MUHAMMAD ABDUH AND THE QUEST FOR A MUSLIM HUMANISM

P. J. VATIKIOTIS

Department of Government, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana

THE question of Muslim response to Western influence has been often put to the Muslim intellectual. The beginnings of reform in Islam and the Near East in general first found expression in men like Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Muhammad Abduh, Ameer Ali, and Muhammad Iqbal. Western civilization, its science, and its material benefits, were known to these intellectuals, enabling them to establish rapport with the West. One must be cautious, however, not to identify educational contact with the inner life of the two peoples—the Muslim world and the West. For, traditionally, they have run apart. The contact between East and West on a mass level has been preconditioned and marred by political considerations, the intellectual cross-currents notwithstanding. Such contact has been further complicated by the unreadiness of the Muslim to rationalize, since his religion never constituted for him an abstract intellectual system. Islam, on the contrary, is regarded by him as an active existential religion that discourages isolation and quietude.

Nevertheless, the gradual awareness by the masses of their heritage and national destiny today has diffused the responsibility of response to the present challenges into a wider spectrum of society. The intellectual, therefore, cannot merely superimpose a modification of traditional values, in the light of his Western training. He must beware of the vacuum that may be created and provide a solid replacement of indigenous origin and character, albeit perforce, synthetic.

Can there be a so-called 'protestant' revolt within Islam today? The Protestant Reformation in Europe paved the way for the relatively free development of modern science, philosophy, and historical criticism. Conversely, while Europe lay dormant in its darkest hours of inquisitorial ignorance, Muslim thinkers were probing nature and philosophy. But the contentment of imperial power, extending too far to be adequately controlled, allowed for degeneration from within, until destruction from without became inevitable. Ultimately, prolonged occupation, together

with rigid emulation in matters of religion and thought, engendered an atmosphere of inertia and social stagnation.[1]

Response by the Muslim intellectuals of the last seventy-five years to the challenge presented by Western penetration has been apologetic in the main. It romantically attempted to recast Islam as a super-philosophy containing all the elements that were operative in the phenomenal rise of the West. The Muslim apologist, in contrasting the lack of authoritarianism in Islamic politics to European political history, for example, is only offering superficial resistance to Western influence.[2] So far, the mere claim that the religion, properly interpreted and understood, allows for all exigencies of change has proven insufficient stimulation for improvement on the mass level. For it is necessary to get people thinking in terms of this viability as a matter of course. On the contrary, the old pre-Islamic resignation to inscrutable *dahr*, or blind fate, was transformed socially to the just as rigid and immobilizing Islamic *qadar*, or predestination, without the benefit of a dynamic concept of destiny.

Apologies are neither useful nor adequate today, for they tend to petrify the Islamic community before a fast shrinking, yet shaking, world community. Twenty years ago the attempts at rational revolt against the rigidity of the past by men like Taha Husain and Ali Abd al-Raziq outlined the fundamental question before the Muslim Near East; which question also carried with it the seeds of possible salvation. These two men were asking their people, in effect, the extent to which they were willing to apply the rules of modern historical and rational criticism to their scriptures and tradition. They were both gravely concerned with the proper evaluation of the authority of tradition. Can reform cope with the power of tradition in Islam today? Can a rationalist adaptation come about to mould a new tradition similar in development—not content though—to that distinguishing the modern Western tradition from its medieval predecessor.[3]

[1] One cannot fairly claim mental sterility in view of developments like the Puritan Wahhabi movement in the eighteenth century, Pan-islamism of the nineteenth century, and more recently the Salafiyya and Muslim Brotherhood movements, and the secularist tendencies of Taha Hussayn, Ali Abd al-Raziq, and Khalid Muhammad Khalid of the present century.

[2] See M. Abduh, *al-Islām Wa'r-radd 'Alā Muntaqi-dīhi* (Cairo, 1928). More recent works are those of Muhammad al-Ghazzali, *The Beginning of Wisdom* (N.E.T.P., Amer. Council of Learned Societies, Washington, D.C. 1953), and Sayyid Qotb, *al-'Adāla'l-Ijtimā'iyya Fi'l-Islām* (Cairo, n.p.d.).

[3] See Taha Husain, *Fi'l-Adabi'l-Jāhili*; 'Alī 'Abd al-Rāziq, *al-Islām wa Usulu'l-Hukm*. Presently, Dr. Husain is calling for the simplification of the written Arabic language as the only means of combating

illiteracy on a mass scale. He proposes mainly phonetic orthography; a radical deviation from classical orthographic rules of grammar and syntax. See *al-Risala* (literary monthly published in Cairo), *al-Ahram*, and *al-Gumhuriyya* of June-August, both dailies published in Cairo, for a debate on this subject between the Husain literary forces and those who support the classicist Mahmūd 'Abbās al-'Aqqād. Earlier, Taha, in an effort to urge Egypt and the Arabs towards modernization, has taken the extreme and rather dubious position of claiming that the native Egyptian mind is totally Hellenic—and ergo Western—in its orientation. See his *Mustaqbalu'th-thaqāfa fī Misr* (Cairo, 1939). Granted that ancient Egyptian civilization may be considered Mediterranean, the hellenization of the Egyptians cannot be assumed without argument at any period of history, especially under Alexander's

Excluding the superficial and limited impact from the West, one cannot overlook the few but creditable efforts along these lines within the Muslim community itself. For, it is the indigenous forces alone that can effect lasting changes in the Islamic world. Thus, it is relatively uncommon knowledge among Westerners that the expression of abstract thought and the vivid satirization of social, political, and economic problems has been developed to highly articulate standards by Near Eastern contemporary writers. Fiction, drama, and periodical literature have become vital and integral aspects of the lives of the increasing literate masses. Like any new literature, it does not purport to serve art for art's sake, but tends to be didactic, and often loaded with social and political messages. Let not the New Critic, however, persuade us to overlook its value as literature, for today it is the most readily available reflection of the ideological currents and struggles agitating the Islamic mind and world.[1]

In the light of these remarks, it is felt that a systematic analysis of the Islamic reform movement is appropriate, beginning with the early attempts at a modern Muslim 'humanism'.[2] This paper will confine itself to the expression of Muhammad Abduh in *al-'Urwa'l-Wuthqā*, who, the writer begs to submit, was one of the first 'humanists' in modern Islam.[3] The discussion will consider strictly the leading articles by Abduh that appeared in the newspaper *al-'Urwa'l-Wuthqā* from 13 March 1884 to 16 October 1884.[4] It does not consider, however, the articles or news editorials published in the paper about specific questions like Egypt, the Sudan, British policy in the East, &c.[5]

Abduh's movement for religious reform is 'humanistic' because he was primarily interested in giving an ethical focus to the religion of Islam, in

diadochic empire of the Ptolemies. The present writer, on the basis of available researches in that period of history, is inclined to the view that the hellenization of the Egyptian population and community never really occurred, the Alexandrian School notwithstanding. The tendency among the Macedonian-Greeks was to live apart and distinct from the subject peoples as a ruling aristocracy. What is more, the indigenous population, led by their powerful priests, tended actively or passively to oppose the foreign rulers. As it turned out, the Greek Ptolemies eventually adopted more of the native Egyptian culture. See I. G. Bell, *Egypt* (Oxford, 1948), and Mahaffy, *Progress of Hellenism in Alexander's Empire* (Chicago, 1905).

[1] For example the dramatists Nagib ar-Rihani (d. 1948) and Tawfiq al-Hakim. See excellent studies by H. A. R. Gibb, 'Studies in Contemporary Arabic Literature', I, II, and III, *Bulletin, School of Oriental Studies* (London), vols. iv and v. The desire for reform and characterization of the Muslim dilemma is to be found expressed at its very best in

Ahmad Amin's autobiography, *Ḥayātī* (Cairo, 1952).

[2] The fact should not be overlooked that an Arab-Muslim humanism of letters, science, and philosophy developed during the Abbasid period especially. See discussion in Louis Gardet, *La Cité musulmane* (Paris, 1952), pp. 273–322.

[3] Muhammad Iqbal and Ameer Ali of India and Pakistan may perhaps be considered as the humanists *par excellence* in modern Islam. However, they belong chronologically to another generation—that of the present century. See Iqbal, *Reconstruction of Religious Thought* (1938), and Ameer Ali, *The Spirit of Islam* (1902).

[4] Text used is that of al-Maṭba'a'l-Ahliyya, Beirut, 3rd ed., 1933. Another text of these articles is reproduced in Sheikh Rashīd Riḍā, *Tārīkh al-Ustādh al-Imām al-Shaykh Muḥammad 'Abduh* in 3 vols., vol. i, pp. 290 ff. (Cairo, 1931).

[5] These summary news items and editorials can be found in Part II of the Beirut edition under the title *an-Nutaf wa'l-Akhbār*, pp. 270–525.

short, a new native system of values not at variance with modern scientific society. As a brand of 'humanism' it is still more interesting because it does not blindly subscribe to the romantic confusion of many other Muslim modernists and apologists, but tends to base its strength on a reformulation of systematic theology and doctrine with the gradual re-introduction of historical criticism into the study of tradition. This 'humanistic' trend is important today not for the Muslim intellectual alone but even more for the mass of Muslim believers. Professor W. C. Smith of McGill University discusses the need for 'a synthesis . . . of the Islamic religious tradition with an intellectualist perspicacity of modernity —a synthesis which, with due regard to Point IV, seems the area's most fundamental need'.[1] The transformation of isolated individual conceptions of reform into a system of social thought and action remains the foremost requirement in the modern Muslim communities. Recent developments in Egypt, for example, indicate that such a public philosophy and system of values are absolutely necessary for the development of a strong nation.[2]

The need for an ethical system, guided by rational criticism and insight, has never been greater in the Muslim world than it is today. Old régimes have been overthrown, but old systems and habits of thought and action have not been totally discarded. In order to retain their leadership, present rulers must transform political revolution into social and political patterns of thought acceptable to the Muslim masses. The claim, for instance, by Egypt's present rulers to a new 'national philosophy', *élan*, and vitality must prove empty unless related to an emergent tradition.

There can never be a completely secular attitude in Islam. Neither can traditional attitudes be legislated out of existence.[3] It is important, therefore, to realize at the outset that any new cultural personality that is to develop in the Muslim East must of necessity be a synthetic one, drawing from the Islamic and pro-Islamic ethnology of the area and its people, as well as from its inevitable intercourse with non-Muslim ideas and institutions.

A rigidly cast socio-religious philosophy is presently unable to perpetuate the old value system. The latter has been seriously challenged to the extent of external economic and political control. Only a 'humanized' version of the religion can institute a personal and collective system of

[1] See his 'The Intellectuals in the Modern Development of the Islamic World', in *Social Forces in the Middle East*, ed. by Sydney N. Fisher (New York, 1955), p. 200.

[2] See the English translation of the new Egyptian Constitution promulgated in January 1956, and adopted June 1956, in *Middle Eastern Affairs* (February 1956), regarding the emphasis placed on social democracy, justice, people's rights and duties.

See also the speeches of President Abd el-Nasser in *al-Ahram* and *al-Gumhuriyya* for the months of June and July 1956.

[3] Even in Turkey the official severance of the religion from the State had its repercussions among the Turkish public. On this subject, see Bernard Lewis, 'Islamic Revival in Turkey', *International Affairs*, xxviii (January 1952), pp. 38–48.

ethics—ergo a theory of action—dependent to a large extent on the principles of rational and historical criticism and introspective evaluation.

The ethical appeal of Islam and its introspective admonitions were first examined and advocated in modern Islam by Muhammad Abduh [1849–1905].[1] In basing this discussion on Abduh's writings in *al-'Urwa'l-Wuthqā*, the attempt is being made to throw light upon the issue: should the Muslim East develop into a modern cultural force on the basis of Islamic unity, or on the basis of independent and interdependent cultural groups most of whose ethnic personalities are already predetermined and crystallized by pre-Islamic factors. In other words, can Islam—the faith, *per se*—adequately replace the Pakistani cultural and ethnic personality and complexion, the Turkish, the Egyptian, the Syrian, 'Irāqi, or Persian?[2]

When Jamal al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh founded the secret society of *al-'Urwa'l-Wuthqā*, the Muslim countries were in a state of political and social retrogression and frustration. Egypt, a suzerain of the Ottoman Porte, had been occupied by British forces in 1882, putting an end to the 'Orabi revolt.[3] Persia was being exposed to more direct foreign influence as a result of Russian and British interests in the country.[4] The Ottoman Porte itself had just gone through a brief and abortive attempt at constitutional reform in 1876–8 under the leadership of Midhat Pasha, reverting to the despotic lethargy of the new Sultan Abdul Hamid. Inevitably, the 'indissoluble bond' established by these two men was primarily devoted to the resuscitation of the Islamic spirit and faith as bonds of unity against outside divisive influences. In this respect the editorials of Abduh in the journal, *al-'Urwa*, may be viewed as apologetic and hortative exhortations to Muslim action against foreign infiltration. This exhortation or apologia is neither complete nor at its polemical best, however, unless considered in conjunction with his *al-Islām wa'r-Radd 'Alā Muntaqidīhi.*[5]

Jamal's hope, at least, was to propagandize the specific political aims of a Muslim League on the basis of the brotherhood of all Muslims. This League, we must assume, envisaged a political union of the Muslim East under one ruler, preferably a *khalīfa*. Realizing the remoteness of this aspiration, however, he sought to publicize more immediate struggles for

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[1] The Mu'tazila school in medieval Islam as well as Imam al-Ghazzali (d. 1111) may be considered among the foremost advocates of a viable system of Muslim ethics.

[2] For a brilliantly incisive analysis of this question see E. A. Speiser, 'Cultural Factors in Social Dynamics in the Near East', S. N. Fisher (ed.), op. cit., 1–22.

[3] See Abdur-Rahman ar-Rafi'i, *ath-Thawaratu'l-'Urābiyya*, and W. S. Blunt, *Secret History of England*

in Egypt, for a sympathetic account of this revolt.

[4] For a history of the conditions in Persia during the latter part of the nineteenth century see E. G. Browne, *The Persian Revolution*, and Sir Percy Sykes, *Persia*.

[5] Cairo, al-Matba'a'r-Rahmaniyya, 1928. This work is actually a collection of essays refuting certain contrasting views on Christianity and Islam by Gabriel Hanoteaux.

for Muslim freedom, such as the Egyptian question, the Sudan, and Persia.[1]

The publication, then, was meant to serve as a polemic mouthpiece of Jamal for his interpretation of the Islamic cause against Britain. Fortunately, it acquired a twin-character when it also served as a literary vehicle for the expression of Abduh's reform ideas. The claim, therefore, in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* that al-'*Urwa'l-Wuthqā* expressed the views of Jamal entirely is not justified as we shall attempt to show in the succeeding pages.[2] Although Abduh may have voiced, in part, Jamal's ideas in it, he was already disillusioned with such programmes as political Pan-islam, realizing the many prerequisites to genuine reform. It would be difficult even to accept without reservations Zaidan's conclusion that both men agreed on aims but disagreed upon the means to achieve them. Abduh's basically pacifist-Sufi temperament permitted him to prefer the wiser, albeit slower, process of education over political eruption.[3] And herein lies the difference: to Jamal, Pan-islam was primarily a political concept; Abduh, on the other hand, recognized its limitations in a Muslim world already directed and preconditioned by political and geographical considerations.

Instead of bringing about a strong Muslim union under a *khalifa*, Jamal's Pan-islamic agitation resulted in no unity at all. The individual development of Muslim nation-states in the past thirty-five years rather became the trend of political evolution in the Muslim world. This is neither a derogation nor a nullification of Jamal's efforts or effect upon the awakening Muslim mind. But this particular Muslim development was destined to give a more lasting character to Abduh's concept of religious and social reform. For the expectation that Jamal's '*urwa* would effect a revolution in the East never materialized. Neither was the combined Pan-islamic policy of Jamal and Sultan Abdul Hamid received warmly by the Muslim subjects of the Ottoman empire in 1909, or 1914, under the Young Turks of Enver Pasha. On the contrary, these subjects sought their national salvation outside the purported caliphal authority.[4]

By editing the journal, Abduh was laying the theoretical foundations of a neo-religious *esprit de corps*. In pleading for the observance of an ethical system favourable to progress and strongly influenced by rational

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[1] See Muhd. Rashid Rida, *Tārikh*, i. 283, 306 ff., who talks of immediate and distant aims of al-'*Urwa*.

[2] iii. 678.

[3] See *Mashāhīru'sh-sharq*, i. 305–7. Proof of Abduh's painstaking approach to the problem of Muslim reform are his efforts at improving the Azhar curriculum, his *fatwas*, and public education policies. See *Tarikh*, vols. ii and iii. For Jamal's political

personality and programme see *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, i. 1008–10; E. G. Browne, op. cit., pp. 2–30; Zaidan, op. cit., ii. 61; Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt*, pp. 13 ff.; *Tarikh*, i, Introduction, pp. 73 ff. (Beirut ed. al-'*Urwa*), 1–20.

[4] Thus Rashid Rida's remark that al-'*Urwa* began to inflame the fires of rebellion in the East is too far-fetched and projectory. See *Tarikh*, i. 304.

processes, Abduh underlined the essence of a Muslim 'humanism'. Considering disbelief (*ilḥād*) a 'social disease' he introduced a novel concept of social responsibility for the first time on the basis of the verse, 'Verily, God will not change the state of a people until they change their own state.'[1]

The starting-point of Abduh's 'humanist' approach to Islam and an Islamic 'feeling of unity' is his idea that Islam is a 'social religion', which has combined in its message the welfare of man in this world and in the hereafter. Therefore, if disbelief be a 'social disease' causing Islam's impotence, it becomes necessary to (*a*) free thought from the shackles of. *taqlīd*, or blind emulation of patristic tradition, and depend on the authority of 'historical proof', and (*b*) consider religion as being compatible ('friend of') with scientific knowledge (*'ilm*). In view of these basic assumptions, Abduh inevitably confined his main interest in religious reform as the basis for all other reform in the Muslim East. His philosophy of reform and 'religious humanism' extended into his concept of political independence and maturity. Insisting upon internal reform first through the spread of education and the elevation of the public character to a standard of social responsibility, he gave political and social maturity precedence and priority over political independence without them.[2]

Before proceeding to formulate Abduh's 'humanist' approach to Islamic reform, one must assess briefly the obstacles to a 'humanism' of any kind in Islam. 'Modernism', says Professor Gibb, 'is primarily a function of Western liberalism. It is only to be expected, in consequence, that the general tendency of modernists would be to interpret Islam in terms of liberal humanitarian ideas and values. In the first stage they contended that Islam was not opposed to these ideas; but they soon went on to claim that Islam was the embodiment of them in their highest and most perfect form.'[3] This overall criticism can be fairly directed at the non-theologian liberal reformers and modernists who, in their hasty enthusiasm, assumed that the adoption of Western political and legal institutions would *ipso facto* produce political and social institutions of liberal and democratic nature.[4] It cannot be equally directed at a trained theologian like Abduh, who came closest to a reformulation of the fundamental position of Islam.[5]

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[1] *H.Q.*.xiii. 11. It is interesting to note that Abduh invokes this verse repeatedly in *al-'Urwa*, but in an incomplete manner. Other translations render the same verse, 'Lo! Allah changeth not the condition of a folk until they (first) change that which is in their hearts; *and if Allah willeth misfortune for a folk there is none that can repel it; nor have they a defender beside Him* [italic is mine] (Pickthall, *The Glorious Koran*, 1954). The deletion must have been deliberate on the part of Abduh, for this second part of the verse renders almost meaningless the freedom

of action suggested in the first.

[2] This position was characterized by the late Ahmad Amin in his autobiography as Abduh's 'rational nationalism' in contrast to Mustafa Kamil's 'emotional nationalism'. See, *Hayātī* (Cairo, 1952), p. 82.

[3] See his *Modern Trends in Islam* (Chicago, 1952), pp. 69–70.

[4] Cf. Ameer Ali, *Spirit of Islam*, and Sayyid Qotb, *al-'Adāla'l-Ijtimā'iyya Fi'l-Islām*.

[5] See his *Risālatu't-Tawḥīd*.

Nevertheless, Abduh, in attempting a rational-humanist re-formulation of Muslim doctrine, had to contend with three major solidly anti-liberal forces in the Islamic socio-religious organism. First, was Tradition and the sanctity it receives from Sacred Law, or Shari'a; codified as it was some thousand years ago into a *corpus juris* of lasting value, and defying change. Thus Tradition, the strongest bulwark of the Islamic socio-religious structure, has resisted change as well as Muhammad Abduh's attack upon it in the guise of his 'anti-*taqlid*' campaign. Second, was the highly transcendental Qur'ānic concept of Allah, which has contributed to the regimentation of the processes of organic change, especially on the lower strata of Muslim society. The slightest attempt at its immenantization could mean apostasy.[1] Third, is the ever-present anti-rational disposition of orthodoxy as well as the average Muslim.[2] The masses, for example, continue in their intuitive adherence to the Qur'ān, in addition to the multitude of cultish accretions that make up the sum total of their daily religious experience and worship, Point Four notwithstanding.

Cognizant of this dilemma, Abduh stood between the outright secularist on the one hand, and the romantic modernist on the other, by insisting upon the systematic re-formulation of dogma without its divorce from the religious experience of the masses—in fact, the only possibility open to organic change in present-day Muslim communities. His hope for a more dynamic concept of God's relationship to the believer was intended to render personal religious experience an existentially strong stimulus for action toward the best possible life. Muhammad Abduh was well aware of the difficulty inherent in a strongly monotheistic religion, that assigns to man an eternal destiny (popularly referred to as 'fate') and retribution in the hereafter. It is, perhaps, this fundamental problem which led Professor Louis Gardet to conclude that what is required in Islam today is a 'creative humanism', because, so far, 'Islamic humanism' has sought refuge in the glorification of the past, glossing over traditional works, and maintaining traditional life.[3]

From the beginning, Abduh grasped the obstacles inherent in religion ossified by tradition and complicated by the concept of nationalism. Consequently, any humanist reform on his part had to presuppose a 'humanism with God' (that is, one which would never question the notion of a supreme being). He came closest to a humanism that called for the highest life possible without unnecessary limitations on man's virtuous achievements. It had to be a religious-oriented humanism in contrast to the

[1] The constant struggle in Muslim history between Orthodoxy and the Sufi Mystics is the paramount instance of the struggle between those who desire a more immanent—therefore, nearer—God, and the overpowering transcendent one of the Qur'ān.

[2] This is even seen among many of the modernists themselves, whose apologetic for Islam is more of an emotional and romantic presentation of a perfect system—a dishonest intellectual attitude at best.

[3] See his *Cité musulmane*, pp. 273–322.

secular-nationalist variety if it were to benefit the masses; one in which secular values become part of the popular endeavour and social philosophy through an invigorated religious doctrine. It is this sensitive understanding on Abduh's part of the importance of religious reinterpretation in any cultural development—a point discarded, misunderstood, or glossed over by the majority of Muslim modernists—which led Professor Gibb to emphasize boldly that 'He [Abduh], more than any other man, gave Egyptian thought a centre of gravity and created, in place of a mass of disconnected writings, a literature inspired by definite ideals of progress within an Islamic framework'.[1]

The difficulty, however, in Muslim religious reform derives from the closeness between the spiritual and temporal, and, more so, the political. Thus, Abduh's so-called 'liberalism' of religious interpretation must be limited by this factor.[2] In analysing his call for religious reform as the only possible means to a better society, one detects certain contradictions. In his article 'Nationality and the Religion of Islam', Abduh rejects the idea of 'nationalism'.[3] He refutes it as a 'natural state of being or nature' and recognizes it only as an acquired feeling. Thus, Islam transcends it, for 'he who belongs to the Muslim faith, once his belief is firmly entrenched, is diverted from his nationalism and racialism. Rather he turns from the *special* bond to the *general* one—that of the believer',[4] because Islam is not merely an admonition for the good and the true, it is also a just legislator who does not discriminate between one nationality and another. He invokes the example of the Orthodox Caliphs to emphasize the lack of nationalist fanaticism in Islam, saying, 'he ([the caliph], nothing elevated him to a position of rulership other than his reverence and obedience for the law, and his care in observing it'.[5] This instance, however, cannot be exemplific inasmuch as the Orthodox Caliphs were the leaders of the strongest political party at the time—an Arab one—leading the newly unified tribes into vast conquests under the banner of Islam. Neither does Islamic history bear out his assertion that divinely inspired behaviour through the proper observance of the scriptures has always replaced, in Islam, the 'racial' and 'national' bonds. During the Abbasid hegemony, for instance, Persians, Turks, and Afghans had a crystallized pre-Islamic ethnic character and personality which Arab-inspired and dominated early Islam was never able to break down or replace. This very insistence by Muhammad Abduh on the return to the true religion as the only source of power seems to indicate clearly the dilemma of reform in Islam generally. First, the precept has not been followed in the

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[1] 'Studies in Contemporary Arabic Literature', *B.S.O.A.S.*, vol. iv, part iv, pp. 757–8.
[2] *Tarikh*, i. 307–8.
[3] *Al-'Urwa*, pp. 47–54.
[4] Ibid., p. 49.
[5] *Tarikh*, p. 51.

recent economic and political development of the modern Muslim nation-states like Turkey, Egypt, and 'Irāq. These national entities seem to have rejected the idea that the source of Islamic prowess at one time was the true religion; which was all-inclusive for human needs and the building of a prosperous society. Recognizing the beginnings of this dual, but mutually contradictory, political development, Muhammad Abduh was faced with the problem of retaining the ethical content and precepts of Islam, while trying to render more flexible the legislative aspects of the religion in the light of modern requirements.[1]

Although Abduh begins by rejecting the idea of Nationalism, as a counteraction to individual national units in Islam, his own attempt at a 'religious patriotism' leads him to a befuddled concept of religious 'nationalism'. He considers national fanaticism (*ta'aṣṣub*) bad, in contrast to a religious feeling of solidarity. One must be careful with Abduh's discussion of Nationalism, for it is full of contradictions and erroneous presuppositions.

First, Muhammad Abduh appears to use *ta'aṣṣub* synonymously with *'aṣabiyya*, or *esprit de corps*. The latter he calls a characteristic of the human soul and personality, causing it to defend its own. The ensuing self-pride urges members of a community to unite in the promotion of good society. He goes so far as to assert that this strong feeling for one's own moulds a nation's virtues.[2] Apparently, Abduh is trying to establish a 'religious patriotism' that would counteract individual national ones. Consequently, he criticizes secularists who wish an anti- or non-religious modernism by reminding them that 'religion' is the foremost sustainer of a virtuous secular life, thus emphasizing the humanist aspect of Islam.

> Religion is the first teacher, . . . and best guided leader for the human souls in their pursuit for knowledge . . . the greatest educator . . . training the souls in the good values and virtuous character, inculcating them with justice, urging them to mercy and magnanimity, and especially Islam, which elevated a nation from the deepest savagery . . . to the highest wisdom and civilization in the shortest time. . . .[3]

'Religious patriotism' (Abduh's concept of *ta'aṣṣub*), then, is more sacred and pure, implying broader benefit than national fanaticism.

Pursuing his warning to the secularists, Abduh asserts further that 'nationalism' (*al-waṭaniyya*) among Muslims is a limiting factor, often causing disunity. Thus, he deplores those who discarded Islam without understanding the true nature of Western-imported Nationalism. It should be

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[1] See especially his articles 'The Decline of the Muslims' and 'Christianity and Islam', *al-'Urwa*, pp. 72–95.

[2] *Al-'Urwa*, p. 99. Professor Charles Adams in his *Islam and Modernism in Egypt*, pp. 58 ff., renders *jinsiyya* as race.

[3] *Al-'Urwa*, p. 103.

noted that, under the circumstances, Abduh was reacting to the conditions
of the Muslim world towards the end of the nineteenth century. But his
contention that there is no *nationality (jinsiyya)* for Muslims other than
their religion is an exaggeration, its Qur'ānic and Prophetic assertions
notwithstanding.[1]

It was indicated earlier that the dictum 'the faithful are brothers' was
not able to prevent the development of nationality-conscious groups with-
in Islam, as well as among the Christian world community. The early
nationalization of Islam into an Arab-dominated movement proved an
obstacle to any acculturation through the religion in a multi-cultural
environment. Historical events were to show that Islam was not free from
the political ascendancy of national groups within its pale. The Turks
with their Ottoman Empire are a case in point. Thus Abduh's article
'Islamic Unity' is perhaps an oratorial appeal to unity at best, but glar-
ingly anachronistic with historical development and facts. And yet,
together with his 'Nationality and the Religion of Islam', it shows a deep
understanding on the part of Muhammad Abduh for the necessity of a
native system of values for the Islamic community at large.[2]

Throughout his articles in *al-'Urwa*, Muhammad Abduh is trying to
establish three major requirements for religious reform that would con-
stitute the beginnings of a 'humanist' tradition in reformed Islam. First
is what the present writer calls a system of virtues to be developed and
spread by the strength of a reformed religious teaching. Such development
of virtue on a religious basis would instigate an inclination for introspec-
tion that would encourage internal reform, constituting the second re-
quirement. The third consideration would be that of a public philosophy
for the Muslim community evolved within the context of the problems
and needs of a modern society.

Beginning with 'Virtues and Vices',[3] Abduh indulges in sermons on
virtue in an effort to establish a 'social didache' so to speak. The essence
of his effort in this series, to revitalize a living religious humanism among
the Muslim masses, may be summarized in the new focus he gives to the
social duty and responsibility of the faithful. 'The sum total of virtue is
justice *(al-'adl)* in all action.'[4] The principle of justice would eventually
lead to a situation wherein 'every citizen will respect the right of all; not
willingly choosing an aim contrary to that of the whole; not seeking aims
sharply contradictory to those of the group . . . until the whole presents a
solid structure.'[5]

[1] *Al-'Urwa*, pp. 107, 150.
[2] Ibid., pp. 47–53, 146–57.
[3] 'Al-faḍā'il wa'r-radhā'il ', *al-'Urwa*, pp. 131–45.

[4] *Al-'Urwa*, p. 132.
[5] Ibid., p. 134.

This didactic call to virtue is based on a *dynamic* belief in God; dynamic in the sense that it is a *moving* concept to action. Abduh here is deliberately trying to activate the expectation of a future life in the beyond into earthly improvement. For, he urges that 'hope (eschatological or otherwise) is a feeling that [should] produce(s) action, carrying the soul [self] against evil . . . towards strife and hard work'.[1] The belief in God, therefore, should produce action, because 'none despair from the spirit of God except the non-believers'. Abduh's view of God, moreover, is one of a Supreme Being who demands the attainment of a virtuous and just life through a developing effort for knowledge as a positive good. Despair, then, as a result of collective resignation, is a definite sign of sickness and disbelief.[2]

In order to further activate the belief in God into social action, Abduh offers a bold admonition in that 'weeping does not raise the dead, neither does pity bring back the past, nor sorrow prevent catastrophe. Action [work] is the key to success.'[3] He considers this God's test of the faithful, for true belief leads to fruitful activity.

Reference was made earlier to Abduh's 'humanism with God'. It is important, therefore, to bear in mind that moderation in character and the acquisition of virtue are to be attained within the religious framework, with the new difference that the religion is to be bolstered up by the deliberate and conscious attempts—striving, if you wish—of man. This is what Abduh means when he reminds his readers that 'Allah shall not change the condition of a folk until they change what is in them', and when he introduces rational choice over against *taqlīd*. For those virtues established by the Divine Law as definite realities are accepted and lived only after they have been defined by man's reason.[4] Thus God has revealed His way for ever. It is up to man to look into himself with a critical eye, for he cannot blame other than himself for his shortcomings. And, in the final analysis, 'change' in people must come about through reason and perception.[5]

'God promised those who believe and do good that He shall make them inherit the earth as those before them.' It becomes imperative, therefore, that justice be the rule upon which men shall act for the attainment of the good. This presupposes the corollary rule that public interest is the basis for the perpetuation of the State, demanding human co-operation. And, as oppression causes destruction, justice becomes the only progenitor of a happy life. 'God has rendered the agreement on the public welfare, and co-operation in the attainment of the general good, sources of power . . .

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[1] Article entitled 'al-Amal', in *Al-'Urwa*, pp. 177-8.
[2] Ibid., p. 145.   [3] *Al-'Urwa*, p. 156.

[4] Ibid., pp. 203-12.
[5] Ibid., p. 242. 'Min nūri'l-'aql wa ṣiḥḥati'l-fikr wa ishrāqi'l-baṣira.'

and comfort in this life, enabling man to arrive at eternal happiness in the hereafter.'[1]

But any discussion of 'change through action' in Islam is inevitably confronted by the traditional question of 'free will and pre-destination'. The treatment of this delicate subject by Muslims has been frequent as well as a source of great controversy. It is, indeed, characterized by polemic and much confusion. Basically, it concerns the Muslim idea of a transcendental God, and the destiny of the believer who must carry on with an earthly existence. Today, the problem facing the modern Muslim consists primarily of his ability to gauge this wide gap between an omnipotent God and His weak subject, man, who must, of necessity, grapple with the bitter adversities of daily living. Those, of course, who hold to the utter helplessness of man and his subjection to the predetermined will of God regardless of his deeds do not recognize the existence of the problem at all. Those, however, who are puzzled by the fact (a) that man has certain potentialities, that he, on his own, can develop maximally, and, perhaps, actualize on earth, and (b) that there are certain living examples in the world today of groups and communities that have accomplished a more materially comfortable and better organized existence feel that the problem is a pressing one for the revitalization of the Muslim community. Their task is difficult, for it is not simply a matter of accepting or rejecting freedom on the one hand and predestination on the other. It is more complex in that they—if Muhammad Abduh is taken as an example—must approach the question within its religious ramification.

Abduh views the problem of freedom as choice *with obligation demanded by the Sharia*, or Sacred Law.[2] This view is not too different from our Western concept of freedom under or within the wide scope of a higher law. He realizes, however, that the famous question of *al-qaḍā' wa'l-qadar* has pre-Islamic origins extending into the Muslim tradition because of the natural proclivity of cultural ethos to perpetuate itself throughout generations. Consequently, Abduh's task was to give this whole question a modern interpretation—even character—that would differentiate it from its antecedent. This he tries to do by manipulating *al-qaḍā' wa'l-qadar* into a concept of *destiny* in which man has an important role to play. One might call this Abduh's 'activization of the popular belief in fate' for possible action in the pursuit of a better life, instead of popular inactive resignation.[3] For Abduh realized that the concept of destiny in Islam after the early Muslim conquests was nothing like the *force civilatrice* of the West.

There are also dangers inherent in Muhammad Abduh's efforts to gauge the power (*qadar*) or will of God with the helplessness of the believer

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[1] *Al-'Urwa*, p. 230.
[2] Article entitled ' al-Qaḍā'wa'l-Qadar ', *al-'Urwa*, pp. 114–30.
[3] Ibid., pp. 128–30.

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and his freedom of choice. In later writings, for example, he accuses the Persians for heretical accretions to Islam.[1] One might well ask if Abduh assumes that only 'Arab Islam' is true Islam. In other instances he refers to the pollution of Islam by foreign elements, as in the case of the Abbasids. The question may be asked again whether Islam should have remained Arabic. Is Abduh calling for an Arab Islamic unity?[2] Needless to say, this would be a most deterministic position. It may be quite possible, how-ever, that Muhammad Abduh is seeking a base from which to attack traditionalism. For he holds that it is not really what is in the Qur'ān regarding free will and predestination that presents a problem. It is rather the rigidity superimposed by *taqlīd* which seeped into the social order, creating apathy in soul movement, or, better still, soul atrophy.[3] And he seems to accept the theory that the work of man has much to do with the growth of his soul. It is in essence Abduh's attempt to render the relationship between man and his Creator a closer and more viable one, reflected in man's relentless struggle for a better life in a human earthly society.

There is frequent reference today to 'rapid change' in the Muslim countries. The term is especially favoured among Westerners genuinely or superficially concerned over events in the Islamic world since the end of the Second World War. It is a term current in the press as well as in civic and women's clubs. The questions 'what change', 'in what direc-tion', and 'how' are rarely examined with any persistence. Some hold, for example, that 'dictatorship' will be the means of change; others console themselves with Technical Assistance as the vehicle of future economic and social change, reaching from these foundations, in good time, to the political structure. Whatever the differing opinions, all are agreed there *is* change!

The present writer may be accused of choosing a poor springboard for discussing his concern over change in the Islamic world, especially the Arab Muslim countries. It may be argued that after all Muhammad Abduh died over fifty years ago; that there are today governments in the Muslim world operating on relatively modern bases; that talking of a Muslim 'humanist tradition' is irrelevant, because a man would much rather drink healthy milk made accessible to him by the kind services of Technical Assistance than go on with religious practices of dubious value and benefit. May I submit, then, as justification for seeing in Muhammad Abduh a basis for a more flexible Islam, the proposition that material

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[1] See his *al-Islām wa'r-Radd 'alā Muntaqidīhi*, pp. 37–40, where he refers to *al-Jabariyya*, an Aryan heresy imported into Islam by Persians from India.

[2] *Al-'Urwa*, pp. 191–4.

[3] *Al-Islām wa'r-Radd 'alā Muntaqidīhi*, p. 38.

change by no means implies change in individual and social modes of thought, habits of feeling, and action at the mass level. Such fundamental change in the few who control the reins of government is not adequate proof of comparable change in the community at large.

Inter-war and present experience in the Islamic countries points to the inability so far of the Muslim 'intellectual' and political leader to undergird whatever 'rapid change' has occurred with a viable social philosophy acceptable to the masses. Outright secularists, demanding the relegation of religion to the sphere of individual conscience without bearing on social and political legislation and action, are very few.[1] There is, on the other hand, a plethora of 'educated' Muslims who have romantically accepted the theory that the adoption of certain political forms will of itself produce change. But they fail to realize that mere form, however ideal, can produce only what the social context permits. The adoption of Western political institutions, supremely embodied in a written constitution, is a case in point. These intellectuals failed to grasp the reality that a constitution setting the political, social, and economic purposes of a society can survive and produce the desired results only in so far as the community is willing to allow. This willingness is contingent upon the understanding not merely of a very few, but on the consensus of the whole society. Thus a constitution alone does not guarantee desired change. It must receive its life in practice from the social context. If a constitution, for example, envisages change and development as a goal of the body politic, it is imperative that the individual members of the society accept the maxim that there is no *final* quality in their present existence, which is liable to change with circumstance. Flux rather than a predetermined order becomes the rule and guiding principle. It is easy for the Muslim intellectual to rationalize such principle against traditional teaching. But it is more important that the mass accept it *emotionally*.

It is this confusion on the part of the Western-educated Muslim that deprives him of influence. His thought, though 'liberal', fails to provide the intellectual conditions for the healthy and steady development of Muslim society. Those who reject religion as useless find themselves lacking any contact with the masses. Those clinging to religious orthodoxy refuse to re-examine their position in the light of a changing world, thus gradually alienating all those inclined to creative thought.

Muhammad Abduh set out to revitalize society by bridging the gap

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[1] An interesting, although weak, example is Khalid Muhammad Khalid, author of *Min hunā nabda'* (Cairo, 1949), with his attack upon 'clericalism' and orthodox conservatism in Islam. His other two works, 'Citizens not Subjects' (*Muwāṭinīn lā raʿāyā*) and 'Democracy Forever or Absolutely' (*Ad-dīmōqrāṭiyya abadan*), are a pursuit of his attack upon orthodoxy and a call for the complete separation between politics and religion.

Min hunā nabda' has been translated into English by the American Council of Learned Societies, Washington, D.C. (1953). See also review of this book by P. J. V. in *P. E. N. Bulletin* (U.N.E.S.C.O.), London, October–December 1952.

between the perplexed educated Muslim and the orthodox believer. He recognized the dangers in the dichotomy of separate systems of value for the few and the many. He saw the necessity of an indigenous value system in which all could participate. His preoccupation with religious reform was based on the assumption that religion reflects the cultural personality —the soul, if you wish—of the Muslim. For generations religion had moulded the Muslim's view of man and the universe. Muhammad Abduh recognized the need of a satisfying psychological experience to accompany the Muslim's re-examination of his position involving the hitherto forbidden 'unknown'. He felt that the new intellectual experiences resulting from such examination would provide a dynamic element in a society that had long resisted change.

The late Professor Charles Adams in characterizing the contents of the organ of *al-'Urwa'l-Wuthqā* summarized the basic ideas expressed in the journal as (1) the unity of all Muslims without racial distinction, (2) the necessity of returning to the rules of religion, and (3) the warding off of foreign influences.[1] These ideas accorded with the professed, albeit secret, aims of the Society. It should be emphasized, however, that throughout his active teaching and writing, Muhammad Abduh actually came very close to introducing into Islamic thought an evolutionary concept of historical development. Hence, his attack upon *taqlīd* by (a) the purification of the mind from superstition, (b) striving for human perfection through independent reason, virtue, and reasonable conviction, and (c) education, since human knowledge is acquired not by dispensation but through investigation.

Abduh felt uneasy about Jamal al-Din's nationalist interpretation of Islam. The 'religious patriotism' he tried to substitute for it was a necessary prerequisite to a religious basis for reform. He understood well that the nationalism of the West was confined among Muslims to the few intellectuals, but was unintelligible to the masses. His humanism, therefore, was never wholly utilitarian but rather bridged the gap between a transcendental God and a dynamic society seeking, and badly needing, organic change through the application of honest individual introspection and historical criticism. In order for liberalism to impress the average Muslim, it must first break down theological petrifaction. Abduh took the first steps in this direction by reformulating doctrine. He sought to revitalize Islamic religion through systematic revision and new expression.

The Romantics in modern Islam retreated into dubious mysticism. The conservative apologists, by virtue of their defensive position, presented ridiculous interpretations of historical fact and dogma. Finally, the secularists alienated themselves completely from the mass of citizens.

[1] Op. cit. (Oxford, 1933), pp. 58–64.

Muhammad Abduh's position differs from all of these inasmuch as he tried to bridge the gap between a transcendent God and His *active* subjects —what was referred to earlier as the basic dilemma of Muslim reform— by introducing the idea of personal virtue and social ethic, making possible the belief in a transcendent God to be reflected in man's active life of endeavour towards higher goals.

What disturbed Muhammad Abduh was the disconnexion between social action and religious belief. Bringing about a viable relation between the two was one of his primary concerns. His choice of *education* as the fundamental means to that end is significant. For Abduh, contrary to many superficial modernists, was aware of the necessity of a vigorous value system within the community. This would afford a distinction between change genuinely accepted by the masses and that formally embodied in superimposed institutions from non-indigenous sources without public understanding. Thus, Abduh preached a liberal and humanistic Islam, free of rigid traditional formulations and invigorated by rational and historical methods of criticism. He advocated belief in Man as part of the greater belief in God, on the assumption that human values are largely formulated by earthly experience.