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### **Muhammad Abduh (Dr Lars Berger, University of Salford/Manchester, UK)**

Muhammad Abduh is a leading representative of 19<sup>th</sup> century Muslim reformist thinking also known as Salafiyya. Like Sayyid al-Din al-Afghani and Rashid Rida he wanted to apply the role model of the pious forefathers of early Islam (al-salaf al-salih) to help the contemporary Muslim world cope with the challenges of domestic decline and Western modernity. Abduh is mostly known for his attempts to formulate a compromise acceptable to Arab conservatives and radical modernizers as well as the introduction of social innovations such as universal education for all Egyptians irrespective of gender.

Abduh was born in 1849 into an educated peasant family in a small village in the Egyptian Nile delta. It was his uncle, a prominent Sufi, who convinced him to continue his studies at a local religious school even though Abduh felt deeply distressed about the extent of rote learning. Eventually pursuing higher education at the famous al-Azhar University in Cairo, he met Sayyid al-Din Al-Afghani whose calls for pan-Islamic renewal strongly influenced him. Even though he was critical of their tactics, Abduh supported the goals of the nationalist Egyptian opposition. The failure of the 1882 anti-British revolt under Colonel Ahmad Urabi thus led to his exile. During their time in Paris al-Afghani and Abduh set up an organization called *Al-'Urwa al-Wuthqa* (The Firm Bond) which published a short-lived magazine of the same name that spread their ideas about Islamic unity and renewal in the face of Western political and military dominance.

Before Abduh was allowed to return to Egypt in 1888 he taught for three years in Beirut. The lectures he gave there would form the basis of *Risalat al-Tawhid* (Treatise on the Oneness of God). There, he argued that nations were looking for a 'religion with a mind to think' and that reason and faith are complimentary and not each others' foes. By demonstrating that science and reason are, in themselves, Islamic, Abduh tried to show that the claims to truth of Islam and science could be harmonized. One would only have to strive to discover the truly unchanging and essential aspects of Islam to find evidence for its compatibility with the demands of the modern world. According to Abduh this could be done through the instrument of *ijtihad*, i.e. the independent reasoning about religious sources, which he set against the practice of *taqlid*, i.e. the blind imitation of religious scholars. He hoped that such arguments would entice conservative religious scholars into accepting necessary reforms while preventing those who were infatuated with Western science and progress from completely discarding the role of Islam.

Over time, Abduh began to accept the British presence and even befriended Lord Cromer who would appoint him Grand Mufti of Egypt, the ultimate authority of interpreting Islamic law in Egypt, in 1899. He justified his stance by describing the British occupation as a temporary necessity until the reform of the education system meant that the Egyptians would be able to rule themselves again. Being rather cautious on the question of democratic reform he was willing to condone an incremental development from local self-government to a representative assembly. However, like al-Afghani Abduh accepted the popular right to dispose of an unjust ruler in the name of the common good (*maslaha*). Again, his cautious reformism meant Abduh would earn the criticism and distrust from conservative traditionalists on the one hand and ardent supporters of change on the other.

#### Sidebar Rewind:

Abduh's call to differentiate between the eternally true and valid aspects of Islam and those deemed to be of changeable nature contrasts with the total rejection of innovation (bid'a) in the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam.

#### Sidebar fast forward:

Abduh's attempts to reconcile the requirements of social progress with the belief in the superiority of Islam were attacked not only from religious conservatives who rejected his criticism of their role in the perceived decline of Islam and those fundamentalists who like the Wahhabis demanded a much more literal understanding of the original texts. For many secularists Abduh's philosophical fence-sitting did not sufficiently address such essential questions like whether the Koran was created. This meant that Abduh's thinking was soon overshadowed by the social and political program developed by Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna.

See also: Arabi Pasha; Education, "New"; Imperialism; Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani; Wahhabis

#### Further reading:

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