ISLAM

THE STRAIGHT PATH

Third Edition

John L. Esposito

New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1998

Islamic Society), that combined religious ideology and activism. These organizations served as catalysts for Islamic revivalism in the middle decades of the twentieth century and have had a major impact on the interpretation and implementation of Islam in recent years.

Islamic Modernism

European trade missions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries progressively expanded so that by the eighteenth century many areas of the Muslim world had felt the impact of the economic and military challenge of Western technology and modernization. A major shift in power occurred as declining Muslim fortunes reversed the relationship of the Muslim world to the West, from that of ascendant expansionism to one of defensiveness and subordination. By the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Europe (in particular, Great Britain, France, and Holland) had penetrated and increasingly dominated much of the Muslim world from North Africa to Southeast Asia (the French in North Africa, the British and French in the Middle East and South Asia, and the Dutch and British in Southeast Asia).

Western imperialism precipitated a religious as well as a political crisis. For the first time, much of the Muslim world had lost its political and cultural sovereignty to Christian Europe. Although the Muslim world had endured the Mongol conquests, in time the conquerors had embraced Islam. Colonial rule eclipsed the institutions of an Islamic state and society—the sultan, Islamic law, and *ulama* administration of education, law, and social welfare. Muslim subjugation by Christian Europe confirmed not only the decline of Muslim power but also the apparent loss of divine favor and guidance. For the believer, it raised a number of religious questions. What had gone wrong in Islam? Was the success of the West due to the superiority of Christendom, the backwardness of Islam, or the faithlessness of the community? How could Muslims realize God's will in a state governed by non-Muslims and non-Muslim law? In what ways should Muslims respond to this challenge to Muslim identity and faith?

A variety of responses emerged from Muslim self-criticism and reflection on the causes of decline. Their actions spanned the spectrum, from adaptation and cultural synthesis to withdrawal and rejection. Secularists blamed an outmoded tradition. They advocated the separation of religion and politics, and the establishment of modern nation-states modeled on the West. Islam should be restricted to personal life, and public life should be modeled on modern, that is, European, ideas and technology in government, the military, education, and law. Conservative religious leaders, including most of the *ulama*, attributed

Muslim impotence to divergence from Islam and deviation from tradition. Many advocated withdrawal, noncooperation, or rejection of the West. Western (Christian) ideas and values were as dangerous as their governments and armies, for they threatened faith and culture. Some concluded that where Muslims no longer lived under Islamic rule in an Islamic territory, they were now in a land of warfare which, following the example of the Prophet, necessitated either armed struggle (jihad) or emigration (*hijra*) to an Islamically governed land. In India, the son of Shah Wali Allah, Shah Abdul Aziz, issued a *fatwa* declaring India a non-Islamic territory, a land of warfare in which to fight or to flee were Islamically appropriate responses. While some attempted to emigrate, more joined jihad movements. However, the majority of religious leaders advocated a policy of cultural isolation and noncooperation. They equated any form of political accommodation of Western culture with betrayal and surrender.

A third major Muslim response, Islamic modernism, emerged during the late nineteenth century. It sought to delineate an alternative to Western, secular adaptationism on the one hand and religiously motivated rejectionism on the other. A group of reform-minded Muslims sought to respond to, rather than react against, the challenge of Western imperialism. They proclaimed the need for Islamic reform. They blamed the internal decline of Muslim societies, their loss of power and backwardness, and their inability to respond effectively to European colonialism on a blind and unquestioned clinging to the past (*taqlid*). Islamic reformers stressed the dynamism, flexibility, and adaptability that had characterized the early development of Islam, notable for its achievements in law, education, and the sciences. They pressed for internal reform through a process of reinterpretation (*ijtihad*) and selective adaptation (Islamization) of Western ideas and technology. Islamic modernism was a process of internal self-criticism, a struggle to redefine Islam to demonstrate its relevance to the new situations that Muslims found themselves in as their societies modernized. The Middle East and South Asia produced major modernist movements. Their themes and activities are illustrated in several key figures—in the Middle East, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and his disciples, Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida; and in South Asia, Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Iqbal.

The Middle East

Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838–97) was an outstanding figure of nineteenth-century Islam and a major catalyst for Islamic reform. A tireless activist, he roamed the Muslim world, calling for internal reform in order to defend Islam, strengthen the Muslim community, and,

eventually, drive out the West. An orator, teacher, journalist, and political activist, he lived and preached his reformist message in Afghanistan, Egypt, Turkey, Persia, India, Russia, France, and England. Afghani attempted to bridge the gap between secular modernists and religious traditionalists. He believed that Muslims could repel the West not by ignoring or rejecting the sources of Western strength (science and technology), but instead by reclaiming and reappropriating reason, science, and technology, which, he maintained, had been integral to Islam and the grand accomplishments of Islamic civilization. He was an ardent advocate of constitutionalism and parliamentary government to limit the power of rulers. Such statements appealed to many of the young who had had a traditional upbringing but were now also attracted by modern reforms. Afghani also appealed to the *ulama* with his assertion that Muslims needed to remember that Islam was the source of strength and that Muslims must return to a more faithful observance of its guidance.

Afghani rejected the passivity, fatalism, and otherworldliness of popular Sufism as well as the Western secular tendency to restrict religion to personal life or worship. He countered by preaching an activist, this-worldly Islam: (1) Islam is a comprehensive way of life, encompassing worship, law, government, and society; (2) the true Muslim struggles to carry out God's will in history, and thus seeks success in this life as well as the next.

> [T]he principles of Islamic religion are not restricted to calling man to the truth or to considering the soul only in a spiritual context which is concerned with the relationship between this world and the world to come. . . . There is more besides: Islamic principles are concerned with relationships among the believers, they explain the law in general and in detail, they define the executive power which administers the law. . . . Thus, in truth, the ruler of the Muslims will be their religious, holy, and divine law. . . . Let me repeat . . . that unlike other religions, Islam is concerned not only with the life to come. Islam is more: it is concerned with the believers' interests in the world here below and with allowing them to realize success in this life as well as peace in the next life. It seeks "good fortune in two worlds." [53]

Like the revivalists of the previous century, Afghani maintained that the strength and survival of the *umma* were dependent on the reassertion of Islamic identity and solidarity. He exhorted Muslims to realize that Islam was the religion of reason and science—a dynamic, progressive, creative force capable of responding to the demands of modernity:

> The Europeans have now everywhere put their hands on every part of the world. The English have reached Afghanistan; the French have seized Tunisia. In reality this usurpation, aggression, and conquest have not come from the French or the English. Rather it is science that everywhere manifests its greatness and power. . . . [S]cience, is continually changing capitals. Sometimes it has moved from the East to the West, and other times from West to East . . . all wealth and riches are the result of science. In sum, the whole world of humanity is an industrial world, meaning that the world is a world of science. . . . The first Muslims had no science, but, thanks to the Islamic religion, a philosophic spirit arose among them. . . . This was why they acquired in a short time all the sciences . . . those who forbid science and knowledge in the belief that they are safeguarding the Islamic religion are really the enemies of that religion. The Islamic religion is the closest of religions to science and knowledge, and there is no incompatibility between science and knowledge and the foundation of the Islamic faith.[54]

Therefore, science and learning from the West did not pose a threat to Islam; they could, and should, be studied and utilized.

Central to Afghani's program for Islamic reform was his call for a reopening of the door of *ijtihad*. He denounced the stagnation in Islam, which he attributed both to the influence of Sufism and to the backwardness of the *ulama*, who lacked the expertise required to respond to modern concerns and discouraged others from obtaining scientific knowledge, erroneously labeling it "European science." The process of reinterpretation and reform that he advocated went beyond that of eighteenth-century revivalism. While he talked about a need to return to Islam, the thrust and purpose of reform were not simply to reappropriate answers from the past, but in light of Islamic principles, to formulate new Islamic responses to the changing conditions of Muslim societies. Reinterpretation of Islam would once again make it a relevant force in intellectual and political life. In this way, Islam would serve as the source of a renewal or renaissance that would restore Muslim political independence and the past glory of Islam.

In Afghani's holistic interpretation of Islam, the reform of Islam was inseparably connected with liberation from colonial rule. The reassertion of Muslim identity and solidarity was a prerequisite for the restoration of political and cultural independence. Although he preached a pan-Islamic message, he also accepted the reality of Muslim nationalism. National independence was the goal of reformism and a necessary step in revitalizing the Islamic community both regionally and transnationally.

Jamal al-Din al-Afghani articulated a cluster of ideas and attitudes that influenced Islamic reformist thought and Muslim anticolonial

sentiment for much of the first half of the twentieth century. His disciples included many of the great political and intellectual leaders of the Muslim world. He is remembered both as the Father of Muslim Nationalism and as a formative influence on Egypt's Salafiyya ("pious ancestors," the early founding fathers of the Muslim community) reformist movement and later, the Muslim Brotherhood.

Muhammad Abduh and the Salafiyya. If Afghani was the catalyst, his disciples Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) and Rashid Rida (1865–1935) were the great synthesizers of modern Islam. Their Salafiyya movement was to influence reform movements from North Africa to Southeast Asia. Muhammad Abduh was one of the earliest and most remarkable disciples of al-Afghani, destined to become one of Egypt's leading *ulama,* a reformer of al-Azhar University, and the Mufti (chief judge of the Sharia court system) of Egypt, and to be remembered as the Father of Islamic Modernism in the Arab world. During the 1870s and early 1880s, Abduh enthusiastically collaborated with Afghani in writing reformist articles, publishing a journal, and participating in the nationalist movement. He was exiled with Afghani to Paris after they participated in an unsuccessful nationalist revolt against British influence in Egypt. When Abduh returned, he turned his attention away from politics and focused instead on religious, educational, and social reform.

Abduh's theology and approach began with the unity of God, the cornerstone of Islamic belief and the source of the Muslim community's strength and vitality. One of his major reformist works was *The Theology of Unity.*[55] The basis for Abduh's reformist thought was his belief that religion and reason were complementary, and that there was no inherent contradiction between religion and science, which he regarded as the twin sources of Islam. The bases of Muslim decline were the prevalence of un-Islamic popular religious beliefs and practices, such as saint worship, intercession, and miracles, and the stifling of creativity and dynamism due to Sufi passivity and fatalism as well as to the rigid scholasticism of the traditionalist *ulama* who had forbidden fresh religious interpretation. He attributed the stagnation of Muslim society to blind imitation (*taqlid*), the dead weight of scholasticism:

> We must, however, believe that the Islamic religion is a religion of unity throughout. It is not a religion of conflicting principles but is built squarely on reason, while divine revelation is its surest pillar . . . the Quran directs us, enjoining rational procedure and intellectual inquiry into the manifestations of the universe. . . . It forbids us to be slavishly credulous. . . . Well is it said that traditionalism can have evil consequences as well as good. . . . It is a deceptive thing, and though it may be pardoned in an animal [it] is scarcely seemly in man.[56]

Abduh was convinced that the transformation of Muslim society depended on a reinterpretation of Islam and its implementation through national educational and social reforms. His writings and *fatwas* reflected his underlying message that Islam and science, revelation and reason, were compatible, and thus Muslims could selectively appropriate aspects of Western civilization that were not contrary to Islam.

Abduh sought to provide an Islamic rationale for the selective integration of Islam with modern ideas and institutions. He distinguished between Islam's inner core or fundamentals, those truths and principles which were unchanging, and its outer layers, society's application of immutable principles and values to the needs of a particular age. Therefore, he maintained that while those regulations of Islamic law that governed worship (*ibadat,* such as prayer, fasting, pilgrimage) were immutable, the vast majority of regulations concerned with social affairs (*muamalat,* such as penal, commercial, and family laws) were open to change. As historical and social conditions warranted, the core of Islamic principles and values should be reapplied to new realities and, where necessary, the old layers of tradition discarded. Abduh believed that the crisis of modern Islam was precipitated by Muslim failure to uphold the distinction between the immutable and the mutable, the necessary and the contingent. Abduh followed this approach by championing reforms in law, theology, and education. His reformist ideas were incorporated in his legal rulings and set forth in a journal, *al-Manar* ("The Beacon" or "Lighthouse"), which he published with his protégé, the Syrian Rashid Rida. In education, he worked for national reforms and modernized the curriculum at al-Azhar University during his tenure as its rector. Employing the Maliki law school's principle of public welfare, he gave *fatwas* that touched on everything from bank interest to women's status.

Abduh was particularly critical of the lack of educational opportunities for women and the deleterious effects of polygamy on Muslim society. His handling of the issue reflects his methodology, which combined a modernist interpretation of Scripture and its employment in the name of the public interest. Abduh argued that polygamy had been permitted, not commanded, in the Prophet's time as a concession to prevailing social conditions:

> If you are afraid that you will not treat orphans justly, then marry such women as may seem good to you, two, three or four. If you feel that you will not act justly, then one. (Quran 4:3)

He maintained that the true intent of the Quran was monogamy because marriage to more than one wife was contingent on equal justice and impartial treatment of each wife, which the Quran notes, subsequent to verse 4:3, is not possible: "You will never manage to deal equitably with women no matter how hard you try" (4:129). Abduh maintained that since this was a practical impossibility, the Quranic ideal was monogamy. Abduh's Quranic interpretation and his use of public interest as an Islamic justification for legal reform were adopted by reformers in Egypt and in other Muslim countries to introduce changes in family law.

Rashid Rida has been called the "mouthpiece of Abduh."[57] He traveled from his home in Syria to Cairo in 1897 to become Abduh's close protégé. In 1898, they published the first edition of *al-Manar*, a periodical that became the principal vehicle for Abduh and Rida's Salafi reformism. Rida continued to publish *al-Manar* after Abduh's death (1905) until his own death in 1935. Although regarded as a journal devoted to Abduh's reformist thought, in fact it was greatly affected by Rida's interpretation of his master and Rida's own growing conservatism in later years. It covered the range of reformist concerns—Quranic exegesis, articles on theological, legal, and educational reform, *fatwas* on contemporary issues.

In general, Rida adopted and carried on the Afghani–Abduh legacy of calling for a reinterpretation of Islam. The development of a modern Islamic legal system was a fundamental priority, given the challenges and requirements of the modern world. Rida, too, rejected the unquestioned authority of medieval formulations of law and regarded much of the social sphere as subject to change. Reform in Islam required more than the eclectic selection of appropriate regulations from one of the established schools of law. New regulations were necessary. He utilized a number of sources to justify this claim. Following Abduh, Rida relied on the Maliki principle of the public interest or general welfare. In classical jurisprudence public interest was a subsidiary legal principle used in deducing new laws by analogy from the Quran and Sunna. Reformers now employed it as an independent source of law to formulate regulations where no clear scriptural text prevailed. Rida also relied on Hanbali law and Ibn Taymiyya. Although Hanbalism is normally regarded as the most rigid of the law schools, its strict formalism pertains to acts of worship, the unchanging essence of Islam based on the Quran and Sunna, as distinct from social laws that are

subject to change. Thus, Ibn Taymiyya had been able to maintain the right to exercise *ijtihad* in social affairs. Rida adopted this distinction:

> Creed and ritual were completed in detail so as to permit neither additions nor subtractions, and whoever adds to them or subtracts from them is changing Islam and brings forth a new religion. As for the *muamalat* (social laws), beyond decreeing the elements of virtue and establishing penalties for certain crimes, and beyond imposing the principle of consultation, the Law Giver delegated the affair in its detailed applications to the leading ulama and rulers.[58]

Rashid Rida believed that the implementation of Islamic law required an Islamic government, since law was the product of consultation between the ruler (caliph) and the *ulama*, the guardian-interpreters of law. Like Afghani, Rashid Rida concerned himself with the restoration of the caliphate and pan-Islamic unity. He also shared the modernist belief that the *ulama* were backward and ill-equipped to understand the modern world and to reinterpret Islam. Therefore, he advocated the development of a group of progressive Islamic thinkers to bridge the gap between the conservative *ulama* and Westernized elites.

Rida shifted the Salafi movement's orientation toward a more conservative position during the thirty years after the death of Abduh in 1905. Although strongly drawn to Afghani and Abduh, Rida had a much more limited exposure to the West. He neither traveled much in the West nor spoke a Western language. He remained convinced that the British continued to be a political and religious threat: "The British government is committed to the destruction of Islam in the East after destroying its temporal power."[59] He became more critical of the West with the growing influence of Western liberal secular nationalism and culture in Egypt, ironically at the hands of former students of Afghani and Abduh, who wished to restrict religion to private life. An admirer of the Wahhabi movement in Arabia, he was more inclined to emphasize the self-sufficiency and comprehensiveness of Islam. Muslim reformers must not look to the West, but single-mindedly return to the sources of Islam—the Quran, the Sunna of the Prophet, and the consensus of the Companions of the Prophet. Rida's conservatism was reflected in his more restricted understanding of the term *salaf*, ancestors or pious forefathers. For Abduh, it was a general reference to the early Islamic centuries; Rida followed eighteenth-century revivalism's restriction of the term to the first generation of Muslims, the Companions of the Prophet, whose example was to be emulated.

During the post–World War I period, Rida became more wary of modernism and more drawn to the *ulama*. The example of Egyptian nationalism reinforced his fear that modernist rationalism in the hands

of intellectuals and political elites would degenerate into the secularization and Westernization of Muslim societies. As a result, he cast his reformism more and more in the idiom of a defense of Islam against the dangers of the West. His rejection of Western secular liberalism and emphasis on the comprehensiveness and self-sufficiency of Islam aligned him more closely with eighteenth-century revivalism and influenced the thinking and ideological worldviews of Hasan al-Banna (1906–49), founder of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, and other contemporary Islamic activists.