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English summary

Shared questions, diverging answers *Muḥammad ‘Abduh and his interlocutors on ‘religion’ in a globalizing world*

This study presents a new and innovative approach for analysing the Egyptian Islamic reformer Muḥammad ‘Abduh’s (1849-1905) reinterpretation of Islam within a globalized and at the same time locally diversified world. It argues that the study of the ideas of this famous Egyptian Islamic reformer benefits from firmly locating his ideas within their particular historical milieu, situating them in his conversations with a variety of interlocutors and in the plurality of contexts to which these conversations responded.

‘Abduh’s long-distance connections and interactions with contemporaries around the world were part of a more general increase in interconnections around the world since the second half of the nineteenth century. In his works, furthermore, he adopted and reconfigured ideas and concepts that circulated globally. At the same time, his intellectual world cannot be reduced to its global dimension. ‘Abduh formulated his ideas in the newspapers of Cairo, a school in Beirut, and the classrooms and halls of the Azhar school of higher Islamic education; they responded to domestic politics, engaged with Islamic tradition, and reflected his friendships and animosities. His ideas necessarily reflected the interplay and entanglement between these global and local dimensions, which were impossible to separate from one another. His ideas exemplify that the global is always configured locally and are indicative of a great diversity within global convergence.

In studying ‘Abduh in interaction with his contemporaries in a globalized yet locally diversified world, furthermore, this study proposes to focus on the questions that he shared with his interlocutors and that they answered differently. By focusing on *shared questions and diverging answers*, this study seeks to capture the way ‘Abduh’s texts reflected the coherence of the discussions of which they were part, while gaining insight into the texts’ particularity within these conversations. Through this approach, this study seeks to do justice to the diversity within historical processes of intellectual and conceptual globalization – a key riddle in the study of processes of global intellectual convergence.

This objective is particularly pertinent for the study of ‘Abduh. The first chapter of this study discusses a wide array of studies from two strands of research, of which the first classifies ‘Abduh primarily as a representative of ‘Islamic Modernism’ and the second considers him to be central to the ‘Salafiyya.’ The chapter argues that the historiography of ‘Abduh has often tended to reduce him to a singular and essentialized tradition, though in multiple ways, as a result of twentieth-century anticipations, norms and interests.

Specifically, this study tracks the questions that ‘Abduh and his interlocutors jointly asked in thinking, writing, and arguing about ‘religion’ (or *al-dīn* in Arabic) – a key concept for understanding both the self and the other in transcultural interactions in a colonized world, as becomes evident in the second chapter of this thesis. To this aim, it focuses on two of ‘Abduh’s texts in context: his theological handbook *Risālat al-Tawḥīd* and his reply to the then former Minister of Foreign Affairs of France, Gabriel Hanotaux. In this way, this study aims to grasp the convergence in the way that ‘religion’ was conceptualized and used in the context of the selected texts. In addition, it aims to situate ‘Abduh’s reinterpretation of Islam within a field of conceptualizations of ‘religion,’ considering his reinterpretation of Islam *as a religion* as one possible answer to questions he shared with his interlocutors.

The fourth and seventh chapters of this study identify several sets of questions that were widely shared in the contexts of two of ‘Abduh’s texts, with regard to ‘religion’ and the various religions. In *Risālat al-Tawḥīd* and its context, ‘Abduh and his interlocutors’ comparisons between religions responded to questions of how to uphold morality and maintain moral order. Specifically, they jointly asked questions about the communal benefit (*maṣlaḥa*) of religions and their encouragement to action. Furthermore, ‘Abduh and his interlocutors compared religions in response to questions about their relation to ‘reason’ (*‘aql*), specifically with regard to the intellect’s autonomy in matters of science and religion.

Focusing on ‘Abduh’s reply to Hanotaux and its context, this study argues that the question that ‘Abduh and his interlocutors asked to compare Islam and Christianity focused on the two religions’ relations to ‘progress’ (*taqaddum*) and their roles in the ‘reform’ (*iṣlāḥ*) that they considered necessary for this. More specifically, they compared Islam and Christianity in relation to the two religions’ doctrinal conceptualizations of the relation between God and man and these doctrines’ implications for a believer’s activity in this world and according suitability for progress. Lastly, ‘Abduh and his interlocutors in the Hanotaux-discussion jointly asked how Islam and Christianity compared with regard to their configuration of the political and the religious and, specifically, with regard to ‘religious fanaticism’ (*ta’aṣṣub dīnī*), ‘the welfare of the fatherland’ (*maṣlaḥat al-waṭan*), and ‘reform’ (*iṣlāḥ*).

These comparative questions revealed the coherence of the discussions and conversations of which the two texts were part. However, ‘Abduh and his interlocutors gave different answers to these questions. ‘Abduh’s conceptualization of the Islamic religion as particularly conducive to upholding a collectively beneficial morality in *Risālat al-Tawḥīd* linked to his interlocutors’ conceptualizations of ‘religion’ in general as conducive to a collectively beneficial morality, yet he assigned the Islamic religion a particular role in this. In addition, ‘Abduh remained ambiguous about which ‘collective’ benefitted from this morality offering no unequivocal clarification of whether it was the Muslim community or the multi-confessional ‘fatherland’ (*waṭan*) that his interlocutors in Beirut wished to defend. In addition, in *Risālat al-Tawḥīd*, his reinterpretation of Islam as conducive to intellectual autonomy was a move against the religious scholars of

that time and their defence of the following of religious authorities (*taqlīd*). Also, the similarity he saw between Islam and Protestantism in this respect was shared by some but ridiculed by others.

Furthermore, in his reply to Hanotaux, ‘Abduh inverted Hanotaux’s assessment of the Islamic doctrines’ encouragement of the believers’ activity and striving. Similarly, he (as well as *al-Mu’ayyad*, *al-Liwā’* and *al-Manār*) tried to demonstrate Islam’s compatibility with the interest of the fatherland through claiming Islam’s rejection of religious fanaticism and the non-political nature of Islamic unity – sharing his concern with the fatherland and with tolerance with Taqlā of *al-Ahrām*. Furthermore, he argued for the importance of an Islamic religio-moral reform, led by the caliph, in obtaining progress for all Muslims.

In this way, ‘Abduh’s answers were particular moves for navigating through the answers of his interlocutors. Thus, his answers were related to those of his interlocutors but were not reduced to them. At times, his answer stood in fierce contestation with those of others; at other times, his answer latched onto the answers that others gave, diverging only slightly.

Using the analytical tool of shared questions once more, the fifth and eighth chapters of this study map the act of navigation that ‘Abduh’s answer represented within a global field of conceptualizations of ‘religion.’ It argues that ‘Abduh’s reinterpretation of Islam can also be fruitfully analysed as one particular answer to questions that are more broadly considered to be fundamental to the modern European discourse of ‘religion.’ What is the relation between the religions as religions? What is the relation between religion, nature, and reason? What is and should be the public role of religion?

This study argues that ‘Abduh’s conceptualization of ‘religion’ (*al-dīn*) – in reply to the first global question mentioned above – reveals a versatile “play of similarity and difference” between ‘the religions’ (*al-adyān*), in which the superiority of Islam quickly alternates with Islam’s similarity to other religions. This study argues that this alternation and the ambiguity that sometimes resulted reflected the discussions and negotiations that he had with his interlocutors. His conceptualization of the superiority of Islam, at times corroborated by his idea of Islam as similar to Protestantism, responded to his desire to defend Islam against Christianity in a colonial context. On the other hand, his emphasis on Islam’s similarity to other religions matched his and his interlocutors’ ambition to establish inter-confessional communal harmony in the context of the *waṭan*. Furthermore, ‘Abduh’s particularly theological conceptualization of ‘religion,’ reflecting his idea of true religion, reinforced a sense of similarity between the religions but also deepened boundaries between religions and within Islam.

In addition, this study argues that ‘Abduh aimed to prove Islam’s relevance by establishing its compatibility with reason (*‘aql*) and its celebration of reason’s autonomy from everyone and everything (except God) in reply to a second globally shared question about the relation between reason and religion. In reinterpreting Islam as a religion without religious authority (except for God), ‘Abduh excluded the

authorities (*'ulamā'*) and the authoritative structures (*taqlīd*) of many of his Muslim contemporaries as irrational and therefore ultimately unsuitable for the role that 'Abduh envisioned for Islam in a communal respect.

Similarly, this study argues that 'Abduh aimed to prove Islam's relevance for the community – in reply to a third global question about religion's public role – by referring to its moral worth as a religion. In *Risālat al-Tawhīd*, he considered this moral worth to be a unique trait of religion (in which reason cannot substitute religion). 'Abduh considered Islam particularly conducive to a community-oriented and action-oriented morality that would result in progress, moreover, contesting Hanotaux's assessment of Islam. 'Abduh's expositions on the moral worth of Islam seemed to be simultaneously directed towards the European colonizer, his Christian co-patriot, and his fellow Muslim – a plurality that is perhaps reflected in 'Abduh's ambiguity as to which community would benefit from his Islamic reforms. Furthermore, in reinterpreting Islam as a religion that was morally meritorious through the instilling of collectively beneficial, activating, and progress-oriented virtues, 'Abduh distanced himself from the Islam of many of his contemporaries and the authorities upholding it.

In short, this study maps how 'Abduh's answers echoed, negotiated, or contested those of his contemporaries, who shared his questions regarding 'religion' in a globally interconnected world. In this way, this study explores how 'Abduh partook in a global convergence in conceptualizations of 'religion' in his own particular way, reflecting the diverse concerns and semantics of the contexts in which he wrote his texts.