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Recovering the History of Modernist Islam

CHARLES KURZMAN

In 1903, Duncan Black Macdonald (1863–1943), a prominent early scholar of Islam in the United States, wrote that Islam does not allow constitutionalism because the caliph ‘cannot set up beside himself a constitutional assembly and give it rights against himself. He is the successor of Muhammad and must rule, within [divine] limitations, as an absolute monarch.’ Yet within a few years of that statement, some of the leading scholars of the Islamic world were arguing exactly the contrary. Muhammad ‘Abduh (Egypt, 1849–1905) – the highest-ranking religious official in Egypt – wrote privately in 1904 that he supported a parliamentary democracy. In 1908, Mehmed Cemaledin Efendi (Turkey, 1848–1917) – the chief religious authority of the Ottoman Empire, appointed directly by the caliph – said that he too supported constitutionalism. Also in 1908, two senior scholars of Shi’i Islam telegraphed their support at a crucial moment in Iran’s Constitutional Revolution: ‘We would like to know if it would be possible to execute Islamic provisions without a constitutional regime!’

Macdonald’s blanket statement about the incompatibility of Islam and constitutionalism also ignored, or dismissed, the previous half-century’s crescendo of proposals for Islamic constitutionalism. These proposals formed part of a movement that generated tremendous intellectual ferment throughout the Islamic world in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This movement sought to reconcile Islamic faith and modern values such as constitutionalism, as well as cultural revival, nationalism, freedom of religious interpretation, scientific investigation, modern-style education, women’s rights, and a bundle of other themes that these authors and activists associated with modernity. The Muslims engaged in this movement saw the tension between Islamic faith and modern values as a historical accident, not an inherent feature of Islam. The modern period both required and permitted this accident to be repaired – the threat of European domination made repair necessary, and the modern values associated with European domination made repair possible. The modernist Islamic movement pioneered the formation or reformation of educational institutions; agitation for political liberalization or decolonization; and the establishment of a periodical press throughout the Islamic world.

Defining modernism

One defining characteristic of this movement was the self-conscious adoption of ‘modern’ values – that is, values that authors explicitly associated with the modern world, especially rationality, science, constitutionalism, and certain forms of human equality. Thus this movement

was not simply ‘modern’ (a feature of modernity) but also ‘modernist’ (a proponent of modernity). Activists described themselves and their goals by the Arabic terms *jadid* (new) and *mu’asir* (contemporary), the Turkish terms *yeni* (new) and *genç* (young), and similar words in other languages. (By contrast, *muda*, Malay for ‘young’, was initially a pejorative term applied by opponents to the modernist Islamic movement.)

A second characteristic involved the usage of a self-consciously Islamic discourse. Activists were not simply Muslims, but also wished to preserve and improve Islamic faith in the modern world. This combination of characteristics emerged in the first part of the nineteenth century, as several Islamic states adopted European military and technical organization, and various Muslim travellers to Europe brought back influential tales of progress and enlightenment.

Modernism distinguished the modernist Islamic movement, beginning in the nineteenth century, from previous Islamic reform movements, which did not identify their values as modern, and from contemporaneous competitors, such as traditionalists who rejected modern values. Finally, it distinguished the movement from two of its successors, which supplanted modernist Islam in many regions in the middle of the twentieth century: on the one hand, secularists who downplayed the importance of Islam in the modern world, privileging nationalism, socialism, or other ideologies; and, on the other hand, religious revivalists who espoused modern values (such as social equality, codified law, and mass education) but downplayed their modernity, privileging authenticity and divine mandates. Late in the twentieth century, the combination of modernist and Islamic discourses was revived in a subset

of modernist Islam that I have labelled ‘liberal Islam’, which sought to resuscitate the reputation and accomplishments of earlier modernists.

The boundaries of the modernist Islamic movement could be imprecise, but its core was clear: a set of key figures who served as lodestones for Muslim intellectuals of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Three figures in particular were famed throughout the Islamic world: Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (Iran, 1838–1897), his student and collaborator ‘Abduh, and ‘Abduh’s student and collaborator Muhammad Rashid Rida (Syria-Egypt, 1865–1935), plus regional pioneers Sayyid Ahmad Khan (North India, 1817–1898), Namik Kemal (Turkey, 1840–1888), and Ismail Bey Gasprinskii (Crimea, 1851–1914). Supporters cited and debated the statements of these figures, especially the periodicals they edited: Afghani and ‘Abduh’s *al-Urwa al-Wuthqa* (*The Strongest Link*), published in Paris, 1884; Rida’s *al-Manar*

‘The central intellectual issue of the modernist Islamic movement, I propose, was freedom of speech: the right to say novel things in an Islamic discourse. In order to defend modern values, modernists had to defend the right to defend modern values. This they did by referring to the particular challenges and opportunities posed by the onslaught of modernity; by arguing that their own, often non-traditional educations qualified them to speak on Islamic issues.’

(*The Beacon*), published in Cairo, 1898–1935; Sayyid Ahmad Khan's *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq* (*Refinement of Morals*), published in Aligarh, 1870–1896; Namık Kemal's *Hürriyet* (*Liberty*) and *İbret* (*Warning*), published in Paris and Istanbul, 1868–1873; and Gasprinskii's *Tercüman/Perevodchik* (*The Interpreter*), published in Bakhchisaray, Crimea, 1883–1914. Even authors who disagreed with the modernist Islamic project located themselves in relation to these central figures.

The recent resuscitation of Islamic modernism has focused largely on this handful of famous predecessors. Yet the modernist Islamic movement was not limited to central figures. Around the Islamic world, other authors were influential in their regional contexts, from South Africa to East Europe to Southeast Asia, even if they were not so well known to other Muslims or scholars of Islam. In South India, for example, the leading modernist of the early twentieth century was Muhammad Abdul Khader Maulavi (Malabar, 1873–1932), commonly known as Wakkom Maulavi, who published Malayalam-language newspapers inspired by *al-Manar*. The Russian Empire produced numerous pioneering Islamic modernists during the same period, including Abdullah Bubi (Tatarstan, 1871–1922), whose activism on behalf of Russian democracy and Islamic reform led tsarists and Muslim traditionalists to cooperate in his repression. In eastern China, Ya'qub Wang Jingzhai (China, 1879–1949) urged his fellow Hui Muslims to adopt both an Islamic identity and a Chinese nationalism in accordance with contemporary standards.

Century-long debates

The modernist Islamic movement was never monolithic, and variation, even deep disagreement, existed on virtually all subjects. Modern values included both state-building and limits on state power; élitism and egalitarianism; discipline and liberty; Europhilism and anti-imperialism. The modernists' Islamic faith encompassed both mysticism and abhorrence of mysticism; strategic use of traditional scholarship and rejection of traditional scholarship; return to a pristine early Islam and updating of early practices in keeping with historical change.

The debates associated with this variation generated arguments that continue to be re-invented today, often with little awareness of their past use. For example, it is common today for modernist Islamic writings to cite the Qur'anic verse 'and seek their counsel in the matter' (*sura* 3, verse 159) as justification for parliamentary democracy – as Namık Kemal did in 1868. The argument that Islamic exegesis must be tailored to ever-changing contexts can be found in Abduh's 1881 essay 'Laws Should Change in Accordance with the Conditions of Nations', as well as the 1908 essay by Musa Kazım (Turkey, 1858–1920), 'Reform and Review of Religious Writings According to the Requirements of the Age'. The notion of intellectual progress, which privileges contemporary scientific approaches over earlier authorities, can be found in the writings of Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi (Syria, 1866–1914): 'If people were limited to the books of the ancients, then a great deal of knowledge would be lost, penetrating minds would go astray, articulate tongues would be blunted, and we would hear nothing but repetition.'

Freedom of speech

The central intellectual issue of the modernist Islamic movement, I propose, was freedom of speech: the right to say novel things in an Islamic discourse. In order to defend modern values, modernists had to defend the right to defend modern values. This they did by referring to the particular challenges and opportunities posed by the onslaught of modernity; by arguing that their own, often non-traditional educations qualified them to speak on Islamic issues; by pioneering new forms of discourse, such as newspaper essays and theatrical performances; and, finally, by laying out their modernist vision of Islam. These problematics remain vivid today for Muslims who wish to espouse modern values in an Islamic discourse.

The freedom of speech was often associated with the defence of *ijtihād*, whose original meaning of 'intellectual effort' was extended to encompass rational interpretation more generally, and with denunciation of *taqlid*, a term that modernists took to mean blind, irrational imitation of tradition. All of the lodestone figures in the modernist Islamic movement weighed in on this theme, as did others, including Muhammad Husayn Na'ini (Iran, 1860–1936): '*Taqlid* of religious leaders who pretend to present true religion is no different from obedience to political tyrants. Either one is a form of idolatry.' Both Na'ini and Khayr al-Din (Tunisia, 1822–1890) – Shi'i and Sunni, respectively –



The Azeri Turkish caption of the original cartoon (Mulla Nasruddin, 22 September 1906, pp. 4–5) was entirely different: 'I cure the ill by writing down verses [from the Qur'an].' The cartoon said nothing about constitutionalism, but rather mocked an old-fashioned religious practice. Europeans saw an image lampooning an Islamic scholar and inverted its meaning, from anti-traditionalism to anti-modernism.

EUSTACHE DE LOREY AND DOUGLAS SLADEN, 'THE MOON OF THE FOURTEENTH NIGHT: BEING THE PRIVATE LIFE OF AN UNMARRIED DIPLOMAT IN PERSIA DURING THE REVOLUTION' (LONDON: HURST & BLACKETT, 1910), P. 98.

defended the right of all Muslims to make independent religious judgements, citing the precedent of the second caliph, 'Umar ibn al-Khattab (634–644), who invited all Muslims to judge the propriety of his actions.

Yet many Islamic modernists, like other modernist intellectuals, remained élitist. Ali Suavi (Turkey, 1838–1878) rejected a definition of freedom that permitted 'saying whatever comes to one's mind', giving the example of a French newspaper that denied the existence of God. 'Abduh offered a warning from the early centuries of Islamic history, when 'every opinion-monger took his stand upon the liberty of thought the Qur'an enjoined', leading to dangerous schisms. Ahmad Khan – while favouring freedom of speech on the pragmatic grounds that open debate advanced the search for truth – was dismissive of 'the opinion or independent judgement of every Tom, Dick, and Harry'.

Other modernists limited *ijtihād* to those who agreed with them. Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi (Egypt, 1801–1873) supported religious freedom 'on condition that it adheres to the principles of religion' – meaning the principles that he emphasized. Rida supported 'freedom of religion, opinion, speech, writing, dress, and work', but not for the 'horde of heretics' who engage in 'chatter, sophistry, audacity in mixing right with wrong, and insolence in criticizing their opponents or critics'. Several authors – though not all – contributed to the polemic between the Sunni and Shi'i sects, considering the other to be disqualified from *ijtihād* by their imperfect faith. And competition within the movement led to other polemics – for example, Rida's resentment at Gasprinskii's leadership of pan-Islamic conference planning in Cairo, or the Calcutta-based challenge to Ahmad Khan's North Indian leadership of the modernist Islamic movement in South Asia.

In sum, the modernists sought to breach the monopoly of traditional religious scholars over Islamic interpretation, and to limit the relativistic damage of this breach, through a single manoeuvre. They expressed confidence in their own qualifications – seminary training, modern education, or personal virtuosity – as compared both with scholarly traditionalists and the 'masses'.

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