

Muhammad Abduh

Muhammad Abduh was a Sunni Muslim scholar and teacher in late 19th-century Egypt who was active among the handful of Islamic intellectuals and religious leaders who defined the idea of Islamic modernism. During a time when many Muslims adhered without question to traditional Islam and a few others rejected that tradition altogether, Abduh used tradition to erect a framework for adaptation, reform, and even revolution within the Muslim world.

Abduh was born in 1849 in an Egyptian village of the Nile Delta. His father may have been Turkish, while his mother came from an Arab family that claimed descent from one of the early heroes of Islam. At the time of his birth, Abduh's family was in dire straits, prompting them to leave their native village in order to improve their lot. When economic conditions improved, they returned to their village and were able to recover their prestige and standing.

At the age of 13, Abduh was sent to study at Ahmadi mosque at Tanta, not far from his family's home. Tanta was "the greatest center of religious culture in Egypt outside the Azhar." Dissatisfied with the methods and style of teaching at the mosque, Abduh ran away. An uncle who served as an early spiritual mentor of Abduh persuaded him to return to his studies, however. That maternal uncle also nurtured in Abduh a religious outlook that transcended the "stiff phrases of the books of grammar and doctrine." After completing his studies at Tanta, Abduh went on to the famous Al-Azhar University in Cairo, where he remained from 1869 to 1877. Abduh studied law, logic, philosophy, and mystical theology; mysticism in fact was the subject of his first published work.

When Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, the pan-Islamic nationalist, returned to Egypt in 1871, Abduh earned a reputation as the most devoted among Afghani's students who attended his informal teachings. Though Afghani's religious ideas were considered unorthodox by the Sunni ulema (scholars and guardians of the faith), Abduh's piety was rarely questioned. However creative and rationalist Abduh's theological and legal conceptions came to be, they remained within the broadly defined boundaries of Sunni orthodoxy. Inspired by Afghani, Abduh published in a Cairo journal, *al-Ahram*, on social and political topics in the spirit of pan-Islam. Abduh later wrote a biography of his charismatic teacher in which he attempted to refute charges that Afghani was something less than a devout Muslim.

Finishing his studies in 1877, Abduh attained the degree of *alim*, meaning he was to be counted among the learned men who act as guardians of the legal and religious traditions of Islam. He now embarked on a lifelong teaching career, formally at Al-Azhar and informally in his own household. In addition, Abduh took on teaching responsibilities at a new college; his first course was on the great Arabic philosopher of history, Ibn Khaldun.

When Afghani was expelled from Egypt in 1879, Abduh was ordered to remain in his village. Allowed to return to Cairo in 1880, Abduh was appointed editor of the official gazette *Al-Waqa'i' al-Misriyya (Egyptian Events)* by the khedive (Egyptian viceroy). Abduh began to play a more conspicuous role in shaping the political opposition to French and especially English entanglement in Egypt. That opposition mobilized around Col. Ahmad Orabi's nationalist movement, which would collapse in the face of the British military occupation of Egypt in 1882. As the British grew more aggressive, Abduh was pressed by the nationalist factions to abandon his conciliatory stance and throw his support behind Orabi as the only viable opposition to direct British control. Once the British secured control, however, they restored the administrative role of the khedive, who collaborated with them in all things, including the arrest and imprisonment of Abduh and his sentence of three years in exile.

After a brief stop in Beirut, Abduh rejoined Afghani in Paris, and the two collaborated in publishing periodicals.

Abduh visited London in 1884. Though Afghani held a visceral dislike of the British because of their imperialist aggression in Muslim lands, Abduh did not share that animosity. His feelings had been softened by his friendship with the English poet and political writer Wilfrid Blunt. After retiring from the diplomatic service, Blunt championed independence for countries like Egypt under imperial hegemony. Blunt attempted to facilitate negotiations between Abduh and members of the British foreign service but to little avail. Abduh returned to Beirut to teach at a school sponsored by Muslims. At that school, Abduh delivered the lectures on theology that were the source of his book *Risalat al-Tawhid (Theology of Unity)*.

In 1888, Abduh was allowed to return to Egypt, where he was made a judge in the "native tribunals" recently established by the British. A decade later, he became mufti of Egypt, head of the entire system of religious law. Abduh's reputation as a teacher, scholar, and public servant grew in proportion to his increasing responsibilities and duties. In his legal rulings, he gave wide berth to the role of human judgment and reason. He was adept at considering all the circumstances of any case within the moral and spiritual scope provided by the Koran and hadith (traditions regarding the Prophet Muhammad that are one of the roots of Islamic law).

Abduh's legal philosophy was characterized by its rehabilitation of *ijtihad* (the exercise of individual judgment in creative interpretation of the law) and its reliance on *maslaha* (that which is "beneficial," a term that refers to the public interest). Furthermore, his modernist rendering of Islamic law relied on the principle of *talfiq* (literally, "piecing together") in which rulings were based on a systematic comparison of the recognized schools of jurisprudence. Rather than relying on any particular dogma, he sought always to find the most appropriate writings from the entire body of Islamic teachings.

Abduh worked for a practical and theoretical reconciliation of Islam with Western philosophical and political ideas and scientific understanding. He was equally at home—literally and figuratively—in Europe or Egypt. He learned to read French, was conversant in the European thought of his age, and maintained contact with several European thinkers, including Herbert Spencer. Abduh diagnosed an "inner decay" within Islamic civilization that, although exposed and preyed on by the imperial powers, remained the responsibility of Muslims to remedy. Abduh himself prescribed education as a curative means: education that, in addition to the spiritual guidance of Koranic revelation and moral principles, was grounded in the use of reason. Only reason could avoid the blind adherence to authorities in religious matters.

Abduh had no systematic Islamic political theory or detailed political program. He saw the value of representative government within a polity with advanced political education but did not believe Egypt was ready for the wholesale importation of Western-style political institutions. He looked forward to the modest improvement that would follow Egypt's transformation into a constitutional monarchy. Any agenda for social and political change would need to give pride of place to education. The conception of an Islamic state was foreign to Abduh, however.

In 1895, Abduh persuaded the khedive to set up an administrative council for the Al-Azhar, which allowed him to carry out organizational and administrative reforms in the very heart of a traditional institution that was suspicious of change on principle. Abduh's measured and gradual reforms took place over a 10-year span. During that time, he also helped to found and direct the Muslim Benevolent Society for the establishment of private schools, not unlike the one at which he taught in Beirut.

After his forced resignation from the Council of Azhar in March 1905, Abduh died on July 11 that year, near Alexandria. There were limits to Abduh's reformist liberalism and modernism. Yet his modernist interpretation of Islam remains exemplary for those who believe Muslims should not have to choose between "tradition" or

"modernity." Abduh taught how the light of tradition could be refracted by the prism of modernity.

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FURTHER READING

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