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A Reflection on `Abduh's Islamic Modernism and its Declining Factors

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ABSTRACT

Muslims used to build Muslim civilizations after they became dominant leaders of the world during the Abbasid caliphates and Muslims continued to dominate the world politics during the Ottoman Sultanates or caliphates. However, since the 19th century the Muslims and their nations were weaker than non-Muslims especially the western Christian nations. Their weaknesses made them unable to confront and win over the western non-Muslim nations that colonized or ruled over them. The Muslim nations and countries in Africa, Asia and Southeast Asia were weak to defeat the powerful western nations and they came under the direct or indirect political and economic dominations of the western nations such as Englishmen and, Frenchmen, They either colonized Muslim nations and countries or protected them when they came under their protection by forced agreements made between the Muslim rulers and the western nations. The western nations colonized or protected Muslim nations for their own economic and political gains and advantages. The colonized or ruled Muslims remained in weakness and backwardness. Egypt came under the British protectorate. Some Egyptians thought about the reasons for the weaknesses and backwardness of Muslims and how to overcome them and how to make Muslims to become as strong as their non-Muslim colonizers or protectors. One of these Egyptian thinkers was Muhammad `Abduh (d.1905); he has been considered as the pioneer and prime advocate of Islamic modernism in Egypt during his lifetime. He introduced his Islamic modernism to overcome the weakness and backwardness of Muslims in Egypt and in other countries as well. However, his Islamic modernism was unable to overcome the Muslim weakness and backwardness in Egypt because of political and religious factors and it was unable to withstand the declining factors during his life as well as after his death. This paper devotes to Islamic modernism as advocated by `Abduh in Egypt and its declining factors. The sources or references for this paper are the books and articles on `Abduh and his Islamic modernism and the factors pulling down his Islamic modernism.

Key words: Islamic modernism, Islam, Muslim weakness , `Abduh, Egypt

Introduction

This paper focuses on the main characteristics and goals of Islamic modernism as advocated and propagated by Muhammad `Abduh who died in 1905 in Egypt as well as its declining factors by referring to some available sources. This paper does not claim to be the first one because there have been many books, articles and theses on Islamic modernism in Egypt as well as on the roles of `Abduh in Egypt as the religious scholar, thinker and leader of al-Azhar University. However, this paper is different from the earlier published works because it combines the two aspects namely `Abduh's Islamic modernism and its declining factors.

Islamic modernism of `Abduh:

Charles C. Adams can probably be considered as one of the earliest scholars who have studied the ideas and movement of `Abduh (1849-1905). He worked on `Abduh for his doctoral dissertation that he was able to complete and submit it in August 1928 to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Chicago in the United States. The first part of his doctoral dissertation was published. It was on `Abduh and the second part that was not published due to certain reasons was on `Ali `Abd al-Raziq.(Adams 1968: v). The first part of his doctoral dissertation was first published in 1933 and then reissued in 1968 carries the term "modernism". In his introduction to his book, Adams writes, "Muhammadan modernism in Egypt may be said to have taken form as a definite movement during the last quarter of the preceding century, under the leadership of the late Grand Mufti of Egypt, Shaikh Muhammad `Abduh, who died in 1905."(Adams 1968: 1).

Adams differentiates between the aims of Islamic modernism advocated by `Abduh in comparison with the one advocated by "the Indian group of rationalist reformers" even though their fundamental assumption is the same namely, "Islam is a world religion, suitable for all peoples, all times, and all cultural conditions". The

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main aim of the Indian Muslim reformers is "a cultural movement, and the adjustment of Islam to the conditions of modern European civilization." (Adams 1968: 1).

As regards the aims and main characteristics of `Abduh's Islamic modernism, one can observe from what is said by Adams who thinks that Islamic modernism of `Abduh "constitutes an attempt to free the religion of Islam from the shackles of a too rigid orthodoxy, and to accomplish reforms which will render it adaptable to the complex demands of modern life. Its prevailing character is that of religious reform; it is inspired and dominated chiefly by theological considerations."(Adams 1968: 1). According to Vatikiotis,"Shaykh Abduh then embarked upon a theological exercise to clear Islamic doctrine of traditional interpretations which, in his view, were inconsistent with the original ethical and religious message of Islam."(Vatikiotis 1985: 194).

No doubt that `Abduh wanted to introduce a reformed Islam by asking and demanding all Muslims to return to "the true Islam" but his reformist call was by no means a simple one due to the actual and grave backwardness of Muslims in many fields. "Politically, they were for the most part subject to non-Muslim powers, and, even where not directly under foreign rule, were yet subject to foreign influence…. Their social, moral, and intellectual condition was deplorable; they were subject to many weaknesses and ills and the victims of many degrading customs, which were no part of the religion of Islam, but rather were the result of their ignorance of the true Islam and their failure to practice even what they knew." `Abduh conceived the cure for these many ills of Muslims is to return to "the true Islam".(Adams 1968: 108).

What is the true Islam as perceived by `Abduh? The true Islam is Islam that is "purified of all the accretions which have originated from the customs of those who profess it, and the matters which they have added to it, perhaps derive from some other religion" and the principles of Islam are "determined by the words and actions of the men who were nearest in time to the appearance of the religion, and who received it from in the simplicity in which it was transmitted from the founder of the religion himself."(Adams 1968: 173).

For `Abduh, the true Islam is Islam during the early generation of Muslims before the emergence of division among them. `Abduh is reported to have said that "`I raise my voice`… `to summon to two important matters. The first was, to free the mind from the chains of belief on authority, and to understand the religion (of Islam) as the early generation understood it, before the appearance of divisions among them, and to return to the original sources of the branches of the sciences (of Islam) in order to attain a proper knowledge of thing.'"(Adams 1968: 174).

For `Abduh, "Islam is a religion of understanding and thought, not of taklid; the study of the sciences, if rightly understood, becomes a services of God; veneration of prophets an saints is to be opposed; exclusive adherence to one school of canon law is the source of rigidity and backwardness to Islam; independent investigation (ijtihad) is the solution for all the ills of the time,…"(Adams 1968: 246-47).

In Izzeddin's opinion, `Abduh "was a devout Moslem and believed that Islam was in harmony with modern science and thought, and it satisfied the needs of modern life. The truths of Islam should be found in their primary sources, where the faith would be found in its pristine purity before hard dogma and restrictive tradition set in."(Izzeddin 1953: 85).

Factors contributing to the declining of `Abduh's Islamic modernism:

There are many factors contributing to the weakening and declining of Islamic modernism advocated and propagated by `Abduh during his lifetime and afterward. The first factor can be named as the conservative or traditionalist factor. The conservative Muslims in Egypt largely represented by "the Azhar class and their following" did not welcome and opposed `Abduh's modernism of Islam. They "decidedly refused any change from the existing state of affairs, out of conviction that what had been handed down from the venerated past was sacred and immune to change."(Adams 1968: 97). The conservative Muslims through their conviction or ignorance were antagonistic to `Abduh's ideas and activities because of their "acceptance of belief on the authority of past teachers represented the divinely ordained order of things." They doubted and objected to `Abduh's ideas and activities by expressing and saying, for example, "`What kind of a Shaikh is this' … `who speaks French and travels in European countries, who translates their writings and quotes from their philosophers and disputes with their learned men, who gives `fatwas' of a kind that no one of his predecessors ever did, and take part in benevolent societies and collects money for the poor and unfortunate?'" These types of objections and insinuations were able to poison the minds of the common Muslims against `Abduh and they came to think of `Abduh as a heretical man and even as an unbeliever or *kafir*.(Adams 1968: 98-99).

In the words of S. V. R. Nasr, "The giant of traditionalism eventually woke up to denounce `Abduhism."(Nasr 1990: 75). For Nasr, there are many reasons why the traditionalist Muslims opposed and denounced Islamic modernism of `Abduh. Nasr states, "To the traditionalist, modernism lacks an opening onto the universal and is altogether imprisoned in its own epoch, its outlook is humanistic, and humanism, which is a revolt of reason and against intellect, considers man and his society entirely for their own sakes as if nothing lay behind them." Moreover, the traditionalist Muslims "found Islamic modernism hostile to their institutions and ideas". (Nasr 1990: 79). Vatikiotis observed that `Abduh's Islamic modernism "brought into direct conflict with

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the Azhar hierarchy and other traditionalist elements in the country. His appointment to the office of Mufti of Egypt --- supreme interpreter of the Sharia ---- was largely due to British influence."(Vitikiotis 1985: 194).

The second factor can be termed as the liberal and modernist factor. The liberal and modernist Muslims in Egypt were those who received modern and liberal education. They were "impatient of a devotion to the past that would shackle freedom of thought and render impossible all participation in modern progress."(Adams 1968: 97-98). They perceived `Abduh's reformism and modernism of Islam as "not thorough enough" since they advocated "the wholesome introduction of European customs along with the commodities and conveniences of European civilization. The liberal and modernist Muslims in Egypt "were neither good enough Moslems nor good enough Europeans."(Adams 1968: 99). Hence it is evident that `Abduh and his following fell between the two extreme Muslim blocs namely the conservative Muslims who rejected in principle `Abduh's ideas and activities and the one hand the liberal and modernist Muslims who did not think that his ideas of reformed and modernized Islam was the same as their liberalism and modernism. It seems that liberalism and modernism of `Abduh did not match that of the liberal and modernist Muslims. No doubt that `Abduh was "a religious reformer with liberal views" (Izzeddin 1953:83) but his liberal views of Islam were insufficient in the eyes of the liberal and modernist Muslims.

The third factor can be called the nationalist factor. Egypt was occupied by the British during `Abduh's lifetime. After he returned to Egypt from his exile imposed by the British rule on him, `Abduh "sought to befriended rather than antagonize the British, in order to win their support for his program of reform". He was exiled after he joined Urabi's rebellion against the British.(Izzeddin 1953: 84). `Abduh was arrested and charged in the court in Cairo after the British won over Urabi in 1882. `Abduh admitted that his involvement in the political struggle against the British rule because he followed his his superiors and he did not want to offend them.(Badawi 1978: 36). `Abduh was sentenced to exile in 1882 and he joined al-Afghani in Paris in 1884. Al-Afghani was expelled from Egypt in 1879 and in the same year `Abduh was "dismissed from his teaching post at Dar al-Ulum for his association with Afghani, and his political view…. Yet Khedive Tawfiq in 1881, probably at the recommendation of Sharif Pasha, recalled Abduh to Cairo and appointed him editor of the Official Gazette. In this capacity, Abduh resumed the pursuit of his reformist activities in education, language and religion." In 1882 `Abduh was expelled from Egypt and he went to Paris to join al-Afghani and both published the journal called *al-`urwa al-wuthqa* from 1883 to 1884. Later on `Abduh left Paris for Beirut and got married in Beirut and stayed there for many years before he returned to Egypt in 1889 and he was appointed as a judge and then as Mufti of Egypt in 1899 to his death in 1905.(Vatikiotis 1985: 193-194 and 203).

`Abduh was said to be antagonistic toward the British rule in Egypt when he was under the great influence of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897) who adamantly stressed on the political reformation and Pan-Islamism to enable the Muslim countries and nations become independent from the western colonial powers. Al-Afghani was exiled from Egypt in 1879 (Badawi 1978: 36). `Abduh joined al-Afghani in Paris and published the journal called *al-`urwah al-wuthqa* (the strongest bond). When the influence of al-Afghani on `Abduh was lessen and diminished, `Abduh was willing to co-operate with the British administrators in Egypt. Moreover, he did not see the benefits for the Muslims in Egypt if he followed the political plan advocated by al-Afghani. `Abduh said that he began to question "the wisdom of political agitation" advocated by al-Afghani when they were both in Paris, and `Abduh preferred to concentrate on writing and educating the Muslims in Egypt. After `Abduh went back to Egypt from Paris, he "sought to hide the fact of his continuing connection with Al-Afghani by refraining from signing a letter to him. The tempestuous Al-Afghani accused him of cowardice, and in consequence the correspondence between the two did not continue."(Badawi 1978: 39). The Egyptian nationalists were against `Abduh' co-operation with the British administrators including Lord Cromer in Egypt. `Abduh came under the protection of Cromer when he clashed with Khedive Abbas concerning matter related to Al-Azhar. The Egyptian nationalists never tired of accusing `Abduh as a power lover who sacrificed "everything for love of power".(Badawi 1978: 37).

The new established National Party led by Mustapha Kamel was "convinced that there could be no thoroughgoing reform as long as Egypt was under foreign occupation. The first step, therefore, was to get rid of the British. Only then could positive, constructive work be resumed". Meanwhile, `Abduh believed that "emancipation from British rule could come only through education and public enlightenment, and worked towards that end". Hence the National Party and its leaders and supporters formidably opposed the approaches taken by `Abduh in relation the British rule in Egypt.(Izzeddin 1953: 84). Mustapha Kamel who died in February 1908 was the founder and leader of National Party as well as the editor and publisher of *al-Liwa'* from 1900 to 1907 as his daily nationalist publication to spread and propagate "his particular brand of mixed secular-Islamic nationalism" and he demanded for "the evacuation of British from Egypt forthwith even if this required the used of force."(Vatikiotis 1985: 203-204).

Badawi sees that `Abduh sought to co-operate with the British administrators in Egypt for "practical politics". Badawi stresses that "`Abduh's co-operation with the British and acceptance of their position in Egypt was, however, an act of practical politics. He never attempted to sanction it by the Shari`a." In this respect, Badawi sees "the most fundamental difference" between `Abduh's politics and the politics of Sir Sayyid

Ahmad Khan in India. "`Abduh was too good a theologian to permit himself to misrepresent the Qur'an."(Badawi 1978: 37).

`Abduh's Islamic modernism excluded Egyptian nationalism since `Abduh himself did not think in the same way as the Egyptian nationalists who did no see any goodness coming out for the Egyptians from the co-operation with the British administrators in Egypt. Contrary to the Egyptian nationalists' thought of the British administrators, `Abduh thought that the co-operation with those administrators was good and beneficial for his modernist plan and activities especially in education for Muslim men and women in Egypt. Unlike his mentor al-Afghani, `Abduh paid less attention to imperialism and political action after he himself was exiled by the British administrators due to his involvement in the rebellion against the British rule incited and promoted by the Egyptian nationalists and politicians. Nasr stated that "`Abduh was not concerned with imperialism and political action, but rather with religious reforms."(Nasr 1990: 74). Vatikiotis holds the view that the religious reformism in Egypt which "gathered momentum between 1882 and 1906 at least was not really concerned with the creation of an Egyptian national-state entity."(Vatikiotis 1985: 188).

In addition to the Egyptian nationalist party led by Mustapha Kamel that opposed `Abduh's co-operation with the British administrators in Egypt, a group of "Muslim shaykhs and writers agitated for political action against the status quo, and sought to arose public opposition to existing rule." Shaykh Ali Yusuf (1863-1913) became the most prominent for this group of Muslim leaders and writers. They were also did no support `Abduh's Islamic modernism because they struggled against British domination in Egypt.(Vatikiotis 1985: 203).

The fourth factor is the illiteracy factor. During `Abduh's lifetime, the rate of illiteracy in Egypt was very high. The widespread of illiteracy in Egypt was well known and an undeniable fact. The British administration in Egypt neglected education for Egyptians. The British ruled Egypt about four decades. "At the end of nearly four decades illiteracy weighs down 92 per cent of the male population and over 99 per cent of the women of Egypt."(Izzeddin 1953: 124-125). The illiterate Muslim men and women in Egypt could not read the papers, books and journals related to Islamic modernism advocated by `Abduh. When the illiterate Muslims were unable to read about Islamic modernism, they probably did not know about it. When they did not know about Islamic modernism, they did not care about it. Hence, there was no way for Islamic modernism to have some influence on the illiterate Muslims since they were far away from reading about Islamic modernism in the books, journals and newspapers. The only way for the illiterate Muslims in Egypt to know and understand Islamic modernism was by listening to the lectures and speeches about Islamic modernism. The efforts to give lecturers and speeches on Islamic modernism had to be carried out by `Abduh's supporters in the mosques and other public gatherings and learning institutions. In this respect, the conservative Muslims who opposed Islamic modernism of `Abduh did the same, They were probably more active than the supporters of `Abduh in giving lectures and speeches opposing Islamic modernism since they were more dominant than the supporters of `Abduh.

The fifth factor is the leadership of Islamic modernism after `Abduh. After he passed away, his followers or supporters came under different leaderships. One of them was under the leadership of Muhammad Rashid Rida (d. 1935) and another one was under the leadership of `Ali `Abd al-Raziq. Rida led "the puritanical reformism of the Salafiyya school" while `Abd al-Raziq led the secularized religious reformism.(Nasr 1990: 75). Rida's Salafiyya movement moved more toward "the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya and Muhammad Abdul Wahhab than those of Muhammad Abduh and his modernist disciples". (Vatikiotis 1985: 326). In other words, Rida advocated Islamic puritanism while `Abd al-Raziq advocated religious secularism whereby politics is not part and parcel of Islam in its original and pristine form. He advocated the separation of politics from Islam. According to Nasr, "Disintegration of religious modernism into secularism and puritanism is a feature of every religious reform movement whose aim is to challenge the source of authority, legitimacy and social worldview of the believers, and promote a novel understanding of sources and quiddity of faith."(Nasr 1990: 81).

Under the leadership of Rida, the Salafiyya called for the return to the Koran and the Sunnah like the Wahhabis of Arabia but unlike the Wahhabis, Rida and his Salafiyya movement upheld "the Abduh reformist principle of utilitarianism in ethics and law. His Salafiyya became "the major opposition to secularism in the 1920s and 1930s in politics, social reform and nationalist programmes." From 1919 to 1923, the Egyptian nationalist movement was led by Saad Zaghlul. After the abolishment of the Caliphate in Turkey in 1924, the Salafiyya led by Rida incorporated "an Arab ethnic-national idea into their Islamic movement in order to accommodate the secular nationalism to which they were originally opposed."(Vatikiotis 1985: 198).

Conclusions:

Based on the time of its rise and emergence in Muslim societies, Islamic modernism is a religious response from Muslims who do not see the political and national responses as suitable and attainable against the foreign powers ruling over Muslim societies and countries. In case of Egypt, the British ruled the Egypt during the lifetime of Muhammad `Abduh. His Islamic modernism can be seen as his reaction to the British rule in Egypt. He co-operated with the British to make his Islamic modernism work and survive in Egypt. He witnessed the

bad consequences imposed by the British administrators on the Muslims who wanted to directly go against the British power in Egypt. His mentor Jamal al-Din al-Afghani was expelled by the British from Egypt. `Abduh himself was expelled from his job at Dar al-Ulum due to his association with al-Afghani. Due to his involvement in the Urabi's rebellion against the British rule, `Abduh was sentenced to be banished from Egypt. He had to leave Egypt for Paris and stayed there for some years and together with al-Afghani, they were able to publish the `*urwa al-wuthqa*. After its publication was stopped, `Abduh travelled to Beirut where he got married and taught there before he was able to return to Egypt in the later part of his lifetime.

There are many factors making `Abduh's Islamic modernism in Egypt declining and going down during his lifetime and after his death. Five of such factors are mentioned above. They are Muslim conservatism or traditionalism, Muslim nationalism and liberalism, Muslim illiteracy during the lifetime of `Abduh, and the spliting and divergence among the followers or adherents of `Abduh's Islamic modernism after his death.

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