**Nur ‘Ala Nur: Toward a Second Evolution of Muslim Civilization**

**نور على نور: نحو نشأة ثانية للمدنية الإسلامية**

In the era of neoliberalism and postcolonialism, any discussion of a Muslim state, or of Muslim culture even without the word “state,” whether this takes place during discussions of politics, economics, or rituals, or in conversations in classrooms or at the beach, usually has one of two types of effects. The first effect is loud, suspicious, and instinctively oppositional. The second type of impact of a discussion of a Muslim state and/or Muslim culture in modern times is to spark curiosity among exponents of the anthropological approach and radical reassessments among intelligence and police officers. Such responses are not new. Even in pre-colonial times, and all the more so under conditions of colonialism – in other words, for the past two hundred years, at least – scholarly discussion of Islam as a cultural and political framework has invariably been perceived as foolish and vacuous, and hence meets with scorn and ridicule.

This article has no desire to fall into the trap of naivety, and accordingly we do not plan to offer an answer to the implicit question that underlies both of the above-mentioned types of responses: “When will you Muslims realize that you’ve lost and give up?” To offer such a response demands that I girdle my nerves and waste my time (and this while, in my hometown, the only sound that can be heard is the call of the muezzins, outside regular prayer time, to come to the funeral of another Jaffa youth murdered by one of his fellows) in order to offer an intellectual and unemotional explanation for the oscillation between skeptical ridicule (broadly, from Napoleon’s invasion through the dismantling of the Ottoman caliphate) to burgeoning anxiety (ever since). The interpretation the weak attach to the reasons for their weakness, which is a factor of the weakness of the group to which they feel an affinity, becomes a trap whenever the explanatory logic is adjusted to that of the strong who control the weak. Whenever reflection on religion adopts the language and logic of hegemonic Western modernity, it condemns itself to the status of an apologetic dead end.

Nevertheless, it is true that there is a stubborn and collective Muslim imagination that must be addressed. A recent contemporary manifestation of this imagination is revealed in the new global Muslim map, its arrows marking the blood that flows into the streets in Muslim communities wherever they may be. And so today, more than ever, Muslim thinkers are presented with the task of offering an alternative self-imagination. But what starting point can we find for a discussion of being Muslim as a moral way of life in these times when the Arabic language is bruised and stuttering? And what form of rehabilitation will best allow it to revitalize its sclerotic arteries with new blood and open it to new discourse? This is an invitation to anyone interested in so doing to remain inside Islam. Our job is to scout for a starting point, to touch on the raw nerves of a theological beginning that flashed for an instant of modern history, and to examine whether it still offers a relative advantage, that is to say – a potential for Muslimism as a linguistic possibility open to translation in a collective Muslim body that will lick its wounds.

The task, then, is to extricate a Muslim way of life that will manage to find itself in modernity, while interpreting it from within its own cumulative history. In other words, we will propose an honest experiment that yearns to renew the covenant of association with God through personal and collective transformation, physical and mental.

We shall seek to embark on our task from within the disciplinary sphere of literature. Literature has the potential to provide instruments of orientation within the twisting alleyways of modern Muslim theological thought. The sphere of literary theory (which secularism, as the other flagship project of modernity, sought to secularize and expropriate) has generally been impervious to theological exegesis; opening this closed door offers an important ancillary tool. Literature suspends the macroscopic history that is typical of the historiography of modern Arabic thought. It finds intrinsic value in dwelling at length on individual texts in order to learn from their structure, narratology, and poetics about the essence of their authors’ intentions. It has something to teach us about the world outside the texts, encouraging us to read slowly and carefully, attentive to intertextuality, rhythm, and the order of the different sections from which the text is composed. It educates us to a patient approach toward changes in the vocal chords, positioning, and anticipations. In other words, we are interested here not in marking the historicity of theology, but in returning to the starting point and reading its narratology.

We will hear of one register in modern Muslim theological narratology by means of the restoration of fragments embedded in a short text that may teach us something both about how Muslimism in modern times perceives itself, its time, and its place, and why, from its perspective, the Muslim nation ultimately lost control over its own fate, language, and order. These reflections are documented by two canonical thinkers regarded as the progenitors of the school of Muslim modernism or reformism:[[1]](#footnote-1) Jamal a-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897) and Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905).[[2]](#footnote-2) Much has been written about both these formative thinkers, particularly by historians who have identified them as a chain in the process of modernization, secularization, and nationalization undergone by the Arab provinces under the rule of the Ottoman state.[[3]](#footnote-3) The mainstream of the early historiography about the two thinkers, whose echoes still reverberate powerfully even after the latest research wave has exposed the Nahda or Arabic Renaissance to contemporary theories,[[4]](#footnote-4) is based on a Western conceptual approach to the analysis of modalities and directions in the development of their thought, and accordingly its findings are limited to the confines of this approach. By way of example, the identification of European influences on the thinkers’ discourse leads, on the one hand, to interest in their thought and actions, enabling the researchers to show empathy toward them and to award them with the title of “modernism.” On the other hand, and despite the attachment of the adjective “Muslim” to their thought, it is perceived as apologetic, unauthentic, and preoccupied with the desire to justify itself and adapt to Western modernity through a superficial response to the challenges it poses. The reading below is grounded in an Oriental and Muslim emotional and intellectual rationale. As such, it refuses to accept the starting point behind the positions that have dominated research and some of the accompanying conclusions. Seeing Al-Afghani and ‘Abduh through the prism of *adaptation* or *reconciliation* between Islam and modernity obscures their profound criticism of the discourse and practices of Western modernity (and of Protestantism). It also creates a problematic and arbitrary division between the political and theological dimensions of their thought.

The seeds of modern Muslim theology were not cast on the lands of an oriental village or town; not in a prison yard; not in an underground movement, or on an isolated island; and not in a secret code. The seeds were written in plain Arabic, in daylight, in Paris, on the pages of a weekly journal written and edited by Al-Afghani and ‘Abduh after their forced exile due to their political involvement in the events surrounding the ‘Urabi Revolution.[[5]](#footnote-5) These seeds can be identified in the anti-colonialist and in spirit of postsecular text they wrote, while based at 6 rue Martel in Paris, between March 13 and October 16, 1884 – two years after the failed revolution and after the de facto British seizure of Egypt. The text was titled العروة الوثقى لا انفصام لها (*al-’Urwah al-Wuthqah La Infișām Laha* – “The most trustworthy hand-hold that never breaks”) and the publication was characterized as جريدة سياسية أدبية (“a political-cultural weekly”).[[6]](#footnote-6) Close to the mid-point of the issues of this journal, its circulation was banned in Egypt, but it managed to survive for a few more months, albeit with changes to its frequency of publication and content, until it finally ceased publication.[[7]](#footnote-7) The publication would not survive long enough to update the epithet السنة الأولى (“first year”) that appeared to the left on its front page. Our examination of the original version of this short-lived publication will offer a window on the great Nakba that removed the Muslim state from the map of the world. This examination will in turn offer us some insight, for example, into the analogy between cultural history and political history. Tellingly, preserved collections of the weekly confuse the original quote of its title: While the title actually quotes Baqara: 256, the collections refer to Luqman: 22.. Likewise, the front page rubric does not include any mention of the journal’s profile as a political and cultural publication. This examination of the original formula suggests that the error in identifying the original banner line and the exclusion of the profile of the journal are merely symptoms of a substantive error that has persisted up to the present day in the research. Al-Afghani and ‘Abduh indeed witnessed a moment of truth in the colonial occupation, and their exile was due to their attempt to identify and repel this occupation. The following generation, however, was born into a colonial atmosphere that influenced the manner in which the text was preserved. Much remains to be uncovered regarding the impact of the changing colonial atmosphere, and the outcomes of the struggle against colonialism, on the relations between the two generations – relations that shaped the cultural output of the younger generation. In the present context, let us confine ourselves to noting that, after ‘Abduh’s death, his associates Sa’ad Zaghlul (d. 1927) and Rashid Rida (d. 1935) strove to preserve his works. Regarding the weekly journal in particular, they were concerned (in all probability Zaghlul more so than Rida) that ‘Abduh’s political messages, which inflamed the Arab and Muslim world and inspired protest and a concerted struggle against the British mandate,[[8]](#footnote-8) were liable to thwart Egypt’s demand for independence. Accordingly, the only works from the weekly they decided to include in the anthology of his writings were his essays on the subject of reform.[[9]](#footnote-9) Due to these conditions, the first and most important collection of ‘Abduh’s writings, *Ta’arikh al-ustadh al-imam*, which was under the direct responsibility of Rida and supervised by Zaghlul’s associates, introduced dramatic changes in the format of the weekly, allotting its different parts into arbitrary columns. Later anthologies even abandoned the chronological order of appearance of the issues, which Rida had maintained.[[10]](#footnote-10) This form of preservation continued after Egypt gained its independence, powerfully illustrating that the logic of a colonial regime may survive even after its battalions and commanders have departed.

Over the past century, excerpts from the weekly journal have appeared in various anthologies without any connecting form, rhythm, order or message. The text is left in a twilight zone, neither alive nor dead, neither speaking nor silent. It has something of the quality of a “present absentee,” like a Palestinian city that must be scrutinized with an archeologist’s eye in order to sense the absence of the indigenous community and the presence of a few remnants, confused and awaiting their fate. The act of collating the dispersed parts of this text shows the footprints of the identity of the collector – a Muslim, a woman, and a Palestinian – yielding a story within a story, a reading within a reading that is created through a double negation of responsibility for one’s fate and the right to self-determination. Within this field of orientation, which documents speech without sovereign status, and while remaining aware of the risk of applying an involved and activist interpretation, I seize in my reading, writing, and interpreting hands one of the most important treasures of the Nahda – a treasure that to date has not managed to free itself from the colonial condition it sought to protest and to oppose. The hope is that this orientation between Nahda and Nakba may open the theological discourse to a new Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian Nahdawi register.

**A. The Theological as the Domain of Symbiotic Divine and Human Time**

In 1884, Al-Afghani and ‘Abduh spoke of a cancerous disease of the heart that was assaulting the collective Muslim body and was liable to lead it to oblivion. Their intention was not to speak in metaphors or to refer to the type of disease that is the object of diagnosis and effective therapy in modern medicine. Their allusion was to a poetical leitmotiv that runs like a thread through the entire Quranic text, suggesting that most humans suffer from disease of the heart “In their hearts is a disease” (for example, Baqara: 10; Anfal: 125; Hajj: 53). This disease is the product of a conscious human decision to refuse to accept the proofs of God’s existence that are available through observation and sensory examination of the world of nature, the land and skies and what lies between them. The Quranic narrative explains that God sent the prophets as reminders that He is the sole sovereign ruler and as reminders that human society must conceive of and bind itself to Him and adapt its actions, values and order so as once again to stand between His hands. Humanity’s conscious repression of the future reality of this stance is explained in the Quranic text, among other reasons, in terms of stubbornness, arrogance and skepticism regarding God’s ability to resurrect the human after her/his death (the concept of البعث). This stance features repeatedly in the Quran as it describes various communities from among whom God chose prophets to speak to them in their language and who were dismissed by these communities as magicians weaving a myth inherited from the previous generations (أساطير الأولين). The ramifications of the repression of the channels for the remembrance of God have an oppressive and damaging impact on the human soul. This repression creates a darkness (ظلم/ظلمة) in the soul that blocks the eyes’ capacity to discern the divine light. The disease of the heart that disrupts the optical capacity of the eye is merely a symptom of the theological reading that demands same type of healers – the theologians.

But as we stand so far removed from the seventh century, what exactly is meant by the theological as we seek to understand it through the writings of Al-Afghani and ‘Abduh in the latter third of the nineteenth century? The underlying act embodied in the theological writing in the journal, fed by the Quranic image we presented of a world in which body and soul maintain mutual relations, requires a different register of reading and exegesis. The Quranic theological construct springs to life in the text once we recognize that the logic and language of its parts flow freely through a symbiotic domain delineated by two parallel and perpendicular times – divine and human. In the era when these thinkers cooperated, their approach was grounded in a theological and political fabric in the context of critique of Modernism.

Before illustrating this theological and political fabric by reference to different sections of the text, it is worth noting that it is the failure to identify this symbiotic, bitemporal domain that led scholars to attribute to the writings of Al-Afghani and ‘Abduh a European-style secularity that, it was claimed, was far removed from the manner in which Muslim orthodoxy regards the function of the individual Muslim in society.[[11]](#footnote-11) Setting aside the paternalistic judgmentalism of this approach (“that’s not how we do modernity!”), it is widely accepted that Al-Afghani and ‘Abduh engaged in discourse with the approach taken by Muslim orthodoxy as it sought to cope with the crisis that had engulfed the contemporary Muslim state and its society. However, a careful reading of the journal shows that their thought was more complex, and by no means obeyed the modernist demand to make an “either/or” decision, that is to say – to choose between the elimination of the self and its subsuming in a single Western, modern cognitive system or entrenchment in a monochromic Muslim cognitive system. These polarized decisions indeed existed, but they were merely two positions on a nuanced, shifting and changing axis along which the outputs of modern Arabic thought may be aligned.[[12]](#footnote-12) Our interest here lies not in a scrutiny of the intricate details of the general critique Al-Afghani and ‘Abduh offered in their journal in the face of Western modernity – a critique that may equally be applied to the positions manifested in the research into their own work. We shall leave for another occasion[[13]](#footnote-13) a detailed analysis of the tools and modalities by which they exposed the mutual relations between various modernist projects, such as the connection between the colonial project, hostile colonial discourse, and secularizing discourse. The brief presentation of their own agenda in the first issue (p. 2) offers a perfectly ordered text, and a study of this text does not demand the arduous task of listening to an oriental tale perceived as having neither beginning nor end.[[14]](#footnote-14) For the present, we shall confine ourselves to noting the anti-colonialist stance in order to use this as a point of departure for discussing a different worldview and a different vision.

Drawn from extensive Quranic quotations – the idea of the *Sunnah* or God’s “way” – featured prominently in the titles of many articles in the journal and helped shape their arguments. The quintessential verse that illustrates this approach is verse 62 in the Ahzāb chapter: سنة الله في الذين خلوا من قبل ولن تجد لسنة الله تبديلا “(Such was) the practice (approved) of God among those who lived aforetime: no change wilt thou find in the practice (approved) of God.”) On the other hand, the same symbiotic domain embraced an approach of human, historical time, as in verse 11 of the Ra’d chapter: ان الله لا يغير ما بقوم حتى يغيروا ما بانفسهم واذا اراد الله بقوم سوءا فلا مرد له وما لهم من دونه وال (“For each (such person) there are (angels) in succession before and behind him: they guard him by command of God. Verily never will God change the condition of a people until they change it themselves (with their own souls). But when (once) God willeth a people’s punishment there can be no turning it back nor will they find besides Him any to protect.”) In other words, we have here a political theology that promoted two parallel messages which the authors regard as central to the Quranic text, but which require a hermeneutic register adapted to modern sensitivities: (1) There is something about God’s way that is stable and static, but/and also (2) There is something about the human soul that changes, and God recognizes this and takes it into account. If our answer is negative to one of the claims leveled in the research against Al-Afghani and ‘Abduh – namely that, since they lived under “oriental despotisms, had we not better assume that what is done has no necessary connection with what is said, and that what is said in public, may be quite different from what is believed in private?”[[15]](#footnote-15) – then these registers, which grant a meaning that is simultaneously both physical and metaphysical to events in human time, can be discerned quite readily.[[16]](#footnote-16)

In the next section, we will seek to illustrate the points made above and to paint a portrait of the soil that fed the thought of Al-Afghani and ‘Abduh, as manifested in the symbiotic domain of divine and human time. Before doing so, though, we will seek to introduce both the vision and the barrier to its realization. From an ideal standpoint, the political-theological fabric the two thinkers proposed should have served the global Muslim community as a tool not only for freeing itself from the colonial maze, but also for encouraging a second wave of Muslim civilizational (مدنية) evolution (نشأة). The authors claimed that Islam, or more accurately their interpretation of Islam, is capable of no more and no less than the realization of the false promises made by Western modernity, and of proposing an alternative world order that will facilitate a universal and truly humane way of life. However, this fantastic vision came with a precondition. Both men were well aware (as were the Zionist movements of the same time) that it is not sufficient merely to dream a vision. Humans must truly want the vision and must initiative a detailed program for its realization. But it was here that the vision shattered even as it was formulated, its authors realizing that reality was truth and their vision was a dream, rather than vice versa.

From their exile in Paris, the two thinkers observed the broad oriental Muslim community. They were profoundly pained to discover that what had begun as a disease of the heart, that is, as the erosion of faith in the hearts of the members of this community, had developed into the corruption of the practice of good attributes (الفضائل),[[17]](#footnote-17) creating a disease of the spirit (الروح), that is to say, in the sense of belonging to the nation.[[18]](#footnote-18) They complain that a whole set of abominable acts (رذائل) had become prevalent among the oriental Muslims, including immodesty (قلة الحياء), insolence or foolishness (السفه), rashness (الطيش), indiscretion (التهور) and cowardice (الجبن). They emphasized that, given this reality, even if individuals emerged among the nation who sought to open its eyes, such as Al-Afghani and ‘Abduh themselves, the majority would not believe them. In a time dominated by acts of abomination, people are reluctant to accept good advice even when it is corroborated; they mock preachers and do everything possible to thwart the efforts of those who seek to change the condition of the community and unite its members. In Muslim societies, they went on to explain, these acts of abomination create fertile ground for moral contradictions that weaken the resilience of the body of the nation, which they likened to a debilitated human body suffering from paralysis and unable to act in an orderly manner, or to a body inflicted by insanity (كالمبتلى بجنون مطبق).[[19]](#footnote-19) In other words, the two authors were the first to demand يقظة (“awakening,”) but their own awakening led them to recognize that the hardest task they faced was not the removal of the colonial power from the lands of the Orient, nor the need to persuade a Muslim leader to call for pan-Islamic unity. The toughest difficulty was how to cure the circumstantial sequence that had led to disease; how to draw the attention of the global Muslim community to the type of disease it faced and the ways it might be treated; and how to reestablish itself on the foundation of Muslim morality and recognize its need for true prayer.

**B. Al-Ghazali and True Prayer**

Cromer (d. 1917), the British General administrator in Egypt at the time the weekly journal was published, only partially understood the man he considered his friend[[20]](#footnote-20). In the text before us, in which ‘Abduh was a partner, the focus of thought has indeed shifted from the beginnings of Islam in the seventh century. Cromer was right to point out that ‘Abduh was easily influenced by medieval Islamic philosophy, and due to his identification of this milestone in ‘Abduh’s thought, he considered him an agnostic (ibid.). What Cromer failed to recognize, however, was that ‘Abduh’s progression of thought was bidirectional, coming and going between different historical milestones along the cumulative axis of Islam. ‘Abduh was not “influenced” by Islamic philosophy in the same way that he was “influenced” by modern Western philosophy. The category of influence, which plays a dominant role in the historiographic study of the Nahda, is inconsistent with the fact that they themselves formed an inherent link in a cognitive chain that extended up to them. They were not external observers.[[21]](#footnote-21) The tumultuous junction that formed the nexus of the thought of our two authors proves that they refused to accept the modernist deception and the demand to abandon the old for the sake of the new, the past for the sake of the future. Before describing the character of the junction, we should note that its very presence should guide us in distinguishing between various Muslim movements and streams in the modern era. Contrary to the claims of some observers, it is not the political dimension of the struggle against the foreign occupying force that complicates the distinction between these streams.[[22]](#footnote-22) Yet the conceptual platform Al-Afghani and ‘Abduh propose in their journal actually shows that this simplistic evaluation of the various types of reform (إصلاح)[[23]](#footnote-23) movements that emerged in the nineteenth century is an act of political subjugation and regimentation that thwarts the attempt to discern the differences between these movements. Although the research identified the mutual affinity between the political and the cultural in Muslim thought, it somehow failed to draw the appropriate conclusions, and instead continued to insist on a division between the two spheres.

The first milestone identified in the journal was the idyllic age identified with the time of the first fathers of Islam (الآباء الأولون). They sought to revive the emphasis on this revolutionary beginning, focusing on the Prophet, the holy Quran, and the four first caliphs. This is the anchor and the *unbreakable bond* which, they believed, must once again be firmly adhere to. But this was not the sole anchor. They also identified a second anchor that deserves careful attention in order to complete the process of return to the first age – an age that is Paradise Lost from a their perspective. The journal identifies a linguistic and epistemological genealogy and a medieval oriental and Muslim sensory system of a specific kind that we may characterize as theological, philosophical, and Sufi. This is confirmed by the use of various specific terms, such as logical deduction (قياس), evidence (برهان), the trial of commonsense (حكم العقل الصريح), the emphasis on examining the historical social process (ويشهد به سير الاجتماع الانساني), and the open channel to divine inspiration (مدد/عناية إلاهية).

In order to illustrate the symbiotic theological perception of history and to examine the theological, philosophical, and Sufi methodology we identified, we will focus on the fourth issue of the journal.[[24]](#footnote-24) In a culturally-oriented essay, the authors sought to explain to their readers the root cause of the gulf between the Muslims who dominated the old civilization and the Christians or those who led the new civilization (المدنية المعاصرة).[[25]](#footnote-25) The essay was entitled ان في ذلك لذكرى لمن كان له قلب او القى السمع وهو شهيد (“Verily in this Is a Message For any that has A heart and understanding Or who gives ear and Earnestly witnesses (the truth),” Qāf: 37). The essay exposes the macroscopic thrust of the discourse in the journal, as already noted: to remind the Muslim body, through organs such as the heart, ears, and eyes, of things it had once known but had since repressed. It also offers an explanation for the subsequent passages in the same issue depicting the general condition of the Orientals in general, and Muslims in particular (الشرقيون عامة والمسلمون خاصة) as the life of weak and desperate humans facing unbearable suffering.[[26]](#footnote-26) Thus from their perspective, the Muslims were indeed united – in oblivion, suffering and despair. The following excerpt from this first paragraph of the essay presents the theological-political definition of the individual against the context of the milestones in Muslim thought:

God created man as a learner and creator (خلق الله الإنسان عالماً صناعياً);[[27]](#footnote-27) He paved his soul and prepared him to work for himself, guiding him in creativity and invention. He determined that man’s livelihood would come from the labor of his hands, and indeed turned this source into the essence of his existence and the crutch of his survival. Man in all his conditions – poverty and prosperity, difficulty and comfort, from the life of the Bedouin to life in culture (حضارة) – is the creation of his labor. If a man shakes his hands for one hour of his working time, begging nature to grant him a breath of life, life will deny him this and indeed drive him to oblivion (ولو نفض يديه من العمل لنفسه ساعة من الزمان وبسط كفه للطبيعة ليستجديها نفسا من حياة لشحت به عليه بل دفعته الى هاوية العدم). In his creations and his inventions, man has need of a teacher to grant him education and culture, and of a guide to steer him in the way of honesty. Just as man works to ensure the needs of his livelihood, so he works in order to know how he works and in order to be able to work (وهو في صنعه وإبداعه محتاج إلى استاذ يثقفه وهاد يرشده فكما يعمل لتوفير لوازم معيشته وحاجات حياته يعمل ليعلم كيف يعمل وليقتدر على أن يعمل). In his mental states, too – perception, discretion, attributes, qualities, and skills, spiritual excitement – man can be seen to be a learner and a creator. People imagine that innovations spring from the actions of nature and show no evidence of acquisition (ويظن أن هذا من تصرف الطبيعة لا من آثار الاكتساب), but the truth is that everything is dependent on acquisition (ibid.).

Firstly, the language of this Darwinian manifesto, including the use of such terms as نشأة (“evolution”) and بقاء (survival), reflects an awareness of and commitment to the discoveries of European science. We should note, however, that the Quran also makes extensive use of the word نشأة, for example, and it is very probable that the authors were conscious of the double-edged allusions of the term.[[28]](#footnote-28) Secondly, the authors’ language is grounded in and intertwined with an intensive and direct poetics drawn from the writings of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111). The journal mentioned many thinkers as pillars of Muslim civilization. In the Muslim Orient, for example, they mentioned Avicenna, Al-Farabi and A-Razi; in the Muslim West, names mentioned included Ibn Bajjah, Averroes and Ibn Tufail.[[29]](#footnote-29) Al-Afghani and ‘Abduh showed a nostalgic longing for this intensive cultural activity, whether in the field of the Shari‘a sciences or the intellectual sciences (علوم شرعية وعلوم عقلية), under Islamic rule.[[30]](#footnote-30) However, they award Al-Ghazali, the Proof of Islam(*Hujjat al-Islam*), a special status. His writings and language are integrated in the authors’ texts on a large scale, and he is referenced with a special measure of admiration as a thinker who delineated a theological, scientific and biographical path worthy of adoption by anyone seeking balance in an age when it has been disrupted. The character of Al-Ghazali as reflected in his autobiography may explain why Al-Afghani and ‘Abduh held him in such particular esteem. Firstly, the language of the journal shows that the authors identified with the general outline of Al-Ghazali’s personality and saw themselves, like him, as a role model for faith and Muslim science. Al-Ghazali declares in his autobiography that he years to be bonded with the divine light and is ready to pay any price in order to overcome obstacles on this way; he abhors cowardice and is faithful to himself and sincere in his concern for Islam. In addition, and without overtly acknowledging this, the journal appears to have drawn on Al-Ghazali’s sharp tongue and on his methodological approach to combining and balancing different types of scientific, religion, philosophical, and Sufi knowledge. The authors seem as determined as Al-Ghazali not to accept any compromises when criticizing the process by which knowledge was accumulated through history and up to their own time. The best definition of the authors’ personality would seem to be the often-quoted comment by Al-Ghazali: وقد كان التعطش إلى درك حقائق الأمور دأبي وديدني من أول أمري وريعان عمري، غريزة وفطرة من والله وضعتا في جبلتي لا باختياري وحيلتي، حتى انحلت عني رابطة التقليد وإنكسرت علي العقائد الموروثة (translation).[[31]](#footnote-31) This affinity between the theology of Al-Ghazali and that of Al-Afghani and ‘Abduh highlights that the fact that in order to understand the soul of a writer, we do not need to rummage through the archives of intelligence agencies in order to learn who she/he is and what she/he thought.[[32]](#footnote-32) As long as the text lives, the soul lives in it.

The impression formed from their writings in the journal is that Al-Afghani and ‘Abduh were skeptical regarding the cumulative hermeneutic Muslim system; suspicious regarding the manner of its transmission and preservation (that is to say, suspicious of beliefs transmitted by inheritance without scientific examination); and critical of the functioning of the *‘ulama* of their time, who should serve as a model of active scholars (علماء عاملون).[[33]](#footnote-33) To return to the text quoted above, we find that the twin ideals of study and creation correspond directly with the manner in which Al-Ghazali related to the Sufi *tariqa* – a way of life that the authors apparently shared.[[34]](#footnote-34) According to the tradition, God created the human and imbued him with powers such as reason and opportunities such as free choice, which the human must then realize as condition for continued existence and for development within social reality. Thus the action of creation inherent in the Shari‘a and the human action inherent in reason (العقل) maintain a mutual affinity and should ideally enjoy harmonious and complementary relations. As Al-Ghazali concludes, “Reason with the Shari‘a [yields] light on light” (فالعقل مع الشرع نور على نور).[[35]](#footnote-35) It is foolishness to abandon either one of these lights.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Following their definition of the individual, it emerges later in the essay that the authors found it necessary to redefine religion. The following excerpt presents several messages in this respect:

God is the one who has offered religion; Human beings are the ones who teach it and are summoned to it; The prophets deliver religion to people, who acquire it by learning and memorizing; Among all the nations, religion is the first thing that merges, is rooted, and fixed in the hearts when the souls endorse religion’s essentials; Religion rules the soul and instructs it how to operate the body. The human being, upon his birth is like a blank slate, and the first line to be drawn upon it is religion. The souls rarely experience anything independently of religion, and even he who has strayed from it cannot undo the impressions religion has left in him; its mark is left like a scar on the skin.[[37]](#footnote-37)

So, if the political order is guided mainly by a healthy heart (قلب سليم) rather than by force, the key for any foundation of being is coming to terms with the question of the condition of the heart in modern times. The process of handing down religion is apparent here: from God, to His messengers, to the people. One way to interpret this definition is that while the Quran is conceived here as eternal, in accordance with Muslim orthodoxy, the holy words that originate in the medieval-modern approach to it are available only thanks to human activity such as learning and interpretation. In other words, this conception of religion construes it as the product of God’s first action: the delivering of the written text, and grounds it in the believer’s active reading.

This, then, is the ideal situation. In practice, however, symbiotic time faces a profound crisis whose symptoms take us back to the disease of the heart that is liable to destroy the spirit. To paraphrase the themes presented thus far, we might suggest that the authors believe that it is a corruption of the individual’s proclaiming or reading of religion, a failure in the activation of the hermeneutic circuit, that has damaged the foundations of the religious edifice, that is – the primordial identity of belief itself, as embodied in the first verse of the Quran: “**P**roclaim ! (or Read !) in the name Of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created.” (‘Alaq: 1). Muslim order rests on this foundation, and its destabilization endangers the entire construction. This is the basis of Muslim civilization (المدنية الإسلامية): the active and ongoing reading by the human of her/his creation and of the essential reason for existence. In other words, we can deduce from the authors’ remarks that in modern times Muslims have ceased to observe the divine command “to read.” As a result, they have been unable to receive the divine grace that teaches “man that Which he knew not” (‘Alaq: 5). It is the violation of the commandment to read that has led the Muslims to live in disconnection (إنفصال) – one of the terms that is repeated many times in the text. The Muslims have disconnected and violated the harmony between themselves and the true Sovereign (الحق), who begins and ends creation, and between themselves and nature, or the reality in which they live. They live in confusion, incapable of understanding events around them, paralyzed and unable to act. But what does reading demand of the modern Muslim?

**C. Reading and Writing in a State of Emergency**

Literature teaches us that we can learn both from what a text says and from things it does its best to keep quiet about. As is apparent from the subjects left out of their essay, or mentioned only in a cursory manner, the authors took a conscious decision to refrain from discussing any controversial issue, and to concentrate exclusively on subjects that enjoy a consensus. They argued that given the conditions in which Muslims lived, ruled over by an alien hand (استملاك), there is no alternative but to set aside controversial issues that are regarded as secondary (مسائل ثانوية) until a time when peace reigns.[[38]](#footnote-38) The hour was one of war. Their theological reading advocated political and cultural unity (وحدة) as an immediate imperative, before it would be too late to save the Muslims from being consumed (ابتلاع) under the occupier’s yoke. In order to secure the goal – healing the sickness by renewing the covenant of faith (جامعة الإعتقاد) – the task was to forge a united front against the force perceived as alien (أجنبي) and to protect (المحافظة) the Muslim state against the danger of division (إفتراق).

Accordingly, the journal maps out two parallel paths of response to the colonialist challenge and threat: political and cultural, military and hermeneutic. Before presenting the hermeneutic conundrum, it is worth noting that on the political level the authors vacillate restlessly between support for the Ottoman state as the sovereign entity empowered to lead the Muslim communities and allusions to the need to shift the center of governmental gravity elsewhere, for example to Iran. For the most part, and over the first seventeen issues, we find the authors ambivalent toward the Ottoman state. Though they present sharp criticisms of its enfeeblement and its inability to defend the provinces under its patronage, they do not question the authority of the Sultan. The same is true concerning the regime of the Khedives in Egypt. However, at times of particularly great frustration – as, for example, in issue 18, which they announced would be the final issue due to pressure to halt publication, the final word is granted to the regime of the Shah in Iran.[[39]](#footnote-39) An early harbinger of this decision can be found in issue 14, which was apparently authored alone by Al-Afghani in ‘Abduh’s absence.[[40]](#footnote-40) After confessing to his illness (and maybe a melancholic state) due to the weather in Paris,[[41]](#footnote-41) Al-Afghani writes to the Iranians and urges them explicitly to initiate unification between the *Shi‘ah* in Iran and the *Sunnah* in Afghanistan in order to create an alternative front to the Ottomans against the colonialist West.[[42]](#footnote-42) In the issue Al-Afghani apparently edited alone, he made a principled and ideological decision not to enter into detailed discussion of the issues in debate between the *Shi‘ah* and *Sunnah*. He confined himself to noting their common ground and to drawing attention to the ease with which unity could be secured around certain basic principles (بعض الأصول). It should be noted that this attempt by Al-Afghani to encourage unity between the *Shi‘ah* and *Sunnah* may finally be able to put to rest the disagreement in the research literature regarding Al-Afghani’s origins and the school to which he belonged. The content at the point we are discussing here shows that his origin and school were secondary in his theology. His passion for unity was a passion that would accompany him all his life. Whatever his origin, he longed to see in his own life some Muslim force that would realize his vision and call for sovereign unity as the condition for the establishment of a new global Muslim civilization. Al-Afghani insisted that there could be no Muslim civilization without Muslim sovereignty; the inverse was also true. Thus the cultural and the political are two sides of the same coin.

Verses urging unity and adherence to God’s path were generally brought from the chapter The House of ‘Imran: واعتصموا بحبل الله جميعا ولا تفرقوا (“And hold fast all together by the rope which God (stretches out for you) and be not divided among yourselves; and remember with gratitude God’s favor on you; for ye were enemies and He joined your hearts in love so that by His grace ye became brethren; and ye were on the brink of the pit of fire and He saved you from it. Thus doth God make his signs clear to you: that ye may be guided,” Āl-i-‘Imrān: 103)[[43]](#footnote-43); واعتصموا بحبل الله جميعا ولا تفرقوا (“Be not like those who are divided amongst themselves and fall into disputations after receiving clear signs; for them is a dreadful penalty,” Āl-i-‘Imrān: 105)[[44]](#footnote-44); يا ايها اللذين آمنوا لا تتخذوا بطانة من دونكم لا يألونكم خبالا ودوا ما عنتم قد بدت البغضاء من افواههم وما تخفى صدورهم اكبر قد بينا لكم الآيات ان كنتم تعقلون (“O ye who believe! take not into your intimacy those outside your ranks; they will not fail to corrupt you. They only desire your ruin: rank hatred has already appeared from their mouths; what their hearts conceal is far worse. We have made plain to you the Signs if ye have wisdom,” Āl-i-‘Imrān: 118)).[[45]](#footnote-45) Another quote was taken from Anfāl: واطيعوا الله ورسوله ولا تنازعوا فتفشلوا أو تذهب ريحكم (“And obey God and His apostle; and fall into no disputes lest ye lose heart and your power depart; and be patient and persevering: for God is with those who patiently persevere,” Anfāl: 46).[[46]](#footnote-46)

As for the hermeneutical front, the chief principle the authors referenced and quoted was the concept of *‘aql* (عقل) – reason. Here, too, Al-Ghazali is been revived. The articles in the journal alternate between praise for the heartfelt faith of the masses (العامة – ‘*amah*) and complaints, embarrassment and even shame at the irrational approach toward religious truth. When the authors turned their gaze inward to the Muslim Orient, they took out all the anger and resentment against Western modernity on the masses. They railed against forms of faith not grounded in facts and logical proof, or in the ways of Sufi scholasticism (which combines العلم والعمل), but instead relies on illusions (أوهام) transmitted mechanically from one generation to the next. True faith, they asserted, is acquired through independent and active forces, and is not supposed to be replicated in a hereditary manner. They were convinced that the foolishness of the masses and their non-reason attitude toward the foundations of their faith was one of the factors that had denuded Islam of its political and cultural strength and its civilizational character.

And so, the authors strove to promote a new hermeneutics that would emphasize the connection between faith and reason as an essential tool for revitalizing and refreshing the modern Muslim way of life. This perspective is evident even in the banner line of the journal. As noted above, the lead title is mistakenly quoted in the literature as العروة الوثقى (“The most trustworthy hand-hold”).[[47]](#footnote-47) This expression brings to mind the image of Luqman, the chief character in this chapter of the Quran that bears his name. Luqman is described (v. 12) as a man who, by God’s grace, was imbued with wisdom (ولقد آتينا لقمان الحكمة – “We bestowed (in the past) wisdom on Luqman”). At the beginning of this chapter (v. 2), the Quran itself is described as a book of wisdom (تلك آيات الكتاب الحكيم – “These are Verses of the Wise Book”). Verse 22 of this chapter reads ومن يسلم وجهه لله وهو محسن فقد استمسك بالعروة الوثقى وإلى الله عقبة الأمور – “Whoever submits his whole self to God and is a doer of good has grasped indeed the most trustworthy hand-hold: and with God rests the End and Decision of (all) affairs.” The words وهو محسن (“and is a doer of good”) can be understood as referring back to the opening words of the verse, that is – to those who pray, give charity and believe in Judgment Day. However, the authors’ intentions relate to a more primal stage of religion. The banner line of the journal actually corresponds with Baqara: 256: لا إكراه في الدين قد تبين الرشد من الغي فمن يكفر بالطاغوت ويؤمن بالله فقد إستمسك بالعروة الوثقى لا إنفصام لها والله سميع عليم – “Let there be no compulsion in religion. Truth stands out clear from error; whoever rejects evil and believes in God hath grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold that never breaks. And God heareth and knoweth all things.” This verse brings us back to the journal’s determination to identify faith as the essential and primal foundation of Islam. Thus there is no need to impose religion by force, since it is proved by wisdom. Despite this error in identify the verse that provided the journal’s banner line, however, both verses indeed relate to the key concepts the authors sought to restore as the foundation for Muslim scientific culture: wisdom (*Hikma*) or philosophy and faith, faith and wisdom,[[48]](#footnote-48) as two forms of the essence of Islam, both granted by divine mercy yet both requiring human hermeneutic activation. During a time of war, the authors demanded that Muslims rise above their internal debates and return to the Quran, as the true sovereign: ان رابطتهم الملية أقوى من روابط الجنسية واللغة وما دام القرآن يتلى بينهم وفي آياته ما لا يذهب على إفهام قارئيه فلن يستطيع الدهر أن يذلهم – “The religious bond between them is stronger than bonds of ethnicity and language, and as long as the Quran is read among them and there are those who manage to understand its verses, time cannot humiliate them.”[[49]](#footnote-49) Muslims are urged to bond to their fellows in their hearts, recognize the need to defend the nation, and agree on the way to do this. Thus they must undergo a collective moral transformation, exercise wisdom and discretion, and promote unity on the basis of the twin foundations of wisdom and faith, setting aside religious debates for an era of peace (سلم).

Next page: Facsimile of the original front page of the journal



1. The nomenclature given to the thought of Al-Afghani and ‘Abduh by Goldziher, a scholar who was their contemporary, was “Islamic Modernism” (1910). This term has been passed down in the research and was consolidated in Hamilton Gibb’s Modern Trends in Islam (1947). In Arab writing, for example in Ahmad Amin’s book زعماء الإصلاح في العصر الحديث (Leaders of Reform in Modern Times) (1948), these thinkers are included in the category of reform. It is worth noting that at least in the text we will read below, the authors did not apply these nomenclatures to themselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Al-Afghani and ‘Abduh worked together for several years; Al-Afghani spent an extended period (approximately eight years) in Egypt in the 1870s and was on close terms with a broad group of enthusiastic young Egyptians who would become political and cultural icons in Egyptian society in the first half of the twentieth century. The group included Qassam Amin, Ahmad Lutfi a-Sayed, Sa’ad Zaghlul, Fathi Zaghlul, Muhammad ‘Abduh, and many others. The research literature has generally discussed the two thinkers sequentially, in linear fashion. Here we will discuss their thought jointly, since both their names appear on the journal in question. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The interest in the thought of these two figures has been due primarily to a quest (indeed a stubborn quest) in the research to locate the earliest buds and moments when nationhood was adopted as an organizing conceptual system in the context of the Arabic-speaking world. Some studies regard the development of nationhood in the first few decades of the twentieth century as the product of the significant influence of European modernity on the directions of thought adopted by the progenitors of this stream. While the motives and the accompanying logic of this focused search are understandable, it obscures the identification of a broader, more flexible, and more replete spectrum of emotions, passions, and avenues of thought that flourished at the stormy political and cultural crossroads of the latter third of the nineteenth century, particularly among the progenitors of the stream. The studies alluded to here are those of: Charles Adams (1933); Hamilton Gibb (1947); Albert Hourani (1962); Elie Kedourie (1966); Nikki Keddie (1972); Sylvia Haim (1974). It is worth adding that while the early scholars (Adams, Gibb, and Hourani) accepted the religious dimension in the type of reforms instigated by Al-Afghani and ‘Abduh, the three latter scholars (Kedourie, Keddie, and Haim) rejected this approach and emphasized the secular dimension in the philosophy of both thinkers. This present study engages with all these classical studies, but more particularly with the latter three. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The recent decade has seen renewed interest in the study of the intellectual history of modern Arab thought in the last third of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, referred to as Nahda or the Arab Renaissance. New studies seek to identify the dynamics that generated this modern movement, by going beyond the simplistic dichotomy of modernism versus tradition, and beyond the model of one-sided influence of Western ideas on Arab-Muslim thought. For new survey on latest works of the Nahda, it is recommended to read Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, *Arabic thought Beyond the Liberal Age: Towards an Intellectual History of the Nahda* (Cambridge University Press, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In 1882, Egyptian officers headed by Ahmad ‘Urabi protested against the growing English interference in the internal affairs of Egypt and against what intellectuals and activists saw as the surrender of the Khedivate regime to the interests of the foreign powers at the expense of advancing the interests of the country they ruled. Al-Afghani and ‘Abduh criticized the policies of Khedive Isma’il in Egypt, suggesting that he was excessively impressed by Western progress. Isma’il adopted European models in his effort to modernize the country, sponsoring and facilitating cultural activism. At the same time, he encouraged intensive European interference in Egypt, and Al-Afghani and ‘Abduh regarded this process as a threat not only to Egypt but to the unity and sovereignty of the Eastern Provinces under the auspices of the Ottoman Empire. For further discussion, see: Panayiotis J. Vatikiotis, *The History of Egypt* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1985). For a detailed study of the forces active in Egypt prior to the revolution, see: Alexander Scholch, *Egypt for the Egyptians, The Socio-Political Crisis in Egypt 1878-1882*, (London: Ithaca Press, 1981). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See the facsimile of the cover page at the end of this article. In general, we have interpreted all the terms that appear in the text in the spirit of the period, in accordance with the dictionary *Muḥiṭ al-Muḥiṭ*, composed in 1870 by Butrus al-Bustani (1819-1883). However, since Al-Afghani’s position is translated into French on the front page as *directeur politique*, it was decided to translate *siyasah* as politics. As for أدب, Al-Bustani states that the term refers to a broad field of العلوم والمعارف (the sciences and knowledges). Accordingly, we have adopted the general term “culture” in the translation, rather than specifically literature. Al-Bustani adds that *al-‘ilm* is generally used to refer to expansive awareness while *al-ma’arfah* refers to partial or simple awareness. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. After three months of publication, and ahead of the seventh issue, *Al-‘Urwah* published an official injunction issued by the Egyptian government requiring the management of the postal services in the country to prevent the journal entering its territory and to monitor its circulation and fine persons holding copies (in the sum of 5-25 Egyptian pounds). The injunction did not halt the publication of the weekly, which continued for a further nine issues, but these appeared more erratically. Through its ninth issue, *Al-‘Urwah* appeared every week as promised, but from May 22 it was generally published every two weeks, with the exception of the eighteenth and final issue, which appeared three weeks after its predecessor. Moreover, following the injunction, from the tenth issue onward a change can be seen in the proportion of texts discussing cultural and educational aspects as opposed to news and opinion items. Through the ninth issue, a single article on the former aspects was included, while from the tenth this increased to two or even three articles. Some of these articles were relatively short, and for the most part repeated themes examined in the first nine issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rada’s original comments is فاما ما كان منها خاصا بالسياسة ومسألة مصر والسودان وتهييج العالم الاسلامي والهند على الدولة الانكليزية فقد وافقته على تركه وعدم نشر شيء منه في منشآته لان الحرية في مصر لا تتسع لنشرها (“while regarding that which relates to politics and to the question of Egypt and Sudan, and to the inflaming of the Muslim world and India against the British state, I agree with him [Zaghlul] that we should set this aside and not publish anything of it, since liberty in Egypt did not permit its publication.”) *Ta’arikh al-ustadh al-imam* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Rida often accompanied those sections of the weekly he considered “reformist” with footnotes in which he interpreted particular words of expressions that he feared might be opaque to his generation. In some instances, he added references to quotes from the Quran, citing chapter and verse. Elsewhere he corroborated the veracity of quoted Hadiths, and sometimes he even suggested changes to a given word in the original text. He added his own titles to the selected essays. Only in one instance did he explain that his titles had not appeared in the original. Rada’s proposed distinction between “political” and “reformist” content was not only horizontal, but sometimes also vertical. For example, in an article that Rida entitled “Illusions” (الوهم), he commented in a footnote that the article was reprinted only in part, and that he had removed the “political” sections from it. It is worth noting that in *Ta’arikh* Rida gives his reasons for excluding the political articles from the journal. His opinion on this matter fluctuates. In one instance, we find him explaining that like the articles that served as introductions to each of the issues, this material was written by Al-Afghani and ‘Abduh played no part in its composition. Rida states: ولم ننشرها برمتها لالتزامنا في هذا الفصل نشر مقالات العروة الاصلاحية من دينية واجتماعية، دون السياسية، كهذه المقالة وجميع مقالات العروة الافتتاحية، وتلك سياسة السيد جمال الدين رحمهما الله تعالى (ibid., p. 337): “We have not printed in full due to our undertaking in this section to publish the reformist, religious, and social articles without the political ones, such as this article and those that appeared by way of introductions; these were associated with Mr. Jamal a-Din, of blessed memory.” This position, which sought to impose a distinction between texts written by Al-Afghani and those written by ‘Abduh within the weekly journal, contradicts an opinion expressed elsewhere by Rida, when he emphasizes that the journal constitutes a collection of thoughts and opinions conceived jointly by both the authors. He also adds that ‘Abduh originally edited all the articles. To quote: الآراء والافكار فيها كانت مشتركة بين هذين الحكيميين والمحرر لجميع مقالاتها هو الثاني (ibid., p. 215): “The opinions and thoughts therein [in the weekly] were common to both these philosophers, while the latter was the editor of them all.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The exception to this rule is the anthology composed by the Egyptian historian A’bd a-Raḥman a-Rafa‘i. It is worth noting that this present study is indebted to A-Rafa‘i, since the discovery that the existing anthologies in the libraries are not identical to the original was possible thanks to the reprinting of the original cover page included in A-Rifa‘i’s booklet on Al-Afghani. Unlike many anthologies, in *Jamal a-Din al-Afghani be’‘ath nahdat a-sharq*, composed in 1961, A-Rafa‘i included a section of Samples of Articles and News from weekly journal. In some cases, A-Rafa‘i adopted the titles that appear in Rida, while in others he provided his own titles. Like Rada, A-Rafa‘i also preserved the original titles alongside those he selected, but unlike Rida he stated overtly that he was acting in this manner. In addition, A-Rafa‘i noted all the changes he had made to the original text. For example, and in contrast to other anthologies, A-Rafa‘i replicated in his book the form and structure of the original front page. ‘Abd a-Raḥman a-Rafa’i, *Jamal a-Din al-Afghani be‘ath nahdat a-sharq, 1897-1938* (Cairo: A-Dar al-Masriyya lil-Ta’alif wal-Tarjuma, 1961). It is also worth noting that most of the studies into the journal were not based on a study of the original version, with the exception of Albert Hourani, who based a chapter of his book on the issues of the journal when discussing Al-Afghani. See: Hourani, Albert. *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See the studies by Keddie, Kedourie, and Haim: Elie Kedourie (1966); Nikki Keddie (1972); Sylvia Haim (1974). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Amal Gazal “‘Illiberal’ Thought in the Liberal Age: Yusuf al-Nabhani (1849-1932), Dream-Stories and Sufi Polemics against the Modern Era,” in Jens Hanssen and Max Weiss, *Arabic thought Beyond the Liberal Age;* James L. Gelvin, “‘Modernity,’ ‘Tradition,’ and the Battleground of Gender in Early 20th Century Damascus,” *Die Welt des Islams* 52 (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The chapter on “Colonialism and the Theological Turn” is currently in preparation within a book based on my dissertation. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Evelyn Baring, Earl of, *Modern Egypt*, London: Macmillan, 1908, footnote # 1 p. 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The scholar Elie Kedourie argued, among other points, that the depiction of Al-Afghani and ‘Abduh as men who devoted their lives diligently to reform has little connection to reality. Yet despite choosing to begin his book with a quote from Hegel (“What the subject is, is the series of his actions”) Kedourie chose to offer an alternative portrait of their characters based on what others thought and wrote about them. He rejected the ideological systems, preferring to see “actions” and “performance” as the test for their positions. He claimed that the lives of both Al-Afghani and ‘Abduh were complex and dark, in part due to the oriental tyranny under which they lived; accordingly, what they said in public should not be over-valued since there is no connection between what they thought and what they did (p. 2). According to Kedourie, Al-Afghani was a man of rumors who disseminated lies about himself and about the events around him. Elie, Kedourie. *Afghani and ʻAbduh: An Essay on Religious Unbelief and Political Activism in Modern Islam* (1966). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Countless instances in the journal weave together linguistic phrases that combine these two messages in a free and logical manner. For example, in the very first sentence in the introduction to the first issue, the writers declare that “this is what divine inspiration transmits of the words of truth, and they place their trust in God for the success of the endeavor” (هذا ما تمده العناية الإلاهية من قول الحق وعلى الله المتكل في نجاح العمل). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. وذكر فان الذكرى تنفع المؤمنين (“but it has been proven that censure is beneficial for the faithful,” *Al-‘Urwah*, iss. 8,15 May 1884). The examples they gave of good attributes that might bring friendship and fellowship among Muslim Orientals included السخاء (generosity), العفة (purity), and الحياء (modesty). The purpose of the attributes as a whole, they continued, is to ensure equilibrium (*al-‘adal* العدل) in all actions (مجموع الفضائل هو العدل في جميع الاعمال). The good attributes, they added, prevent discord since each individual controls their needs, recognizes their boundaries and does not cross them. The more these good attributes stabilize among individuals belonging to the same social organization, they emphasized, the more unity will dwell among them. They asserted that the individual’s attitude toward society is identical to the force of gravity of the universe. Just as gravity maintains order among the stars and the proportions between each star, so good attributes maintain human existence (ibid.). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See *Al-‘Urwah*, issue 5 (10 April 1884): واعتصموا بحبل الله جميعا ولا تفرقوا (“all of you seek strength in the rope God has reached out to you, and do not divide among yourselves;” sub-title التعصب). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. “I suspect that my friend Abduh, although he would have resented the appellation being applied to him, was in reality an agnostic. His associates, although they admitted his ability, were inclined to look askance at him as a ‘filosouf.’ Now, in the eyes of the strictly orthodox, one who studies philosophy or, in other words, one who recognizes the difference between the seventh and the twentieth centuries, is on high road to perdition” (second vol., p. 180). It is also worth mentioning in this context that Cromer confuses the school of thought of ‘Abduh in Egypt and that of Ahmad Khan in India (ibid.). See Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, London: Macmillan, 1908. Kedourie’s study, mentioned above, adopts Cromer’s testimony in order to condemn ‘Abduh and deprive him of his historical status as a Muslim reformer. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. In the introduction to the 1983 edition of his book, Hourani repented, admitting that the modern dimension in the first and second generations of the Nahda was more limited than he had previously believed, while the dimension of continuity with the past was greater. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. This claim is particularly prominent in Gibb. Like Goldziher before him, Gibb identified the connection between the political and the cultural in Al-Afghani’s thought. However, he felt that the dominance of the political aspect mitigated against serious reflection on religious problems (Gibb, *Modern Trends in Islam*, p. 33). He argued that in order to begin to revise Islamic doctrine, it is vital to detach the religious element in the modern reformist movements from the emotional influence of their nationalist or revolutionary program; even if these continue to be connected, they will no longer be mutually dependent. Gibb argues that each aspect must develop freely along its own course (ibid., p. 29). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. إصلاح (*islah*) is contrasted with إفساد (*ifsad*); there is a similar contrast pair مصلحون/ مفسدون. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. This issue included eight sections: an untitled introduction; ان في ذلك لذكرى لمن كان له قلب او القى السمع وهو شهيد (“Indeed in that is a reminder for whoever has a heart or who listens while he is present [in mind]”); الدولة العثمانية (“The Ottoman state”); انكلترا في سواحل البحر الاحمر (“England on the coast of the Red Sea”); خرطوم (“Khartoum”); اماني انكلترا في حركات محمد احمد (“English hopes in the movements of Muhammad Ahmad”); الحزم والعزم (“Decisiveness and forcefulness”); اسطورة (“Myth”). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The authors claim that the main reason for the gulf between the origins of the Christian religion and the character of Christians in the modern era lies in Roman history. Discourse on the values that appeared in the New Testament, such as peace, was the domain of spiritual leaders, while the secular legislators and authorities wages a war against the cross. Thus the war against Christianity undermined the foundations of Christian faith in Europe; a struggle was waged against religious authority, which as a result divided into separate schools. The conflict between the authority of the Roman rulers and religious authority drove the Europeans back to what they described as “the virus of their existence” (*Al-‘Urwah*, iss. 4, 3 April 1884). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See اسطورة *Ustura* (*Al-‘Urwah*, iss. 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. ان في ذلك لذكرى لمن كان له قلب او القى السمع وهو شهيد (“Indeed in that is a reminder for whoever has a heart or who listens while he is present [in mind],) (*Al-‘Urwah*, iss. 4, 3 April 1884). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See, for example, in the Quran: Ankabūt: 20; Najm: 47; Wāqi’a: 62). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See: واطيعوا الله ورسوله ولا تنازعوا فتفشلوا أو تذهب ريحكم (“O believers, listen to God and His messengers and let not discord fall among you, lest your heart fall and your spirit fail to rise” (*Al-‘Urwah*, iss. 9, 22 May 1884). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. المنقذ من الضلال والموصل إلى ذي العزة والجلال, p. 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Hourani made a similar criticism in his review of Nikki Keddie’s political biography of Al-Afghani. See: Albert Hourani, *Review of Sayyid Jamal ad-Din 'al-Afghani: A Political Biography* by Nikki R. Keddie, International Journal of Middle East Studies 4:4 (1973), pp. 492-495. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Active *‘ulama* are mentioned, for example, in iss. 9. In iss. 7 the authors devoted their cultural essay to a discussion of the corruption of the original meaning of the foundation of the القضاء والقدر or the ancient edict. Their general thrust is the claim that confusion developed between this principle and the explanation given for it by the Al-Jabariyah school. This school, they suggested, promotes the position that the entirety of a person’s actions are preordained, without a dimension of free choice. They went on to claim that there was no other school active in their period – Sunni, Shi‘ite, Isma‘ili, Zidi, Wahabi or Kharji – that agreed with such a position, which deprives the individual of free choice. They emphasized that the Muslim schools in general believe that a person’s actions play a certain role known as *kasab* (acquisition; ibid.). See القضاء والقدر (*Al-qidaa wal-qadar*, 1 May 1894). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. ثم إني لما فرغت من هذه العلوم، أقبلت بهمتي على طريق الصوفية وعلمت أن طريقتهم تتم بالعلم والعمل... (*Al-munqidh*, p. 130). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Al-Ghazali, *Al-iqtisad fil-i‘tiqad*, Maktabat wa-Matba‘at Muhammad ‘Ali, Maydan al-Azhar, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. ان في ذلك لذكرى لمن كان له قلب او القى السمع وهو شهيد (“Indeed in that is a reminder for whoever has a heart or who listens while he is present [in mind];” *Al-‘Urwah*, issue 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. In the original ومن رأيها أن الإشتغال بداخل البيت إنما يكون بعد الأمن من طروق الناهب: “And in their opinion [that of the authors], addressing the inside of the house should come only after securing the path against thieves” (*Al-‘Urwah*, issue 9). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. كنا على يقين ولا نزال عليه ان الذات الشاهانية وهي الأب الأكبر لعموم المسلمين وهي الكافلة للشريعة الحافظة للدين هي أجد الناس للإلتفات الى حركات الأعداء في البلاد الاسلامية... ولا يمكن أن يطمئن للسلطان قلب وهو يرى أن أمة عظيمة من أخلص الأمم في الولاء له والخضوع لشوكته سقطت تحت السلطة الأجنبية: “We had no doubt, and we have no doubt, that the character of the Shah, the great father of all the Muslims who tends to the Shari‘a that preserves religion, is the most worthy to attend to the enemies’ movements in the Muslim lands… The heart cannot place its trust in the Sultan when it sees a splendid nation, one of the most faithful and subservient to his power, falling under foreign rule” (iss. 18, 16 October 1884, عماء بعض الناس في مصر او تعاميهم عن مقاصد الانكليز فيها “The blindness of some people in Egypt or their ignoring the objectives of the English therein.”) [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. It was noted in the issue that ‘Abduh had traveled to London to meet with British politicians in an attempt to persuade the British government to refrain from occupying Egypt and Sudan. See *Al-‘Urwah*, issue 14, 14 August 1884, هؤلاء رجال الانكليز وهذه افكارهم (“These are the English and these are their thoughts.”) [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. According to testimonies presented in the journal itself, articles from the various issues were translated into Persian and Hindi during its period of publication in local newspapers in Iran and India. In Iran, the articles appeared in the newspaper اطلاع, which was printed in Iran. The authors thanked the newspaper for publishing their work (iss. 14: اذا اراد الله بقوم خيرا جمع كلمتهم, “When God desires the good of the people, He unifies its ranks.”) In a report entitled *Al-jara’ad al-hindiyah*, the authors mentioned two Indian newspapers: *Akhbar Dar a-Sultanah*, printed in Calcutta, and *Mushir Qaisar*, printed in Lucknow. See, for example, iss. 8 (15 May 1884), “The Indian Press” (الجرائد الهندية, *Al-jara’ad al-hindiyah*). In addition to these newspapers, iss. 12 carried a report about two additional Indian newspapers: *Oda Akhbar* and *Amirta Baza Bartaka* (جريدة اوده اخبار وجريدة اميرتا بازار برتركا). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. *Al-‘Urwah*, issue 5 (10 April 1884). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *Al-‘Urwah*, issue 16 (11 September 1884). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. *Al-‘Urwah*, issue 11 (19 June 1884). [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. *Al-‘Urwah*, issue 9 (22 May 1884). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. This error in identifying the heading on the front page may be due to the reliance on the anthologies of articles from the journal. Individual essays indeed carried the heading العروة الوثقى. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Shahab Ahmed argues rightly that “one important symptom that helps to dispel the notion of philosophy as a marginal foreign science in the discourse of Muslims, is the swift historical replacement in both the discipline of philosophy and in the discourses of Muslims at large of the Greek-derived term *falsafa* (philosophy) with the Quranic-Arabic term *hikma*…” (p. 15). Ahmed quotes Ibn Sina’s definition of *hikma* as “‘the perfecting of the human soul by the conceptualization of things and by the verification of the theoretical and practical real-truths to the extent of human capacity.’ As such, *hikma* is the knowing of the idea and reality of the Universal Truth of Divine Creation; that is to say, *hikma* is the knowing of the truth of God – as ibn Sina wrote, it compasses Divine Science (*al-ilm al-ilahi*)… *Hikma* is also tied to the concept of “rule” … thus, *hikma*/philosophy is both the identification of the theoretical *rules* or values operative in the universe, as well as the enactment and application of practical *rules* or values consonant with those theoretical rules” (Ibid, 16). I strongly recommend a careful reading of Shahab Ahmed’s excellent book: *What is Islam? The importance of Being Islamic*, Princeton University Press, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. *Al-‘Urwah*, issue 1 (13 March 1884). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)