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## MUHAMMAD ABDUH'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO MODERNITY

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper analyzes the contributions of Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh to modernity, and his struggle for change and reform in al-Azhar and Egyptian society. Abduh was hailed as the "first leader of modern thought in Egypt", "the father of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Muslim thought" and "pioneers of the modernist movement in the Arab world", whose legacy in the history of Islamic reform was significant, carrying dynamic role in the transformation and reinterpretation of Islam in contemporary thought. His contribution to Islamic modernism was clearly seen in liberalizing the educational system, restructuring the mufti (jurist consult) office, transforming the Islamic worldview, championing Islamic feminism and integrating western and Islamic ideals and tradition.*

**Keywords:** Muhammad Abduh, Islamic modernism, educational reform, Pan Islam, Western and Islamic ideals.

### INTRODUCTION

The contributions of Muhammad Abduh to modern Islamic movement was definitive, and his role in the formation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Islamic reform was phenomenal, for "he had inaugurated a new temper of religion and scholarship in Egypt to which 'more than any other single man (he) gave...a centre of gravity and created...a literature inspired by definite ideas of progress within an Islamic framework.'" (H.A.R. Gibb, 1928). This paper discusses Abduh's contribution to modernity and his dynamic influences throughout the Muslim society. It will begin with brief discussion on the meaning and definition of modernity and modernist Islam with extensive reference to works of several academic authorities in the field.

### The Nature of Modernity

Modernity, or the modern age, is usually defined as post-traditional, post-medieval historical period (Heidegger 1938, 66-67), marked by the move from feudalism toward capitalism, industrialization, secularization, rationalization, the nation-state and its constituent institutions and forms of surveillance (Barker 2004, 444). From conceptual understanding, modernity relates to modern era and to modernism, but forms a distinct idea. Whereas the enlightenment refers to specific movement in western philosophy, modernity tends to refer only to social relations associated with the rise of capitalism. Modernity may also refer to certain intellectual cultures, particularly the movement associated with secularization and post-industrial life, such as Marxism, existentialism, and some formal establishment of social science. Modernity has been

associated contextually with intellectual movement of 1436-1789 and extending to 1970s or later period (Toulmin 1992, 3-5).

Modernity denotes the renunciation of the past, favoring a new beginning, and a reinterpretation of historical origin. Central to modernity is the emancipation from religion, especially the hegemony of Christianity, and subsequent call for secularization. The idea of modernity has many ramifications in politics, sociology, culture, philosophy, science, and art.

The distinction between modernity and modernism, modern, and modernization begin to arise in the nineteenth century (Delanty 2007) with such attempt to define its precise meaning and nature in modern time.

John F. Wilson defined “modern” as “a correlative term: it implies what is new as opposed to what is ancient, what is innovative as opposed to what is traditional or handed down.” (Wilson 1987, 18). Modern, therefore, must be viewed as a relative term historically (e.g. what one considered to be modern sculpture of architecture in 1900 was much different than the modern expressions of art in 1990). (Berry, 1990, 7). Richard Bendix describe ‘modern society’ as “the social conditions of the present, or of recent times including the present, as contrasted with those of an earlier period.” (Richard Bendix 1968, 275). Modern, in one way, is an innovative present age as contrasted to modernization, which is a “programmatically remaking of the political and economic aspects of society in support of the new” (John Wilson, 10), which shows that the process of modernization remakes or reforms the traditional character of political and economic institutions of a given culture based on the affirmation of new discoveries or innovations. Wilson reserves modernization to politics and economics, and prefer to coin modernism with religious tradition. Peter Berger defined modernization as: “the growth and diffusion of a set of institutions rooted in the transformation of the economy by means of technology”. (Peter Berger 1974, 9).

Modernism, in its widest definition, is modern thought, character and practiced. Specifically, it describes the modernist movement in the arts, its set of cultural tendencies and associated cultural movements, arising from far-reaching changes to Western societies in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The development of modern industrial societies, the rapid growth of cities and the eruption of World War I, were major factors that shaped modernism. Some experts define modernism as “a socially progressive trend of thought that affirms the power of human beings to create, improve and reshape their environment with the aid of practical experimentation, scientific knowledge or technology” (Bermann 1988, 16).

Many traditionalists consider modernism as potentially pose greater challenge to religious heritage than modernization. Robert Bellah sees modernism as “an explicit and self conscious commitment to the modern in intellectual and cultural matters” (or at least support of the claims of the new as against its critics and detractors). (Robert Bellah 1970, 72-3). According to him, modernism involves a conscientious effort on the part of the participant to enlighten a particular religious tradition by accommodating or adapting to the cultural or intellectual innovations of the day.

Modernism in Christianity refers to the progressive theological thought which developed in the nineteenth and twentieth century. (M.G. Reardon 1987, 14). The work of Christian modernists,

such as Alfred Loisy, Ernst Troeltsch, William Bousset and others reflected the progressive spirit of Christian modernist thought since nineteenth century. The same period witness the emergent of Muslim modernists of high standing such as Sir Sayyid Ahmad khan, Ameer Ali, Muhammad Iqbal, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Shaykh Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Rashid Rida.

Modernist movement constitutes radical new direction in approaching art, architecture, music, literature, culture, letters, design, and technology especially in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century which stress on freedom of expression, experimentation, radicalism and revolutionary concept and ideas.

### **Islamic Modernism**

Islamic modernism is fundamentally a religious reform, which “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. It is inspired and dominated chiefly by theological considerations (Charles C. Adams, 2010).

From this definition, Charles C. Adams sees religious reformism as dominated by theological considerations to free Islam from the rigidity of orthodoxy and showing it adaptability to the demands of modern life. He distinguished Egyptian modernist from the reforms instituted by the Indian group of rationalist reformers, who aim primarily at a cultural movement, and the adjustment of Islam to the conditions of modern European civilization” (Charles C. Adams, 2010).

In his important and decisive analysis of political Islam, John L. Esposito gave a riveting account on the aspiration of Islamic modernist: “Islamic modernists asserted the need to revive the Muslim community through a process of a reinterpretation or reformulation of their Islamic heritage in light of the contemporary world. It is a respond to the political, cultural, and scientific challenge of the West and modern life. The modernist attempted to show the compatibility (and thus acceptability) of Islam with modern ideas and institutions, whether they be reason, science and technology, or democracy, constitutionalism and representative government” (Esposito, 1984). According to him, Islamic modernism was a response both to the continued weaknesses and to the external political and religio-cultural threat of colonialism.

The *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World* defined modernism as the struggle of “Islamic modernists to advocate flexible, continuous reinterpretation of Islam so that Muslims may develop institutions of education, law, and politics suitable to modern condition” (David Commins 1995, 118). R Hrair Dekmejian has distinguished the claim of Islamic modernist and conservatives in which the modernist “seeks to reform and adapt it to contemporary life, while the conservatives cling to the traditional Islamic precepts and reject Western and other influences (R. Hrair Dekmejian 1985, 21). Hisham Sharabi in his brilliant analysis of Islamic modernist favour the force of progress and enlightenment pronounced by the modernist, in which he says: “Modernism is to be understood as a positive attitude toward innovation and change and toward Western civilization generally; while traditionalism is to be viewed as a negative attitude toward all types of innovation and toward the West. Modernism, thus, represents a dynamic outlook, essentially pragmatic and adaptable; while traditionalism is a static position, fundamentally passive and hardly able to react to external stimuli.” (Hisham Sharabi 1970, 6).

Muslim modernists work to reconcile modern aspiration with Islamic ideals and devise ways to integrate faith with modernity. Fazlur rahman defined Muslim modernists as “those who have made an articulate and conscious effort to reformulate Islamic values and principles in terms of modern thought or to integrate modern thought and institutions with Islam.” (Fazlur Rahman 1969, 222). Rahman insisted that the value of the Qur’an could be maintained, while adjusting to the challenge of modernity. His definition implies progressive mindset like other Muslim reformists who believe in the superiority of Islam over other religion and struggling in the same track with Muslim modernist to overcome the disparity between meta-Islam (idealism) and historical Islam.

### Abduh’s Views on Modernity

Abduh favorably embrace the ideas of modernity which principally geared to the advancement of Muslim society. The basic foundation of modern ideal proposed by him was largely grounded in rationalism, liberalism, nationalism and universalism of Islam. “Abduh believed the rigid structures of Islamic culture were holding back what was essentially a logical and fluid religion.” (Mark Sedgwick 2009, 1)

The practice of Islam is essentially rooted in ontological premise of rational and logical truth and its teaching is lucid and clear for common understanding and comprehension. He crafted essential framework for reform clamoring for change and “advocating a more modern conception of Islam”, making significant effort to enlighten classical tradition and ideas. The struggle represents his ground for revival of Islamic ideals in modern society, and the expansion of freedom and the renaissance of political Islam.

Abduh advocated the necessity to accept modernity founded in Islamic construct and civilization, for “it is only as Islam is reformed to agree with modern conditions, it is believed, that its true character as a world religion will be apparent.”(C.C. Adams, 204) Abduh’s modern ideals and inspirations can be seen from various impacts he made in the field of tafsir, hadith, philosophy, science, ‘*aqidah* (Islamic theology), traditional ruling and commentary and modern Islamic movement, as clearly mentioned by Muhammad Asad in his explanation of the Qur’an: “The reader will find in my explanatory notes frequent references to views held by Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905). His importance in the context of the modern world of Islam - can never be sufficiently stressed. It may be stated without exaggeration that every single trend in contemporary Islamic thought can be traced back to the influence, direct or indirect, of this most outstanding of all modern Islamic thinkers. The Qur’an commentary planned and begun by him was interrupted by his death in 1905; it was continued (but unfortunately also left incomplete) by his pupil Rashid Rida under the title *Tafsir al-Manar*, and has been extensively used by me.” (Muhammad Asad 1980, xviii).

Abduh’s formidable work in espousing his modernist ideas is *Tafsir al-Manar*, his greatest legacy and contribution in exposing modern and rational interpretation of the Qur’an. Abduh “believed that it was not only possible but imperative to show how “modern” values and institutions could be reconciled with authentically Islamic ideals.” (Charles Kurzman 2002, 3) His inclusivity in taking “more conciliatory and evolutionary approach” (Yvonne Haddad, 32) characterized his worldview and principle outlook of modernism, with strong conviction that

adopting the western ideals will liberate the Muslim from stagnation, decadence and backwardness and leading the ways to reap the benefit of science and technology.

### Modern Reform Movement Inaugurated by ‘Abduh

Muhammad ‘Abduh is the first advocate and pioneer of Islamic reform in Egypt and a great modernist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with immense contribution in the revival and reform of Islamic intellectual thought and movement. The principle characteristic of reform movement inaugurated by ‘Abduh was chiefly determined by three individuals, “who are chiefly responsible for this movement”: Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad ‘Abduh and Muhammad Rashid Rida.

They have direct influence in the reform plan, and determine to furnish significant and vital influence to realize its objective, sharing the common platform and commitment to: (1) reproduce the genuine and most characteristic of religious ideas, in its inward and outward form (2) reform the religious conception of Islam and revive the religious practices and beliefs of the Muslims of to-day (3) emphasis upon the direct study and exegesis of the Qur’an rather than the ponderous tomes of theology, in order that faith might be derived from its proper source (4) to bring the dogmas of theology within the comprehension of the common people (5) fight against the bid‘ah and corruption of to-day (6) reclaimed the right of independent investigation (*ijtihad*) and went back to first sources and principles in everything. (Haddad, 203)

The idea of reform has been germinated and magnified from his encounter with Europe, and the dynamic influence he received from the leading exponent of Pan Islam, Jamal al-din al-Afghani. (Youssef Michael 1985, 54) Al-Afghani, the revivalist and great reformist from Asadabad, was described as “the Socrates of the (modernist) movement” (Zaki Badawi 1978, 7) and the “Awakener of the East”, seeks to integrate the entire ummah and to revive and crafted the political destiny of Islam.

During his campaign in Egypt, India, Sudan, Iran and Istanbul he call for social reform and independent thinking and the dismantling of *taqlid* (blind following) which has been pervasive in the traditional norms of Muslim society. Afghani violently critic the colonial agenda in the East, as stated in his famous and momentous journal, *al-‘Urwatul-Wuthqa*: “The English deny the wealth of India to the Indians. They take it as their own simply because the Indians are weaker than themselves.” He also rejected the notion of European supremacy, and the notorious tactic of imperialist to control the sources and wealth of the conquered land, by their deceitful propaganda and machinery: “All the scientific gains and whatever good these (western) nation civilization, if weighed against the wars and sufferings they cause, the scientific gains would undoubtedly prove to be too little and the wars and sufferings too great. Such a progress, civilization and science in this fashion and with these results are undiluted ignorance, sheer barbarism and total savagery. Man in this respect is lower than animal.” (Ana Belen Soage 2008, 1)

Abduh was greatly influenced by al-Afghani’s profound aspiration, and became his arduous supporter and student, trying to emulate his voice and character, and expanding his effort and struggle. Abduh’s world of socio-political activism has broaden his philosophical enquiry to embrace philosophy, theology, law, social and political science and mysticism, which strengthen his resolve to reinterpret classical Islamic text and espoused radical change and reform in al-Azhar. This was partly inspired by the creative and dynamic ideas of al-Afghani, in instilling and

proclaiming to his students, “the urgency of resisting European intervention in the life of their country and the importance of seeing the Islamic peoples as one unified community.” (Haddad 2005, 32)

### **Abduh’s Influence on Other Contemporary Thinkers of Modernity**

Abduh’s modernist project was aspired to synthesize various trends of thought and espoused the common platform, reconciling the two divide between western and Islamic ideals. His foremost aspiration was to challenge the rigidity and conservative ways of interpreting the text and place special emphasis on the principle of general welfare and social needs of the time. The struggle had monumental impact to the younger Egyptian modernist who were distinctively influenced by ‘Abduh’s prominence psyche and ideas such as Mustafa ‘Abd al-Raziq and his brother, ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Raziq who wrote extensively on the Shaykh and his theories, (Aswita Taizir 1994, 2) Muhammad Farid Wajdi, Muhammad Husayn Haikal, Taha Husayn, Qasim Bey Amin, ‘Abbas Mahmud al-‘Aqqad, Ibrahim ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Mazini, Dr. Mansur Fahmi, and other luminaries. Some influential ulama from the *Manar Party* and the *Azhar Group* also express strong favours and supports for his ideas such as Shaikh Ahmad Abu Khatwah (d. 1906), Shaikh ‘Abd al-Karim Salman and Shaikh Sayyid Wafa, Shaikh Muhammad Khalil, Shaikh Hassunah al-Nawawi (1840-1925), Shaikh Muhammad Bakhit, Shaikh Muhammad Mustafa al-Maraghi, Shaykh al-Sayyid ‘Abd al-Rahim al-Damardash Pasha (1853-1930), Ibrahim Bey al-Lakani (d. 1906), Ibrahim Bey al-Hilbawi, Ibrahim Bey al-Muwailihi (1846-1906), Hifni Bey Nasif (1856-1919), Ahmad Fathi Zaghlul Pasha (1863-1914), Sayyid Mustafa Lutfi al-Manfaluti (1876-1924), Muhammad Hafiz Bey Ibrahim (1873-1932), and many others.

The various support gained from many quarters and rank in Egypt, prove that the atmosphere of reform was strongly felt and the change is imperative and undiminished, confirming that “the ferment of reform generated by ‘Abduh’s influence was at work in various directions.” The ramification of Abduh’s ideas was pervasive, particularly to young Turk (kaum muda) and the Azharite in Malay and Java, with decisive and strong influence penetrated among the revivalist such as Kiyai Haji Ahmad Dahlan, Dr Abdul Karim Amrullah (Haji Rasul), Haji Abdul Malik Abdul Karim Amrullah (Hamka), Haji Zainal Abidin Ahmad (Zaaba), Syed Syeikh Ahmad al-Hadi, Shaykh Muhammad Tahir Jalaluddin, Muhammad Natsir, Abbas Taha and many generations of young and promising leaders in Malay Archipelago.

## **7. Abduh’s Contributions to Modernity**

The reform movement inaugurated by Shaykh Muhammad Abduh in Egypt had significantly contributed in reforming and liberating the educational system, and reviving the religious ideals and thought. His work and struggle has brought unprecedented change in legal, social, and political structure of Egypt, and help to revitalize modern Islamic aspiration. The modern worldview he projected had significant impact in engineering the force of rational spirit and reviving modern and liberal ideas and contributing to dynamic change in social, cultural, educational, political and religious paradigm of modern Egypt.

### *Educational Reform*

Abduh's passion for reform had begin to develop at Ahmadi Mosque, Tanta and Jami' al-Azhar, Cairo. The encounter with the conservative system of learning inspired him to undertake reform and embark on transforming the obsolete curricula where: "the students were to read texts, their commentaries, the glosses on the commentaries, and the superglosses on the glosses," (Amin, Uthman 1953, 3) without critical analysis and comprehension. He introduce groundbreaking initiatives to systematize the teaching class, syllabus and method of learning, ready to compete and advance with scientific style of Western education, and to include relevant ethical and moral discipline, science, philosophy, history and other classical literary tradition. Abduh's strategic focus to endeavor and undertake change at al-Azhar institution, was highlighted by Yvonne Haddad in her recent article on Abduh's reform program: "His first experience with learning by rote, memorizing texts and commentaries and laws for which he was given no tools of understanding, was formative in his later commitment to a thoroughgoing reform of the Egyptian educational system". (Haddad, 31) Shaykh Muhammad Mustafa al-Maraghi described the condition of such unmotivated learning activity: "[Muhammad Abduh] grew up in a lustreless age...he, and others like him, went on studying dull, lifeless rules cut off from their wellsprings in the Qur'an and the canonical writings, shorn of their roots in the language of the Arabs..."(Haddad, 31)

In his letter to his European compatriot, Abduh criticize the educational policy introduced by Egyptian government administered by the British. He try to embark on reform initiative and transforming the whole structure of curricula, fees, subject, and teaching components and improving basic necessities of schools and teachers. He emphasized the need to uplift the level and standard of al-Azhar University and emphasize the role of British to build a strong and liberal nation of Egypt: "The Egyptian government spends only two hundred thousand Egyptian pounds on education out of an income of twelve million pounds. It also keeps raising schools fees to the point where education is becoming a luxury that ornaments a few rich homes...There are only three schools for higher education in Egypt: the schools of law, medicine and engineering. The other components of human knowledge are denied to the Egyptian who is only superficially exposed to some of them in secondary schools...The government's plan seems to be first: to assist primary schools where reading and writing are taught. Second: reducing the spread of education in the country as much as possible. Third: limiting secondary and higher education to very narrow circles...I do not see what the British will gain from this. On the contrary it should be in the interest of the British to have a strong and free nation in the Egyptians. The more wealthy we are, the richer the source they draw upon." (Khoury, Nabil Abdo 1976, Muhammad Imara 1972, 170-172)

### *Gender equality*

Abduh is a strong advocate of feminist right. His struggle for the "education of women and reforms on their behalf" (Charles Adams, 232) had significant impact on many great Muslim idealists and reformist such as Zainal Arifin Abbas, (Azyumardi Azra 2002, 184-5) Qasim Amin (1863-1908), Zainal Abidin Ahmad (1895-1973), Syed Sheikh Ahmad al-Hadi (1867-1934), Syeikh Muhammad Tahir Jalaluddin (1869-1956) and others. Abduh principal struggle was to correct "the misconceptions of the status of women among Muslim society" (zanariah Noor, 2007) and reforming the law relating to Egyptian family life, emancipation of woman, and



uplifting their status and right. (Charles Adams, 232) He maintained that “men and women are equal in rights and duties; they are also equal in reason, feelings and sense of self.” (Haddad Yvonne, 56) Many influential *fatwa* (*legal opinion*) issued by Abduh in *Fatawa al-Manar* (Charles Adams, 205) confirm and strengthen this where “he spoke out strongly for family reform and the rights of women” (Haddad Yvonne, 30), championing issues regarding the status and position of women, and espoused his stand on polygamy’s issues, and propose rulings to enhance the position of women in politics and society. (Zanariah Noor 2007)

Abduh also spoke relentlessly about the nature of Islamic feminism which he distinguished from the Western-style feminism. The genuine framework based on ‘Islamic model’ which he ideally constructed according to the spirit of the Quran and sunnah. His struggle to uphold the right of feminist was meticulously propounded by Dr. Ahmad Farouk Musa in his article entitled ‘Feminism through the lens of Islamists’: “It was in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century that the struggle for what is known as feminism started in the Muslim world. And it was from the work of one exceptionally brilliant man that this movement had spread across the Muslim continents and reached the shores of our country. This exceptional man was Muhammad Abduh.” (Farouk Musa, 2011).

Abduh advocates thorough reform in legal sphere which affect the right of Muslim women. He consistently upholds the dignity and equal right of women and man and maintained that polygamy “was only permissible when equal justice and impartiality were guaranteed.” He concluded that considering the impossibility of achieving this, the Qur’anic ideal must be monogamy. This was practically consistent with text highest and ultimate aim to preserve equality and right and was significant moral foundation of the Qur’an which he skillfully articulated in *Tafsir al-Manar*: “God has made the condition that one keep far from injustice to be the basis for His giving of a law (concerning marriage). This confirms the fact that justice is enjoined as a condition and that duty consists in thriving for it. Polygamy is like one of those necessities which are permitted to the one to whom it is allowed (only) with the stipulation that he act fairly with trustworthiness and that he is immune from injustice. In view of this restriction, when one now considers what corruption results from polygamy in modern times, then one will know for certain that a people cannot be trained so that their remedy lies in polygamy, since, in a family which a single man has two wives; no beneficial situation and no order prevail.” (Farouk, 2011).

### ***Social and Political Reforms***

The main intent of his movement was to bring social reform in the entire gamut of social life in Egypt. Abduh anticipated true internal reform as a means of securing British evacuation. The change has brought significant development in Egypt and open new avenues for many possible reform to take place, which successfully influence entire fabric of society, as mentioned by Charles C. Adams: “The call of Muhammad ‘Abduh received a response from many quarters and affected the life of the country in many directions.” (Adams, Charles, 206) It had profoundly contributed to the revival and reform of Muslim society, creating national consciousness and viable social institution, (Khoury, 154) and stimulates robust development of social groups and parties in Egypt. The movement had monumental impact in propagating and sustaining religious activity, eradicate social problem, advocating women’s rights, uplifting the modern literal revival and classical Arabic language, escalating reform at al-Azhar, advancing the religious and cultural

consciousness, establishing schools and welfare groups, founding the society and journals and contributing to the triumphant of ideas and knowledge.

In national and political reform, Abduh has made significant contribution to defend the political idealism of Nationalist Party and crafted significant agenda for reform and write down its program to Wilfred Blunt. Among the term suggested was: (1) The Nationalist Party would like to preserve its ties with the Sublime Porte, and agrees to assist the Sultan (Khedive) with financial and human resources. The Party, however, will resist any attempt to annex Egypt as a part of the Ottoman state deprived of its independent administration (2) The Party accepts the Khedive's authority as long as his rule is just and in accordance with the Sharia. It also reminds the Khedive to implement the freedom that he promised the Egyptian people (3) This party recognizes the help of the French and the British in reorganizing Egypt's financial affairs and trust the European supervision in these matters will guarantee success in this reorganization. The Party, however, considers European control to be temporary, until Egypt's debts are repaid (4) Egyptians have now become aware of their rights and will insist on achieving their freedom. The Party calls for strengthening the Peoples' Assembly, the freedom of the printed words, and the spread of education (5) The Nationalist Party is a political, not a religious organization. Egyptians of all faiths belong to it, since we consider them all equal before the law. Furthermore, Egyptians are not averse to Europeans living in Egypt, as long as they abide by Egyptian law and pay their taxes (6) This party is determined to reform the country financially and morally. This can only be achieved through preservation of the law, the spreading of knowledge, and political freedom (Khoury, Nabil Abdo, 159).

This clearly show his pragmatism and strong influence in undertaking reform in many section of political structure including the institution of army, military deployment, non-Egyptian affairs and political direction of Egypt, which constitute greater international and social power in Egypt.

### Reform on the Shari'ah Courts, al-Azhar and Tajdid Agenda

Abduh had clearly initiated legal reform in Egypt by reviewing Islamic law in his capacity as the Chief Mufti of Egypt, and issuing fatwa and judgment based on the fundamental teaching of the Qur'an and sunnah, which he depended heavily on the writings of Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah: "Both Muhammad 'Abduh and Rashid Rida derive the method of their 'fatwas', or legal opinions, from the *I'lam al-muwaqqi'in* of Ibn Qayyim, because he bases his authority upon the text of the Qur'an and the Sunnah." (Charles Adams, 204) 'Abduh also endeavour to embrace the principle of *maslahah al-mursalah*, and *al-talfiq* as the basis of his principle ruling, condemning *taqlid* (blind following) and upheld the principle of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning). He consistently works to issuing legal fatwa which embrace the legal precept of every major school of jurisprudence in Islam, reflecting the dynamism of opinions and genuine spirit of inclusivity and universality.

Abduh's reform principles relatively not attracted to the Azhar or *Shaikh* class of the society compared to his followers from young 'Effendi', the Europeanized section of the population, which drawn from "the higher ranks of the legal profession, from teachers in the higher Government schools and from the heads of Government departments." (Rida, 137) Many of the Azhar-trained professionals who had received some western education openly support his ideas. 'Abduh's monumental contribution in reforming al-Azhar was highly profound, in view of the

“unsparing efforts which ‘Abduh devoted to the reform of the Azhar and the teaching which he himself did and the lectures which he delivered within its precincts.” (Charles Adams, 207)

Substantive effort has been made to liberalize al-Azhar from the influence of traditional ulama and conservative element in the schools, and unprecedented revival was significantly achieved with important reform initiative into the administration of the religious curricula, judicial fatwa, publication and basic methodology and training. Abduh also founded the Society for Islamic Propaganda (*Da‘wah*) whose drive was shouldered by Shaykh Muhammad Rasyid Rida in his effort to challenge the missionary movement of the Christians.

The enormous contribution of Shaykh Muhammad Abduh to modern Islamic thought can be summarized from his mission espoused in the influential newspaper, *al-‘Urwa al-Wuthqa*, an important based where he projected revolutionary attempt to initiate reform and reclaim the religious tradition with clear vision to (1) identifying ways in which to rectify the problems of the past which had led to decline; (2) infusing Muslims with a hope of victory and eradication of despair; (3) calling to steadfastness in adherence to the principles of the fathers and forebears; (4) defending against the accusation levied against Muslim that they cannot progress as long as they adhere to the principles of Islam (5) providing information on important political events; and (6) enhancing relations between nations and improving public welfare. This important initiative to undertake reform and defending modernism had a resounding impact on society, and Abduh’s work “continues to be influential both on his disciples and on those who thought that his compromises with the West went too far.” (Haddad, Yvonne, 30-32).

Abduh is the founder of Islamic modernism in Egypt, with massive influence in the entire continuum of Islamic world, through his effort to champion the national and religious cause of modern Arab world. He is a great expositor of Islamic creed and tradition, and major proponent of modernist Islam who geared a major intellectual movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Abduh’s work has contributed to the flourishing of religious ideas which he attempted to reconcile from various factions and views of the school of jurisprudence in Islam. Abduh advocate the idea of following the Qur’an and the sunnah, with genuine effort to revive and reinstitute spiritual and religious consciousness. (Zaki Badawi, 4) The penetrating influence of his movement was significant, in defending religious autonomy, resisting European colonial, opposing the prevailing practice of *bid‘ah*, dismantling the conservative and obsolete ways of *taqlid*, advocating the freedom of reason, and uphold the supremacy of intellect, which reflect the rationalist and modernist tendencies of his school of thought.

The fundamental objective of the movement was the revival of religious consciousness. The motive for revival was to reclaim the genuine spirit of Islam and its harmonious tradition as practiced by the *salaf*. It was to challenge the assumption of impossibility of Islam to afford and complement with modern condition, and proving its compatibility and “harmonization with the most advanced scientific ideas of the present day.” (Adams, Charles, 240) For Abduh, the renewal of Islam and Muslim society could be accomplished not simply based on western secular modernization, but through Islamic legal and social change. His distinguished reform agenda was not only to idealize the glorious past, but also to reinterpret and reformulate Islamic ideals to respond to the political, social and scientific challenges of western secular and modern life. His main struggle was to reconcile the truth of revelation and reason, and this was clearly

propounded by his disciple, Syed Syekh al-Hadi in his works, *Kitab Agama Islam dan Akal (Islam and Reason)* and Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*.

## CONCLUSION

Abduhs' contributions to modernity had a forceful brunt in restoring conventional religious principles of rationalism. Undoubtedly, he had undertaken significant reform initiatives, and made fundamental contributions in founding modern Islamic movements and projecting scientific renaissance in the Muslim world. The foundational aspect of his works could be seen in his struggle to synthesis Islamic and western ideals, in his legal reform, in his defense of rational and religious liberty and empowering women. His struggle resulted in an unprecedented scale of reform in social, political and economic systems in the Muslim world and the successful breakthrough of educational models in al-Azhar. His school of thought, the renowned *Madrasah Shaykh Muhammad Abduh* had successful impact in projecting the revival of ideas and tradition and continues to effect change in the Muslim world especially in Africa and South East Asia. The modern reform movement inaugurated by him had momentous contributions in reforming educational system, restoring the role of *ijtihad*, reclaiming the intellectual dexterity and uplifting the modern Islamic worldview.

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