

# THE EUROPEAN ENLIGHTENMENT THINKERS AND MODERNIST MUSLIM THINKERS INTERPRETING RELIGION

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## ABSTRACT

In the following text I propose to conduct a trans-civilizational comparison that will be asymmetric in time as it compares 18th century Europe with 19th and 20th century North Africa. Nonetheless, it will be symmetric in scope as it compares similar traits of socio – political and religious life in two different historical contexts. Both of them are at the verge of modernity and aim at defining the role of religion in the altered socio-political and economic circumstances. One of the main aims of this comparative research is to explore the ideas that Voltaire, Rousseau and Kant and Al Afghani and ‘Abduh articulated about religion amid the challenges of modernity. In both cases a new interpretation of religion was sought in order to fit the expectations of time. However, these Enlightenment thinkers and Muhammadan modernists are analyzed together to point out significant differences.

**Key words:** Enlightenment, modernity, religion, Muhammadan modernists, ‘Abduh, Afghani, Voltaire, Rousseau, Kant

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The Age of Enlightenment marked a great intellectual and social movement in the Western European and American countries in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. A wave of rationalization swept over England, France and Germany developing a new paradigm and a significant moral shift and transformation in social organization from traditional towards modern. The old traditional world view based on the teachings of Christianity yield a new understanding of man, society, nature and God. The Age of Enlightenment “implies a general process of society awakening from the dark slumbers of superstition and ignorance”<sup>1</sup> and during this age the Renaissance ideas reached its peak. New ideas expressed by the philosophers had immense impact on multiple disciplines and throughout the layers of society. Philosophers regarded seeking knowledge, classifying, developing novel laws of society outside the traditional worldview and transmitting these new laws to the general populace as their vocation, which was reflected and recognized by the enlightened populace’s mania for the recently compiled collections and dictionaries. Peter Hamilton divided the most important philosophers of this era into three groups. The first include Voltaire (1694-1778) and Montesquieu (1689-1755), who were strongly influenced by the writings of the English political philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) and the scientist Isaac Newton (1642-1727). The second generation includes David Hume (1711-76), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78), Denis Diderot (1713-84), and Jean d’Alembert (1717-83). The third generation is represented by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Adam Smith (1723-90), Anne Robert Turgot (1727-81), the Marquis de Condorcet (1743-94), and Adam Ferguson (1723-1816).<sup>2</sup> The idealization of reason, empiricism, science, universalism, progress, individualism, toleration, freedom, uniformity of human nature, secularism and critique of traditional authorities<sup>3</sup> were the main ideas of the Enlightenment. The philosophers “saw themselves as cosmopolitans, citizens of an enlightened intellectual world who valued the interest of mankind above that of country or clan.”<sup>4</sup>

Economic, social, political and cultural concepts were developed or crystalized during this period and essential instruments for the conception of the world became reason and empiricism. Moreover, modern interpretation and conceptualization of religion, challenging the Christian dogmas and the monopoly of Churches over the truth of religion were central elements of the Enlightenment movement. The truth of religion was now understood as

something that could be tested in objective and natural terms. “The ready response of the rationalists in redefining Christianity in terms of natural religion was a sign of the times”<sup>5</sup> says Haydon and remarks that there was an enthusiasm to investigate the natural religion, natural sciences, natural right and natural law. This period marked the turning point in the study of religion and origins of this new movement lay in the controversies surrounding the Church, the acquired knowledge from other religions and the scientific approach to Christianity. Discussing the Enlightenment in purely anti-religious terms, argues Robert Adams, would not do justice to the – too often neglected – religious dimension of the Enlightenment. Even though the Enlightenment has been a religious movement of religious reform for many, today we hardly speak of the religious dimensions of the Enlightenment because religiosity of the Enlightenment was too individualistic and rationalistic to be considered authentic religion. He makes reference to the Geertzian model of religion that states that “it is intrinsic to religion that it be authoritatively revealed”<sup>6</sup> and concludes that this way of perceiving religion hinders the reader to see the religious dimension of the Enlightenment. In this context we must consider Charles Gliozzo’s remark on the role philosophers of the time played in the French Revolution, contending that the deistic and atheistic writings of philosophers has profoundly influenced the “dechristianization” of the French society.

Dechristianization means the attempt to suppress Christianity either by legislation or by force. In the Revolution, dechristianization took the following forms: aggressive anti-clericalism, prohibition of any Christian practice or worship either in public or private life, closing of the churches, the formation of a revolutionary calendar to replace the Christian one, and the establishment of new religious cults-the Cult of Reason and the Cult of Supreme Being. It is argued here that a direct influence can be traced from the philosophes to the dechristianizers of the Revolution.<sup>7</sup>

Among the more moderate thinkers of the Enlightenment period whom I will come to explain in more detail later, I want to mention others who have expressed radical views on nature, God and the moral system of the enlightened man. The French Denis Diderot

1 P. Hamilton. “The Enlightenment and the Birth of Social Sciences” in S. Hall & B. Gieben (eds.) *Formation of Modernity* (Oxford: The Open University, 1992), 25.

2 Ibid, 25.

3 Ibid, 21-22.

4 Ibid, 24.

5 E. Haydon. “The Interpretation of Religion in Western Tradition”, *The Journal of Religion*, 16, no. 2 (1936), 165.

6 R. M. Adams, “Reading the Silences, Questioning the Terms: A Response to the Focus on Eighteenth-Century”, *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 28, no. 2 (2000), 282.

7 Charles Gliozzo. “The Philosophes and Religion: Intellectual Origins of the Dechristianization Movement in the French Revolution”, *Church History*, 40, 3 (1971), 273.

(1713-1784) and Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789) are representatives of this philosophical view. They and other materialist philosophers nurtured an atheistic understanding of the world and advocated a radical version of dechristianization, denounced all organized religion and claimed that "the priests were charlatans who duped the people in order to produce wealth while Christ was vile and wretched, good for nothing, low-born, ignorant, untalented and awkward."<sup>8</sup> They substituted the revelation with reason as being a guide for good life and the source of knowledge. For some among them God existed while others rejected that idea completely. They turned away from religion as they believed that theistic ideas have been the product of sheer ignorance and the reason for the social and political problems of the day. "Man's ignorance of the powers and possibilities of nature had created God" argued d'Holbach and held that an "atheist, is a man who destroys chimeras prejudicial to the human species, in order to reconduct men back to nature, to experience, and to reason."<sup>9</sup> In this context, reason was held sufficient to understand the world and establish social harmony and justice. Replacing religious arguments, these philosophers put forward and advocated utilitarian philosophical views: "Man's happiness was based on the love of pleasure and the fear of pain in this life only. The greatest happiness was promoted by virtuous actions-when men benefit other people as well as satisfying themselves."<sup>10</sup> Diderot's encyclopedia that was among the twenty one most popular works of its time, with 4000 subscribers, was a medium for propagandizing anti-Christian ideas, Gliozzo claims. The place and prominence of the Church in the society started to be replaced through this and similar philosophies of religion. A new more pragmatic and modern religion was demanded for. In this process the Church became unimportant for public order or the understanding of the world and the democratic state – a concept that emerged with the French Revolution – replaced it. The *state* was to govern and guide its *citizens* instead of ruling over Protestants and Catholics. Theological principles in organizing and ordering the society were gradually replaced, a new place for religion was assigned in the society and new laws of society were defined by political philosophers, such as Rousseau's idea of civil religion.

The writing of the philosophers had immense impact on the French society and among them Voltaire played a central part. The 18<sup>th</sup> century is called the "Age of Voltaire" because of the influence he exposed on his French readers. Voltaire counts as one of the main authors of

the French Enlightenment who utilized poems, satire, irony, lyrics and dramas to transmit his views and ideas. He is the founder of *tendenz-roman*<sup>11</sup> – a type of novel with social and ethical purpose – and its primary example is his *Candide* in which he criticized religion. The play left the audience stirred by the critique of the government and the Christian faith.<sup>12</sup> But Voltaire did not castigate Christianity only. One of the most prominent figures elaborated upon in the 18<sup>th</sup> century French society was the Prophet Muhammad. Various histories of the Prophet appeared as well as the translation of the Quran between 1695 and 1750. The popularity of this Arab prophet encouraged Voltaire to write *Mahomet* but especially through this to "demonstrate the fear, ignorance and fanaticism which he felt was at the base of organized religions."<sup>13</sup>

According to Kahn, *Candide* assigned Voltaire a place in the process of secularization.<sup>14</sup> In *Candide*, Voltaire introduced the concept "one's garden" to describe "any effort that has a direct social purpose, anything that betters the environment"<sup>15</sup> and the philosophy of his work introduced a new "religion of activity" as "work and activity are now no longer valued for the increase they bring to the Glory of God but for their own sake."<sup>16</sup> These ideas would later influence pieces such as Goethe's *Faust*. Although Faust is a sinner, in Goethe's story he is accepted to the Heaven not because he was "good" in the traditional sense of revelation but because he died working and striving. He is saved not because he is striving for something *beyond* this life but because he is living and acting in this world. As such life and activity are values itself, not the strife for a higher purpose.

Further, Voltaire preached a natural religion based on the assumptions that reason rather than supernatural revelation proves the existence of God. Voltaire had certainly acquired knowledge from other religions and cultures and concluded that there exists a common ground, a common truth in all religions. Voltaire saw God as the God of all humans not only Christians and he argued that Christianity cannot be the true religion for it addressed only Christians. Christianity he saw even more the enemy of true religion because it sticks to superstitions which is expressed among other things in crosses and relics. For him the organized religions are the source of all upheaval, fanaticisms and disorder and are the enemy of mankind.<sup>17</sup> The only way to put an end to this fanaticism is to rule out dogma. He rejected

11 B. W. Wells. "The Age of Voltaire", *The Sewanee Review*, 3, 2 (1895), 151.

12 Ibid.

13 R. Tobin. "The Sources of Voltaire's *Mahomet*", *The French Review*, 34, 4 (1961), 372.

14 L. W. Kahn. "Voltaire's *Candide* and the Problem of Secularization", *PMLA*, 67, 5 (1952), 886f.

15 Ibid, 887.

16 Ibid, 886.

17 Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, trans. Peter Gay (New York: Basic Books, 1962). Cited by Gliozzo, *ibid*, 274.

8 Ibid, 280.

9 Ibid, 281.

10 Ibid, 280.

the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation – that Christ was the God-Man – and called for the abolishment of ecclesiastic hierarchy.<sup>18</sup> In his articles *Divinity of Christ* and *Good and Wrong* he expressed his view that Christ was not an ordinary man, for he was a model of reason and virtue but he did not carry two natures in one being. He portrays him as tolerant, kind, sincere, natural and in the face of death, solitary. But Voltaire's Jesus is not the traditional Christian Jesus, because he does not mention miracles, messianic claims and there is no death for the sins of the world.<sup>19</sup> Voltaire's morality was based on tolerance, helpfulness and love for the neighbor and recognition of brotherhood.<sup>20</sup>

Rousseau's philosophy of religion is that men through the experience of sense, perception and conscience rather than reason, will arrive at the truths of natural religion and right conduct.<sup>21</sup> Thus, by knowing his own nature an individual is able to reach the existence of God. In *Emilé* he wrote in the voice of one of his characters:

I know full well that he exists, and that he exists of himself alone; I know that my existence depends on his, and that all things which are known to me depend absolutely upon him. I perceive God everywhere in his works: I feel him within myself...<sup>22</sup>

Even though Rousseau attacks the Christian dogmas and miracles his aim was not to discredit religion but to find a better religion. In both of his main works *Emilé* the actor realizes the existence of God through nature and in *Contract Social* the citizen finds refuge in civil religion. He believed in Christ as the ideal human being but not in the Christianity with its dogmas and miracles. Rousseau's God does not interfere with the actions of humans allowing for the human freedom over actions. Further, he teaches that evil does not originate with God but that it starts with man. However, evil is not inherent with the human being but it has origin in the society because the natural state of the human is good as "all the first impulses of nature are good and right". In other words, the human is originally good and with this he rejects the Christian dogma of original sin.

Rousseau regards civil religion the best form of religion for societies because it "unites

the notion of a divine being with the love of law... It teaches civil and religious obedience... teaches citizens that duty to their country fulfills duty to God."<sup>23</sup> According to Rousseau there is a crucial part religion plays in a functioning society: if society is composed of members who have undergone a conversion to what he describes as the "natural religion of the heart" this conversion enables individuals to trade private willfulness and egoism for social cooperation and genuine selfhood.<sup>24</sup> The principles of civil religion as he envisioned it can be summarized as "to love God above all things and to love our neighbor as ourselves is the whole law; the service of the heart is the first of these moral duties, but without faith, there is no such thing as true virtue."<sup>25</sup> Civil religion is for Rousseau the best model of religion because it has a private and public activity because it encourages the citizens of the state to love each other and fulfil their duties towards the state. But he emphasizes the necessity to find the "natural" spirituality which is free of superstition and errors of traditional Christianity. A good man "orders his life to serve the whole while the wicked man makes use of the whole to serve himself" and the good life is "ordered in relationship to the common center, which is God, and to all the concentric circles, which are God's creatures"<sup>26</sup> he argues. The civil religion is practiced by moral and dutiful citizens, who are tolerant to each other. It is the solution for division and violence and establishes a perfect moral order. Because of the importance it plays Rousseau states that the individual has first to accept the civil religion and then his personal religion.<sup>27</sup> For Rousseau reason and freedom are the most defining elements in his philosophy but he recognized the crucial function religion plays in a society.

Following the footsteps of Rousseau in 1784 Immanuel Kant invoke his contemporaries to *Sapere aude!* "Have courage to use your own reason" coining in this way the motto of the Age of Enlightenment. In *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* Kant claimed that all human beings are free, possess the rational faculty but often chose freely not to obey to the moral law and decide not to act rationally.<sup>28</sup> Similar to what has been mentioned previously on Rousseau's views of religion, Kant saw that revelation can be authority and dictate what one should do and therefore is necessary for the functioning of moral community. In *What is Enlightenment* Kant made a distinction between private and public use of reason to illustrate

18 Gliozzo, "The Philosophes and Religion", 275.

19 Cladis, M.S. "Rousseau and Durkheim: The Relation between the Public and the Private", *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 21, 1 (1993), 19.

20 Gliozzo, "The Philosophes and Religion", 276.

21 Ibid, 277.

22 Jean Jacques Rousseau. *Emile*, ed. Francois and Pierre Richard (Paris: Garier frbres, 1961), cited by Gliozzo in "The Philosophes and Religion", op. cit., 276.

23 D. Fourny. "Rousseau's Civil Religion Reconsidered", *The French Review*, 60, 4 (1987), 489.

24 Cladis. "Rousseau and Durkheim", op. cit., 16.

25 Rousseau, *Emile*, 385, ibid, 278.

26 Ibid, 19.

27 Fourny, "Rousseau's Civil Religion Reconsidered", 494.

28 P. Enns. "Reason and Revelation: Kant and the Problem of Authority", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 62, 2 (2007), 103-114.

the importance of freedom. Kant's understanding of the public use of reason is the exercise of reason free of authority, while private use of reason is whenever there is an external authority influencing the thoughts and actions of individuals. "The public use of one's reason must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among men"<sup>29</sup> he argues. Following Kant's differentiation between private and public reason an individual who practices religion accepts external authority that guides him in his actions. Thereby, he exercises private reason. On the other hand, in matters of the social organization, economic or political issues man must utilize public reason that is free of any religious or political authorities. He illustrates this on the example of a priest who delivers the sermons every Sunday to his congregation. As he accepts the framework and guidelines of his religion and conveys religious arguments, the priest performs the private use of reason. But when he acts as a scholar and adds his thoughts and critiques he exercises public reasoning and as such should be free to point to the errors of the Church system. Kant did not advocate a society of clergymen who would determine the unchangeable truths of the Church, for to consolidate a religious institution with permanent premises which are not open to alterations goes against the spirit of Enlightenment, prevents progress, limits freedom and offends the most fundamental traits of human nature. Supreme state authorities must allow for the unlimited use of freedom in religious matters by non-interference and openness to public criticism and suggestions. Such an environment would ensure stability and peace in the society. An enlightened state man, who is not afraid of shadows,<sup>30</sup> sees religious Enlightenment in his own interest and perceives "no danger in allowing his subjects to make public use of their reason and to publish their thoughts on a better formulation of his legislation."<sup>31</sup> Thus according to Kant revelation, reason and freedom are crucial ingredients for peace, harmony and Enlightenment to follow.

What has been said so far will be in the following connected to the reformist movement in Egypt of the 19<sup>th</sup> century which was inaugurated by Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905) under significant influence of his teacher Jamal ad-Din al Afghani (1838-1897). Additional to these two reformist thinkers another Muhammad is mentioned, Rashid Rida (1865-1935). In order to understand the circumstances that led to the "Muhammadan modernism", a term coined by Charles Adams to refer to the thinkers of the Egyptian reformist movement,<sup>32</sup> we will proceed

to Ernest Renan's lecture, to define briefly the main points of the dilemma and challenges the Muslim world found itself amid the European scientific, intellectual, philosophical and military domination.

When in March 1883 Ernest Renan gave his lecture on *Islam and Science* at the Sorbonne University he tried to explain the ambiguity contained in the words: Arab science, Arab philosophy, Arab art, Muslim science and Muslim civilization and to elaborate the causes for the decadence of the Muslim world he experienced visiting the Orient and Africa. He developed the argument that Islam itself is the source of the scientific and technological backwardness of the Muslim world. Religious Muslims were incapable of conceiving and absorbing science and ideas outside the scope of religion:

All who have been to the Orient or to Africa are struck by what is the inevitably narrow-mindedness of a true believer, of that kind of iron ring around his head, making it absolutely closed to science, incapable of learning anything or of opening itself up to any new idea.<sup>33</sup>

Further he describes how Muslims are characterized by religious fanaticism and scorn towards anything that constitutes the European spirit such as education and. Further, he offers his conception of the history of the Muslim civilization where he argues that the Arabs were incapable of science and philosophy and therefore only with the aid of Persians, Christians and Greek philosophy achieved their past glories. His reading of history concludes that the achievements of the *mutakallimun* and the philosophical and scientific movement of the Islamic civilization were achieved once orthodox strictness diminished. The death of Ibn Rushd marks for Renan a crucial moment as it represents simultaneously the Muslim countries gradual decline and the slow awaking of the European genius, rationalism and the beginnings of Europe's great path to scientific and intellectual accomplishment.<sup>34</sup> After the death of this last Muslim philosopher history of the Muslim World took a drastic turn. In 1200 A.D. Muslim theological reactions killed science and philosophy and "soon the Turkish race will take the hegemony of Islam, and its total lack of philosophical and scientific spirit will prevail everywhere."<sup>35</sup> Moreover, he argues that intellectual and scientific achievements

29 I. Kant. *Was ist Aufklärung?* (Königsberg: 1784), 2.

30 In the Allegory of the Cave Plato describes the people of the cave who believe that the perceived shadows constitute the truth.

31 Kant, 4.

32 Charles C. Adams. *Islam and Modernism in Egypt* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968), 1.

33 E. Renan, *Islam and Science*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Montreal: McGill University Press, 2011), 3.

34 Ibid, 12.

35 Ibid, 14.

of the Islamic civilization in the past could not be attributed to it as Islam condemned and punished scientists and philosophers who were interested in anything beyond orthodox Islamic dogmas.<sup>36</sup> In sum, Islam was against science and philosophy and there was no authentic Arabic science and philosophy. For him, animosity towards the scientific is present in each social organization where dogma reigns but this is true especially for Islam as Islam equates science to evil. The West rescued itself from religious tutelage of the Middle Ages when it recognized that science and rationalism is the soul of society and that it creates social superiority. By defining the Muslims incapable of science and philosophy Renan introduced a racial and religious discrimination into the debate. Now a yawning gap exists between two civilizations and could only be closed by administrative and political reforms. The Islamic values, culture and traditions, he suggests, must be replaced by Western political authorities and administration. Bernard Lewis affirms this view that all the problems of the Middle East are because of Islam.<sup>37</sup>

How did European Enlightenment ideas formulated here in the form of a Renan's critique of the Muslim world influence Muslim thinkers? In responding to Renan how did the Muslim thinkers imagine the future and how did this debate shape their interpretation of Islam? The philosophical considerations on the relationship between the Church and state, the religion and society during the Enlightenment period in Europe swept over to the Muslim countries and sparked debates. However, these discussions that took place in the Muslim world under different social, political and economic circumstances. The Muhammadan modernist movement developed out of the need to defend Muslim territory from the occupiers. The Muslim countries were not only outperformed but dominated by the West. The Muhammadan modernists sought to give answers to how to deal with these emerging challenges, placed in front of the Muslim world. In Africa, Syria, Turkey and India<sup>38</sup> Muslim intellectuals endeavored to formulate answers to complex questions: How did Europe achieve the scientific and intellectual blossoming while the Muslim countries stagnated if Islam is the only true religion? Why did the Muslims become politically weak? What should be done with the Western colonizers? How can Muslims regain their political, social and economic strength? What is the role of Islam as a religion in these necessary reforms? How to establish the balance between philosophy and religion? It seems that while giving answers to these questions the

Muslim modernists chose to fit into the paradigm of Enlightenment philosophers. Having said this we turn now to Muhammadan modernism's conceptualization of religion and what role it should play in modern Muslim societies.

New expectations from their religion appeared and philosophers aimed at finding solutions. Francis Robinson observed correctly when he suggested that Islam scholars now started to define Islam with a "This-Worldly" focus and not the "Other-Worldly."<sup>39</sup> Because of the encroachment of the West on the Islamic world the piety of Muslims was now to be defined in new terms. Critics of Other-worldly piety, intensified interest in the life of the Prophet the emphasis on *ijtihad* and activism in this world was what constituted the idea of what Cantwell Smith termed "the caliphate of Man": the responsibility to fashion the Islamic society was in the hands of each man individually.<sup>40</sup>

In his *Answer to Renan* Afghani refuted the formers surmise that Arabs and Islam are incapable of science and philosophy by stating proofs for the intellectual superiority and natural attachment to philosophy in the history of the Islamic civilization. Therefore it is important to ask how Arab civilization found itself in this state. Afghani's view is that Muslims are able and must embrace modern science for their civilization to survive. Similar to Renan he argues that all religions, Islam and Christianity, "impose on man its faith while philosophy frees it totally or in part."<sup>41</sup> The struggle between religion and philosophy, dogma and free investigation is present in all societies. For him however science, reason and philosophy are tools that should be used by intellectual elites only because "reason and science does not completely satisfy humanity, which thirsts for the ideal and which likes to exist in dark and distant regions."<sup>42</sup> Philosophy thus is a domain of the few while religion is for the masses. The Egyptian modernism had common features with the Aristotelian and neo-Platonic systems of the early Muslim reformists which were at the same time the philosophical source of Western philosophers. The Muslim modernists proclaimed the use of reason over the literalist interpretation of the scriptures. The world and nature could be explained by natural laws which are accessible to the human mind and not exclusively by tradition. "Mankind ignores the real causes of natural events and follows an 'educator' [prophet, religious leader] who

39 F. Robinson, "Other-Worldly and This-Worldly Islam and the Islamic Revival. A Memorial Lecture for Wilfred Cantwell Smith", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 14, 1 (2004), 47-58.

40 Ibid, 51.

41 S. Al Afghani. *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 110.

42 Ibid.

36 Ibid, 16.

37 See Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 26ff and 31ff, etc.

38 See C. Smith, *Modern Islam in India* (Lahor: Minerva Books, 1943).

resorts to imagination and makes them believe that some outside Being is the cause of the events<sup>43</sup> says Afghani in his response to Renan. Nevertheless, no society can be guided by reason only, but needs revelation/religion for a harmonious and ordered flow as otherwise chaos would break out. Afghani further claimed that the Qur'an has infinite meanings and as it is inexhaustible no generation can reach the final truth but can only add to the knowledge of humanity.<sup>44</sup> Emphasize on *ijtihad* to renew the faith was a common trait of the Muhammadan modernist philosophers. Afghani's writings and work were heavily influenced by the Western encroachment. He believed that political revolution was the appropriate means by which he could achieve reform and unification of the Muslim lands which was expressed in his efforts for Pan-Islamism.<sup>45</sup> Instead of educational and gradual reform he urged for the overthrow of the existing order.

His less radical and more constructive and essential teachings on religious and educational reform are found in the concluding part of his *Refutation of the Materialists* and they molded the thinking, preaching and writing of his student Muhammad 'Abduh and defined his activities and social work. 'Abduh's primary education let him experience the deficiencies of the teaching methods in the traditional Islamic education system. He was disappointed by the methods in primary education and held the same opinion about Al-Azhar University where he started his education in 1866.<sup>46</sup> The primary aim of education in this system was to transmit traditional Islamic sciences in an authentic manner and 'Abduh criticized the absence of independent research and the lack of interest for natural sciences.<sup>47</sup> Instead 'Abduh adopted Al Afghani's methods of instruction, his interpretation of the Qur'an and the understanding of the texts. Max Horten points out in *The Thought-World of Muhammad 'Abduh* that Muhammad 'Abduh's accomplishments in the discipline of philosophy or sciences were not significant but that his achievements in the religious awakening must be acknowledged.<sup>48</sup> Adams allied with his arguments and states that the social work, writings and the teaching vocation left no leisure time that would have allowed 'Abduh to develop a new school of philosophy. On the other hand, even though 'Abduh valued the philosophical instrument of logic and found it to be useful for matters of religious proofs, 'Abduh displayed a vivid skepticism towards the

early schools of philosophy and argued that the issues of the Muslim world were caused by the mingling of the arts of philosophy with the religious studies.<sup>49</sup> 'Abduh was aware of the social, moral and intellectual weaknesses of the Muslim societies and claimed that the cure for such conditions was the return to "true" Islam emancipated from inventions that were added and are misleading Muslims. New interpretations of the religious texts have to be encouraged and in this way the individual and the society has to be taught the "real" Islam.

To achieve this 'Abduh stressed the importance of education. The individual Muslim has to understand his own religion, he has to have religious education that will allow him to improve the conditions of the Muslim world. In addition to this, he advocated several other steps to improve the conditions of the Muslim societies. The various sects and divisions in Islam needed to be united, the essentials of the religion had to be defined and an intellectual revolution had to take place that would promote public education and redraft the curricula to include secular sciences.<sup>50</sup> In his book Seyyed Hosein Nasr differentiates between two general attitudes of Muslims in the Muslim world at that time: the first advocating the need for a return to purified Islam while the second view urged for change, modification or reform of the Qur'anic messages so that they fit the challenges of the modern world.<sup>51</sup> Thus, 'Abduh's and his followers' strategy was a combination of both orthodox Islam as understood by the first generations and a new system that was appropriate and be reflective of the needs and challenges of the modern times.

Religious awakening in the Muslim world was the solution rather than political revolution. Essential for the awakening was the need to understand the Qur'an in a proper way and an alternative interpretation if the Qur'an was offered by 'Abduh that would be responsive to current conditions. The character of his theology is reflected in his major systematic work the *Risalah al-Tawhid* as being simple, available and understandable by the masses of people, not overloaded with the doctrinal discussions and religious polemics, instead offering only the doctrines he thought to be the most vital. The modern and rationalist school of *Tafsir al-Manar* reflects the imperative of the use of reason and freedom in interpretation. The Modernists made a breach with Islam and the understanding of religion. The new *tafsir* was pragmatically oriented, rationalistic and aimed at purifying Islam by freeing it from legends and ideas of the earlier 'ulema. Examples of this are the interpretation of the second Surah and Surah

43 Al Afghani, 107.

44 N. Keddie. *Islamic Philosophy and Islamic Modernism: The Case of Sayyid Jam l ad-D n al-Afgh n* (Tehran, Iran: British Institute of Persian Studies, 6 (1968), 54.

45 Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt*, op. cit., 13.

46 Ibid, 22

47 Ibid, 28.

48 Ibid, 106.

49 Ibid, 122-125.

50 Ibid, 109.

51 S. Nasr. *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 81.

*Kawthar*.<sup>52</sup> The responsibility of every individual is to know the articles of faith, to be able to read the Book of God and not derive religious knowledge from the treaties of theologians.<sup>53</sup> ‘Abduh gave importance to the unity among Muslims as much influential on ‘Abduh as the caution of the limits of reason.<sup>54</sup> The former was reflected in his avoidance of secondary religious discussion in his writings that would disturb the unity of the Muslim world and the latter was reflected in the limitation of reason in regard of predestination, the nature of the creation of God and the knowledge of soul.

When it comes to the relationships between religion and science and religion and reason ‘Abduh states that Islam is the religion of reason. Intellect enables the human to reach the knowledge of God and from this belief in God he can arrive at any other essential belief in Islam. When conflict arises between reason and the traditional meaning (*naql*) ‘Abduh argues that priority should be given to what has been arrived at with reason. Further, his standpoint is that religion aids reason and argued simultaneously that reason is the test for religion. “It is the duty of reason, after it has determined that a prophet is to be accepted as a true prophet to believe all that he came to reveal.”<sup>55</sup> Further, he argued that the Prophet himself assigned to reason the role of arbiter between good and evil and “Islam yells at reason in such a way that it is aroused from deep sleep.”<sup>56</sup> It is not an obligation for Muslims to believe in something that is logically impossible because the revelation cannot be in contradiction with reason. In this way he breaks with the chains of *taqlid*— the acceptance of belief in the authority of others – and states that every individual has to be guided by his own reasoning, science and understanding of universe. Distinction between good and evil is natural and can be perceived by common sense – made by reason without the aid of dogma.<sup>57</sup> Islam as a religion of reason has to be revived by reason, blind acceptance is not what Islam commands and in order to be a believer one has to use reason. *Iman* is not complete if it is not based on reason.<sup>58</sup>

52 M. M. Sharif. *A History of Muslim Philosophy* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1966), 1505-6.

53 Adams, 116.

54 Ibid, 118-120.

55 Ibid, 129.

56 H. Nasution. *The Place of Reason in ‘Abduh’s Theology Its Impact on His Theological System and Views* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1968), 57.

57 See M. Kerr “Muhammad ‘Abduh and Natural Law”, 103-153 in M. Kerr *Islamic Reform: The Political and Legal Theories of Muhammad ‘Abduh and Rashid Rida* (Cambridge: University Press, 1966).

58 Nasution, 58.

Belief on authority, without reason and guidance is a characteristic of the godless. For one becomes a believer only when he grasps his religion with reason, and comprehend it with his soul, so that he becomes fully convinced of it.<sup>59</sup>

‘Abduh argues for the independent investigation and freedom of each individual to interpret religion. Therefore he advocated for tolerance among the different sects of Islam. Science and Islam are not in exclusion of each other. The nature and the Book were revealed to encourage humanity to use intellect to understand the laws behind it. However, for ‘Abduh only the elected few have a capacity of reason, while the masses have to be satisfied with revelation. ‘Abduh claims that the elite has a two way relationship with God: revelation and reason. Revelation has an informative or confirmative function, the former adding to the knowledge reached by reason and the latter confirming what has been reached already by reason.<sup>60</sup> As science and education are the primary source of power in the West, Muslim societies have to follow the imperatives of Islam that promotes the pursuit of natural sciences. Adams noted that ‘Abduh aspired to create an interpretation of religion that was in harmony with natural sciences and with the scientific theories developed in the West such as the theory of evolution and the survival of the fittest.<sup>61</sup> ‘Abduh criticizes the reliance of the people on the saints and even though he does not deny the possibility of some men and women to have cognizance of the other world and some miracles he is not in favor of it. ‘Abduh’s attitude not to state precisely the theological school he preferred led to heated discussions on the nature of his theology and doctrines. On the one hand, Nasution argues that although ‘Abduh tried to conceal his Mu‘tezili theology by using an orthodox cover, his reforms could only be realized in the Mu‘tezili theological system with the belief in the great power of reason and man’s independence.<sup>62</sup> Only in the framework of this theological school he could have realized what he aimed at. Hildebrandt, nevertheless, emphasizes that the pure fact that ‘Abduh’s theological positions in some points explicitly reflect the Mu‘tezili school of thought are not sufficient to label him a Mu‘tezili or Neo-Mu‘tezili.<sup>63</sup> In summary, Islam has thus to be understood as accessible by every individual and the true Islam is that of its earliest generation in its purist and simplest form.

59 Adams, 131.

60 Nasution, 37-42.

61 Adams, 132-142.

62 Nasution, 253-267.

63 T. Hildebrandt. *Waren Jamal ad-Din al-Afani und Muhammad ‘Abduh Neo-Mu‘teziliten?*, Brill, 2002, 243-262; see also T. Hildebrandt *Neo-Mu‘tezilismus?: Intention und Kontext im Modernen Arabischen Umgang mit dem Rationalistischen Erbe des Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).



I raised my voice to free the mind from the chains on authority and to understand the religion as the early generation understood it, before the appearance of division among them and to return to the original sources of the branches of the sciences of religion in order to attain a proper knowledge of them.<sup>64</sup>

When Roman Loimeier compared and contrasted the socio – economic and political circumstances that preceded the Reformist movement in Europe and Muslim movements of reform in the Sub-Saharan countries he asked “Is there a Muslim Luther?”<sup>65</sup> Now that we have analyzed the main principles of Muhammad ‘Abduh’s reform and identified certain similarities with the Enlightenment ideas I ask “Is there a Muslim Voltaire, Kant or Rousseau?” If Afghani identified himself with Luther and the Reformist movement<sup>66</sup> has ‘Abduh become the Muslim Voltaire? The revival and reform inaugurated by Muhammad ‘Abduh can be said to be reliant on the Western paradigms developed during the Enlightenment period. Elements of natural law and morality, puritanism, critique of the *‘ulema* (Muslim scholars), emphasize on individualism, freedom of action, free will and the importance of reason combined to create an “Islamic rationalism” and a natural religion out of Islam free of traditional interpretation of the Qur’an and *Sunna*. The rationalistic approach together with the political and psychological oppression by the occupiers after Napoleon’s victory over Egypt was gradually transformed in a political ideology, Islamism.<sup>67</sup> Instead of defining the ethical framework for the modern Muslim living in the altered socio – political circumstances the Salafist movement argued for the return to the pure Islam. Neither “Islamic rationalism” nor “Islamic puritanism” solved the problems of the Muslim world. ‘Abduh’s approach posed many question but did not provide any solutions. By analyzing the Islamic sources in an exclusively rationalistic manner ‘Abduh has neglected other additional sources of knowledge in Islam such as Islam’s mystical knowledge. The modern Muslim mind has become skeptical of such knowledge and relies only on rational and empirically based knowledge. Further, “the secular elites in the Muslim world behave no differently from their western counterparts in their ambivalence or hostility to increase the role of religion in society.”<sup>68</sup> Have Muslims created a “westernized” Islam as Allawi suggests?

64 Adams, 174.

65 R. Loimeier. *Is There Something like “Protestant Islam”?* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 216-254.

66 Ibid, 245.

67 See R. Schulze, *Die Politisierung des Islam im 19. Jahrhundert* (Leiden: Brill, 1982), 103-116.

68 Ali Allawi. *The Crisis of Islamic Civilization* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 267.

The modern West is based on the ideas of Enlightenment and its societies, economics, politics and religion are shaped by those ideas. At the same time the framework created in the 18<sup>th</sup> century creates problems for the Western civilization. René Guenon explained in his article *Material Civilization* the very materialist character of the modern Western civilization, the traits of which are recognizable in each and every sphere. Modern man calls only “science” that which deals with the sensible world, uses scientific method and rejects anything that is not dealing with the material world. For moderns “nothing exists other than what can be seen and touched; even if they admit theoretically that something else may exist they hasten to declare it not merely unknown but ‘unknowable’”<sup>69</sup> and the “scientific” is reduced to what can be measured and quantified only. Guenon argued that the whole scientific pursuit of the modern West is how to deal with matter and how to quantify it. In this material world heading towards quantification industry and machinery are at its center while the individual has become its slave. Commerce and finance dominate the public and private relations in the material civilization, material satisfaction and “making money” fulfill the modern society. The values of the modern West oppose traditional aspirations to the extent that Guenon refuses to call the modern Western civilization Christian.<sup>70</sup> To become clearer about the dichotomy that exists today between the traditional and modern world view it is necessary to mention the attitudes of believers towards their faith today. Armstrong claims that because “Western modernity has led to an entirely different notion of truth, [...] man can no longer be religious in quite the same way as his ancestors.”<sup>71</sup> This is because the doctrines of religion cannot be proven logically nor empirically. Because the modern world has lost its sense for symbols, what was accepted and unquestioned traditionally now seems untrue. In the process of rationalization of faith the Christian mythology and Biblical stories, notes Armstrong, had to coincide with historical or scientific evidence rather than permitting them their traditional role as transmitters of meaning and values.

This was true as well for member of other religions. The shock a group of Jews felt when they fled from the Iberian Peninsula to Amsterdam, where they met for the first time with a Jewish community that freely practiced the laws and customs of Judaism was big. Jews who did not know how to pray and perform rituals in the Iberia relied on their reason to give meaning to the rituals and prayers. They have studied mathematics, physics, logic and

69 R. Guénon. “A Material Civilization” in H. Oldmeadow (ed.) *The Betrayal of Tradition: Essays on the Spiritual Crisis of Modernity* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005), 17.

70 Ibid, 27.

71 K. Armstrong. “Faith and Modernity” in H. Oldmeadow (ed.) *The Betrayal of Tradition*, op. cit., 72.

medicine. What they saw in the new community was senseless, barbaric and some of them refused to accept explanations of the rabbi and were excluded from the community. One of them was the physician Juan (Daniel) de Prado who took refuge in Amsterdam and was excluded from the community because of his heretic attitudes.<sup>72</sup> Reason alone became the measure of truth. In the essay *Spirituality and Science – Convergence or Divergence* Seyyed Hossein Nasr discusses the importance of science in the life of modern man and the exclusivist manner in which science and spirituality are dealt with. Science in the modern era is the sole legitimate form of knowledge and scientists the new priest determining the meaning of life to the masses.<sup>73</sup> Nasr emphasizes the fact that spirituality and science recognize and operate within different “realities”. While traditional spirituality understands under reality what is beyond the categorization and conceptualization of human mind, for science reality constitutes what can be experienced through the five senses and thus scientifically proven. While authentic spirituality depends on revelation from a higher being science is based on the set of rational premises created by scientists.<sup>74</sup> The greatest gap is apparent in the realm of ethics: while “ethical values are inseparable from the acts and deeds of spiritually realized men and women” the “modern science as a system of knowledge is ethically neutral and in fact ethical questions are irrelevant to it.”<sup>75</sup> But Nasr’s argument goes beyond elaborating the divergence between spirituality and scientific knowledge. He called for the convergence of these two sources of knowledge and the creation of a “sacred sciences”.

The aim of this paper has been to sketch the history of ideas that developed and were written down by the Enlightenment philosophers with special accent on how they conceptualized the world around them, how they evaluated the function of religion, reason and freedom and how they perceived the role of revelation, the individual and institutionalized Church in the modern state. Voltaire was critical to the established Church authorities and the manner they justified their sovereignty. He also expressed his critique on the Christian religion and called for the natural religion free of superstition, where the virtue of man was measured by his tolerance towards the other and by the degree he serves the wellbeing of his society. Rousseau carried Voltaire’s thought on religion further and coined the term “civil religion”. Similarly, Kant encouraged the use of reason in matters of religion but at the same time saw revelation

as an important element of society. To interpret the time of Enlightenment as anti-religious and exclusively atheistic is false, rather our retrospective understanding of that period is incomplete. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century most of the great thinkers were religious in one or another way but criticized the way religion was misused to manipulate the society. The aim of these philosophers was to give religion a new meaning and to create a better society. Reason was not used instead of religion. It was rather used in order to understand the world around and improve the social condition. As earlier noted modern societies will have to reconsider and redefine the relationship between science, politics, economy, society and religion.

Similar problems and dynamics have emerged in the Islamic world. The Muhammadan reformist movement in Egypt has eagerly suggested a reinterpretation of Islam based almost exclusively on reason. It is important however to mention that the reform and religious revival movements in the Muslim world even when bearing similarities with the European Enlightenment have emerged in different circumstances. After the rise of the West as a political and economic hegemony and scientific and military power the Muslim world became subject under the psychological, physical and intellectual occupation of the West. To free the Muslim society from its occupiers Al-Afghani argued for a reorganization of society based on Islam and an international Muslim community, the Qur’anic *ummah*. ‘Abduh called for a religious reform, reinterpreting the tenets of Islam with reason, individually and independent from the opinions of the *‘ulema*. Nonetheless, nationalism and absence of practical religion in the Muslim world is common. It is ironical how every bank in the Muslim world has a *masjid* to pray but continues to rely on a non-Islamic banking system writes Allawi in *The Crisis of the Islamic Civilization*. The Muslims have forgotten the roots of their creativity and vitality. In the political, economic, public and private sphere it seems that modern Western ideas of modernity prevail. Take as an example a worker in the guild the *futuwwa* has to say about his work, the spirit of the guild:

I myself acquired the skill only after many long years... I gradually came to understand that there is nothing fortuitous about this craft, that each movement and each procedure is the bearer of an element of wisdom. But not everyone can understand this. But even if one does not know this, it is still stupid to rob men of the inheritance of the prophets and to put them in front of a machine where, day in and day out, they must perform a meaningless task.

72 Yirmiyahu Yovel. *Spinoza and Other Heretics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 75.

73 S. H. Nasr. “Spirituality and Science—Convergence or Divergence?” in H. Oldmeadow (ed.) *The Betrayal of Tradition*, op. cit., 276.

74 Ibid, 278-280.

75 Ibid, 281.

The Muslim world has reshaped their cities' infrastructure according to the Western ideals, imported their work practices, social norms and political structure. But at the same time the issues created by such a Western modernity were imported into Muslim territory. Modernity challenges both East and West.

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