p. 19.

⁶⁹ 'Ammarah, I, 12.

⁷⁰ Goldziher, p. 325 cited in Adams, p. 111.

⁷¹ Rida, *Tarikh*, I, 769.

⁷² Rida, *Tarikh*, I, 765; 'Ammarah, I, 241.

⁷³ Adams, p. 199.

⁷⁴ Stewart, p. 195.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 7.

judgement and independent thinking in order to revive *ijtihad* (interpretive reasoning) and eradicate *taqlid* (blind imitation); third, by eliminating superstitions and illogical elements, such as magic, from religion.⁷⁶

4.1 Reason and Revelation in ‘Abduh’s Perception

‘Abduh’s conception of the relationship between reason and revelation is one of his most consequential teachings, upon which he based his defence of Islam. His famous theological treaty, *Risalat al-Tawhid*, portrays his rationalism, which was to be reflected later in *Tafsir al-Manar*. The term ‘reason’ denotes a ‘human faculty which enables us to distinguish between truth and false beliefs, and by which we may obtain awareness ... of the divine truths ...’⁷⁷ For ‘Abduh, the relation of reason to revelation is a symbiotic one, as both are sources of knowledge and serve a common goal. Thus, applying reason to understand revelation is not only permissible but essential.⁷⁸

‘Abduh saw that reason occupies a significant position in Islam, which is why the Quran elevated its status to possess the ‘final decision concerning the matter of happiness and in the distinction between truth and falsehood, and between what is harmful and what is beneficial’.⁷⁹ Accepting the message of God’s apostles, argues ‘Abduh, is by no means possible without believing in God’s existence. As a result, Islam gives human intellect the absolute freedom to consider the creation of the universe, several signs of God’s power and the course of nature, because deep thought and meditation over those things, will probably lead to a belief in God.⁸⁰

By reason, moreover, we can accept a prophet and his message, although at times our understanding of his message is more or less superficial. This does not mean that we are obliged to accept something unbelievable. However, if there is anything in his message which seems incompatible with reason, then:

Reason must believe that the apparent sense was not intended. It is then free to choose between interpretation of the passage consistently with the rest of the words of the Prophet... and resigning the matter to Allah and His knowledge.⁸¹

Analysing ‘Abduh’s rational approach, ‘Ammarah argues that ‘Abduh is a moderate rationalist who rejects Salafi conservatism and Mu’tazili rationalism, because he advocates a return to pure Islam within the framework of reason by rejecting myths, innovations and anything that contradicts human intellect.⁸²

However, this assessment suffers from some serious weaknesses. It may not be correct to consider ‘Abduh as a moderate rationalist, because his rationalist spirit in placing reason (*‘aql*) as a judge in matters of faith opens up a wide space for intellectual inquiry that leads to a challenging of the authenticity of revelation as a source of truth. Arguably, is not possible for human *‘aql* to reach perfection by means of reason alone and without divine guidance.⁸³

Perhaps the main weakness of ‘Ammarah’s assessment is its failure to take into account ‘Abduh’s rationalistic interpretation of the Quran, which is to be found in his treatment of the word *Furqan* in Sura 3:3. Abul Qasim Mahmud al-Zamakhshari (1075-1144), for example, holds that *Furqan* can be understood as ‘the category of books that make a distinction between truth and falsehood’.⁸⁴ Both Marmaduke Pickthall and Yusuf ‘Ali also render the word as ‘the criterion (of judgement between right and wrong)’.⁸⁵ ‘Abduh, however, explains the word in a rational way, as ‘a reason, by which man differentiates between truth and falsehood’.⁸⁶ In much the same way, Rida supported this view and even went on to enjoin jurists to imitate *Mutakallimun*, rationalist theologians, in making rational analysis the basis of the understanding of religious doctrines.⁸⁷

Indeed, ‘Abduh’s rationalist conception is more or less similar to the approach of Mu’tazili, which sought to reconcile the findings of human intellect with a true Islam.⁸⁸ As P. J. Stewart writes: ‘Abduh is ‘a latter-day Mutazilite’, for sharing their ‘view on such matters as free will and the role of reason in religion’.⁸⁹ Equally, Jansen notes, ‘Abduh’s perception of revelation vis-à-vis reason has the negative consequence of replacing the former with the latter: ‘an obvious implication

⁷⁶ Amin al-Khuli, *Manahij al-Tajdid fi al-Nahw wa al-Balagh wa al-Tafsir wa al-Adab* (Dar al-Maarif: Cairo, 1961), p. 105.

⁷⁷ Euben, ‘Premodern’, p. 442.

⁷⁸ Andrew Rippin and Jan Knappert, eds, *Textual Sources for the Study of Islam* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p. 31.

⁷⁹ Al-Imam Muhammad ‘Abduh, *Risalat al-Tawhid* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1986), p. 12.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ B. Michael and Cheikh Moustapha Abdel Razik, *Cheikh Mohammed Abdou: Rissalat al Tawhid* (Paris: [n. pub.], 1925), p. 88, XLVIII, quoted in Adams, p. 130.

⁸² ‘Ammarah, p. 186.

⁸³ Weismann, ‘Between Reformism’, p. 217.

⁸⁴ Abul Qasim Mahmud bin Umar al-Zamakhshari, *al-Kashshaf ‘an Haqa’iq al-Tanzil wa ‘Uyun al-Aqawil*, 4 vols (Cairo: Madba’at Mustafa al-Babi al-Halabi, [n.d.]), IV, 285-286.

⁸⁵ See, Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Quran: An Explanatory Translation* (Birmingham: Islamic Mission Da’awah Centre, 2000), p. 69; ‘Abdallah Yusuf ‘Ali, *The Holy Quran: Text, Translation and Commentary*, 2 vols (Lahore: Kashmir Bazar, [1914 (?)]) I, 122.

⁸⁶ Rida, *Tafsir al-Manar*, III, 160.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), p. 8.

⁸⁹ Stewart, p. 194.

of this stance would be that... it is sufficient for [a person] to use his intellect' in judgement, without the need to consult Scripture at all.⁹⁰

To sum up, 'Abduh's conception of the relation between reason and revelation is more or less problematic. It does seem to be the case, of course, that he gives reason ('*aql*') an extraordinarily wide scope. His position is thus a complex one. On one hand he advocates freedom of reason and interpretive judgement, while on the other he gives human intellect unlimited freedom.

4.2 *Ijtihad* and *Taqlid* as Reflected in *Tafsir Al-Manar*

Ijtihad in a modern context means 'the effort to understand the meaning of a relevant text or precedent in the past', that contains a rule, and to change that rule 'by extending or restricting or otherwise modifying it in such a manner that a new situation can be subsumed under it by a new solution.'⁹¹ Conversely, *taqlid* is broadly defined as 'the passive acceptance of dogmas from religious authorities without asking for proofs and without rights of free thinking examination and personal initiative'.⁹²

'Abduh's intellectualistic concept of reason vis-à-vis revelation prompted him to advocate the revival of *ijtihad* and the eradication of *taqlid*. He attributed the backwardness of the Muslim Ummah to the intellectual inferiority imposed on them in the name of Islam. For him, the origin of the decline lay in Muslims' deviation from pristine Islam and absolute denial of intellectual freedom. Thus, no hope for revival was possible without addressing this problem. Consequently, he viewed the restoration of the freedom of *ijtihad* as crucial in the reform process.⁹³

The central argument of 'Abduh was that re-opening the gate of *ijtihad* by engaging in independent intellectual inquiry would help Muslims to solve their problems and promote new feasible interpretations for the legal texts that would be compatible with modern thought. Hence, *ijtihad* was not only permissible but also essential to Islamic reform.⁹⁴

'Abduh criticised traditional scholars for contaminating 'the hearts of the masses of the people' with 'the disease of *taqlid*'.⁹⁵ To abolish this trend, he devoted most of the pages of his *tafsir* to the revival of the free use of reason in comprehending the Quranic message. More specifically, in Quran 2: 118 & 121, Abduh relentlessly argued that *taqlid* impedes Muslims from understanding Quranic guidance and the prophet Muhammad's teaching, because they feel contented with the directives they receive from their scholars.⁹⁶

The proponents of *taqlid* argued that the right of *ijtihad* was limited to the early Muslim generation who, as they claimed, were more competent to understand and interpret the legal texts. Thus, subsequent generations had no right whatsoever to investigate any religious matter and form their own independent judgments. In his comment on Sura 2:167, however, 'Abduh argued that this claim was baseless, since historical records show that the people of the early Islamic generation 'never imitated anyone blindly'.⁹⁷ He even went so far as to assert that blind imitation is one of the 'traits of unbelievers and one will never become a believer until he grasps his religion with reason'. Therefore, anyone who simply 'admits to authority without the use of reason is by no means a believer'.⁹⁸

'Abduh's views concerning *ijtihad* and *taqlid* have been criticised by a number of writers. Albert Hourani, for example, explains that once the traditional Islamic methods of interpretation were abandoned and the way to independent judgment reopened, so that the system of Islamic belief was judged by reason, then it would be 'difficult if not impossible to say what was in accordance with Islam and what was not'.⁹⁹ Consequently, the identity of Islam as a religion and its integrity as a system of belief could be undermined by all sorts of innovations, because anything perceived as good and rational might be seen as Islamic. Inevitably, it would then be easy to 'distort if not destroy the precise meaning of the Islamic concepts'.¹⁰⁰

5. An Assessment of 'Abduh's Modernism

The aims of Islamic modernism were miscellaneous. In their endeavor to face modern challenges, Islamic modernists combined their protest against past tradition with the acceptance of change through a relentless effort of Islamic reinterpretation 'in light of modern realities'. Contrary to secularists, who accepted western values uncritically, and traditionalists, who rejected them obstinately, Islamic modernists took a moderate stance that sought to ensure the

⁹⁰ Jansen, p. 21.

⁹¹ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (London and Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 8.

⁹² Osman Amin, 'The Modernism Movement in Egypt', in *Islam and the West*, ed. by Richard N. Frye (Netherlands: Mouton and Co, 1956), pp. 165-178 (p. 166).

⁹³ Peters, 'Ijtihad and Taqlid', p. 132.

⁹⁴ N. J. Coulson, *A History of Islamic Law*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1964), p. 202; N. J. Coulson, *Conflicts and Tensions in Islamic Jurisprudence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 44-45.

⁹⁵ Michel, *Translation*, p. 46.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 447-448.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 81.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 94.

⁹⁹ Hourani, p. 144.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

sustenance of the Islamic legacy.¹⁰¹ Therefore, it might be correct to assume that they were successful in linking the past with the future.

In identifying the relevance of Islam to the modern world and harmonizing it with reason and modern science, 'Abduh made a major contribution by emphasizing something previously seen as impossible and neglected in medieval Islam. Thus, he succeeded in pioneering scientific thoughts and culture within an Islamic framework.

It was 'Abduh who 'gave modern Egyptian thought a centre of gravity' and replaced traditional scholarship with a focused and progressive literature within a paradigm of Islam.¹⁰² 'Abduh was also successful in inspiring other modernist movements in various part of the world, such as North Africa and Asia. Moreover, his advocacy of *ijtihad* and protest against traditionalism destroyed the intellectual monopoly of authority and consequently paved the way for freedom of interpretative readings for subsequent generations. As Basheer M Nafi writes, 'by liberating Islam from the monopoly of the traditional institutions the reformists prepared the ground for the laymen, the modern Muslim intellectual and the Muslim professional, to speak on behalf of Islam.'¹⁰³

However, many analysts argue that the modernism of Abduh has not been successful. Malcolm H. Kerr, for example, asserts that 'the teachings of Abduh and his circle rested on intellectual foundations that were, on the whole, vague and unsystematic. Their social and psychological impact was immense, but it was ambiguous'.¹⁰⁴ 'Abduh's role was essentially to 'open the doors and expose a musty tradition to fresh currents'.¹⁰⁵ As a result, subsequent reformers built their 'shaky superstructures' on his 'haphazard beginning'.¹⁰⁶ For Kerr, both 'Abduh's and Rida's theories of reform are 'full of contradiction and equivocation' which 'stem fundamentally from theological problems' which they were unable to resolve.¹⁰⁷

Similarly, Nadav Safran assesses the modernism of 'Abduh and his disciples and concludes that they have failed woefully 'to work out any' of their 'ideology'¹⁰⁸ or to 'produce any viable Muslim-inspired alternative'.¹⁰⁹ The origin of this failure, he claims, is their 'rationalism and a Western cultural orientation'.¹¹⁰ For Horten, Abduh's scholarship is limited to 'the elimination of that which has been overcome by the spirit of progress, not the building up of a new world of thought'. In Abduh's project, he says, 'there still remains fundamental rubbish to be carted away in order to create room for a new building'.¹¹¹

While not denying the theoretical contradiction in 'Abduh's theory, I do not subscribe to the argument that 'Abduh failed woefully to create the basis for a new system. Indeed, there is a degree of consistency in 'Abduh's position in relation to his circumstances and the problems he had to contend with as a member of a community steeped in medieval Islamic tradition. Perhaps the spiritual crisis he experienced in his youth influenced him to become more sympathetic with the notion of personal contact with God and his religion than most of his colleagues in al-Azhar. This is understood in the context of his separate efforts at reforming al-Azhar and in his Sharia interpretations.¹¹²

In his effort to revitalize his community and gain acceptability, 'Abduh tended to adopt a cautious approach on certain issues so as to avoid the dilemma faced by the intellectuals of medieval Islam in their withholding of conservative ideas.¹¹³ His aim was therefore to 'present' and strengthen 'rather than to withhold' existing ideas as this 'was no longer relevant'.¹¹⁴ And of course, it was this 'ideal of the preservation of the community' that made his reformation unique in relation to the intellectuals of the past. In order to do 'Abduh justice, his position should be understood in the light of the circumstances of his time. In this context, therefore, the theoretical contradictions of his thought 'do not deny their consistency within the framework of an attempt to reformulate the belief system'.¹¹⁵ Moreover, in the process of revitalizing his community, he was faced with the formidable challenge of reconciling Islamic thoughts with western ideas. In his attempt to harmonize reason with revelation, he also had to contend with the existing 'cultural tension' of his society. As a result, 'he turned in part to an intellectual framework of external origin and in part to an intellectual

¹⁰¹ Esposito, *Islam*, p. 142.

¹⁰² H. A. R. Gibb, 'Studies in Contemporary Arabic Literature', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies*, 4 (1928), 745-760, (p.758).

¹⁰³ Basheer M. Nafi, 'The Rise of Islamic Reformist Thought and its Challenge to Traditional Islam', in *Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Suha Taji Farouki and Basheer M. Nafi (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 28-60, (p. 53).

¹⁰⁴ Malcom H. Kerr, *Islamic Reform: The Political and Legal Theories of Muhammad 'Abduh and Rashid Rida* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 15.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.16-17.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

¹⁰⁸ Nadav Safran, *Egypt in Search of Political Community: An Analysis of the Intellectual and Political Evolution of Egypt, 1804-1952* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), p. 245.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ M. Horten, 'The Thought World View of Muhammad 'Abduh (Die Gedankenwelt von Muhammad 'Abduh)', *Beitrage zur Kenntniss des Orients*, 14 (1917), 17-128, (p. 128), cited in Adams, p. 105.

¹¹² Charles D. Smith, "'Crisis of Orientation': The Shift of Egyptian Intellectuals to Islamic Subjects in the 1930s", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 4 (1973), 382-410, (pp. 388-389).

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 389.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 390.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

source within, though not accepted by, his own tradition'.¹¹⁶ As Smith notes, 'by establishing reason as a force for good in itself, 'Abduh did, however, open the way for a departure from the synthesis he sought to create'.¹¹⁷

It is, however, correct to say that 'Abduh had some deficiencies in the implementation of his project.¹¹⁸ For example, he 'failed to provide a systematic, comprehensive theology or programme for legal reform'.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, despite his effort to reconstruct Mu'tazila-type rationalism, theology remains insufficient in his work.¹²⁰ The limitations of Islamic modernism are also evident in his rational analysis in *tafsir*, particularly in his perception of the relation of reason to revelation and his views on *ijtihad* and *taqlid*.

6. Conclusion

Islamic modernism is a process of internal self-criticism that entails a struggle to redefine Islam and demonstrate its compatibility with western civilization in order to respond to modern challenges. In nineteenth-century Egypt, Muhammad 'Abduh pioneered Islamic modernism in response to both the internal weaknesses of the Muslim community and the external political threat of European colonialism. For 'Abduh, Islam and modernism were compatible, but this compatibility could be assured only by a commitment to the revitalization of Islam in the face of Western superiority. The fundamental failure of Muslim societies, he argued, originated from their departure from pristine Islam. To this end, he used Quranic commentary, *Tafsir al-Manar*, as his point of departure in his efforts at reforming his community.

'Abduh contended that traditional exegetes had engaged in technical analysis of Arabic grammar, theological debates and other digressions which made the Quran inaccessible to laymen. Consequently, he adopted a new approach to Quranic interpretation, depending largely on rational analysis. This project was undertaken to assess 'Abduh's perception of human reason ('*aql*) vis-à-vis revelation and the extent to which it influenced his approach in his *tafsir*.

The relation of reason to revelation is the foundation upon which 'Abduh based his methodology of *tafsir* and his defence of Islam. The harmonization of reason with revelation, he argues, is indispensable for human guidance and in understanding the Quran's message as well. This paper has shown that generally, *Tafsir al-Manar* was used to accommodate rationalism, to harmonize Islam with modern science and to appeal to Muslims to select and benefit from any aspect of Western civilization so long it did not contradict Islam. The study has found that 'Abduh based his modernism on four pillars: first, the defence of Islam; second, Islamic reform; third, the reformation of educational institutions; and fourth, harmonizing Islam with modern discoveries.

The current study has only examined 'Abduh's rational analysis and its implications in his *tafsir*. However, I have assessed his modernism in the light of the view of modern scholars. My argument has been that although 'Abduh had some weaknesses in the implementation of his project and some theoretical contradictions in his theory, his ideas stand as an important source of insight and inspiration to other modernist movements in various parts of the Muslim world.

The evidence of this study suggests that 'Abduh tried to explain Quranic passages within the bounds of reason and human comprehension in order to confront the trend of superstition and myth that dominated the mentality of some Muslims. I have argued that 'Abduh went too far in his rationalist approach to the extent of rejecting certain traditions that contradicted reason, regardless of their authenticity.

This research adds substantially to our understanding of 'Abduh's apologetic and rational analysis in his overall methodology of *tafsir*. His major contribution to modern exegesis lies in its revitalization and in creating a link between the Quran and the everyday lives of Muslims. Indeed, his emphasis on Quranic guidance may be seen as a turning point in modern exegesis. It is perhaps not overstating the case to say that 'Abduh is the father of modern *tafsir*.

The following conclusions can be drawn from the present study: 'Abduh's conception of reason vis-à-vis revelation is more or less problematic, as he gives human intellect an extraordinarily wide scope. His position, therefore, is a complex one: on one hand, he promotes the use of reason and independent thinking, while on the other, he gives reason unrestricted liberty. Moreover, his extensive use of reason and his overemphasis on its role in textual interpretation, thereby forcing extreme logical conclusions, are at best questionable.

Finally, this research shows that classical and modern commentaries complement each other, since a person cannot fully understand one without the other. Perhaps the fundamental difference between the two categories is that the former was addressed to theologically-trained people, whereas the latter was aimed at making the Quran accessible to a wider audience.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Gibb, 'Studies', p. 756.

¹¹⁹ Esposito, *Islam*, p. 144.

¹²⁰ Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, p. 153.

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