

Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition: Reform, Rationality, and Modernity

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The goal of this book “is to provide a way of conceptualizing the Islamic tradition that is different from that proposed by conventional scholarship” (p. 6). The author wants to highlight how Muslims themselves view modernity because their own views have been overshadowed by western scholarship and have problematized assumptions founded on the oppositional dichotomies of modern versus traditional or secular versus sacred. She argues that a tradition is not simply the recapitulation of previous beliefs and practices, but that each successive generation confronts its own particular problems via an engagement with a set of ongoing arguments. Therefore, the author asserts, one effective way of addressing Islam is to approach it as Muslims do – as a discursive tradition embodied in the practices and institutions of their communities.

Haj intends to attain her goals and highlights these problems by analyzing the work of two significant Muslim reformers: Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-87) and Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905). Although they belong to different historical periods and social settings, she feels that their work has inspired the two major strands of contemporary Islamic political thought. The former, an Arabian reformer, has often been referred to as the “legendary mastermind of a ‘fundamentalist’ and ‘violent’ political movement, the inspiration for the present-day militant Muslim groups (like al-Qa`ida) in their struggle against modernity” (p. 30). The latter is an Egyptian reformer regarded as a liberal humanist who underlined the essence of Muslim humanism for the modern world.

Chapter 1 provides concise life narratives for both men and their distinct social settings, which are objective and useful to readers as background information. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab lived in a world defined by religion and Islamic knowledge, whereas Abduh was born into a scientifically oriented new world. Yet both had to struggle against invasive elements to preserve Islam’s eternal message: Ibn Abd al-Wahhab dedicated his life to rescuing Islam from the authority of ignorant and unenlightened people, while Abduh struggled against European aggression and expansion to safeguard it against the temporal, secular world and keep it relevant to the modern era.

The next chapter details Ibn Abd al-Wahhab’s reform efforts by shedding light on the location of his reform effort within the context of the cri-

tique and reform discourse and how his concept of a good Muslim entails submission and worship, intrinsic to which is executing God's moral commands. She examines the fundamental disagreements over the interpretation of the authoritative corpus on how to realize Islamic practices and virtues that, in his context, occupied center stage. His approach to disputation, insistence on returning to the original sources, selective use of those sources, and utilization of arguments all fell, according to her, within the established Islamic discursive tradition. However, he differed from his contemporaries in his condemnatory attitude toward certain practices and reliance upon force to correct them.

Haj examines Abduh's reform efforts and methods in the third chapter. In contrast to Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Abduh was depicted as a liberal humanist because of "his tolerance for and general amenability toward European progressive principles and culture" (p. 68). His humanism is demonstrated through the lenses of western scholars, such as P. J. Vatikiotis and Albert Hourani. The author elaborates Abduh's efforts at educational reform through al-Azhar and in society when he was the grand mufti. She argues that similar to Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Abduh drew upon the Islamic discursive tradition of corrective criticism and renewal, although he appears to have been imbued with western liberal humanism.

The climax of Haj's thesis is found in chapter 4, where she argues that Abduh's dispute with the religious establishment over what constitutes a Muslim, and with European colonial discourses over what constitutes a modern subject, created a space in which he could define his vision of the new Muslim subjects. In contrast to the good liberal self who seeks to be self-constitutive and sovereign and values a selfhood that is tradition-free and detached from its social roles, Abduh, who assumed that the essence of Islamic law resides in the self, postulated a Muslim selfhood to be formed through and within the parameters of the Muslim community. He argued that although Islamic subjectivity allows a space for the private self, Islamic morality and law tie the subject to the community and worldly actions.

Abduh was not a liberal in the western sense, for he feared the replacement of an Islamic moral order with a liberal one from colonial modernity. He did not oppose the modernizing features of Europe's project, but rather its liberal secular vision grounded in demoting social morality and enshrining individual interests as the driving social determinant. His fatwas opened space for Muslims to envision new boundaries for private/public domains without dismantling religion's role as a regulator of social morality. The author strengthens her thesis by showing, in chapter 5, how Islamic law was reconfigured to accommodate new social realities in the domains of family

status and family relations through a story of two lovers whose marriage was not approved of by the bride's father on the ground of social incompatibility.

Haj concludes her book by reasserting her thesis of the difficulty of going beyond the conventional notion of tradition as a fixed essence and dichotomous categories of rational to the irrational, the modern to the anti-modern. She argues that although the new scholarship on Islam has gone beyond Orientalism, its analysis continues to be plagued by the difficulty of transcending the Enlightenment's rationality because this not only requires the cultivation of an attitude but "involves power, which continues to favor those who are unwilling to concede" (p. 203).

This work is an excellent contribution to discussions on Islamic reform efforts, for it challenges the assumptions underlying scholarly treatments of Islamic reform movements. Her arguments are powerful, logical, and substantive. In addition, she has substantiated her claim so that one can conceptualize an Islamic tradition in its own right and so that Muslims can modernize – but on their own terms instead of western terms – through her critical analysis of these two reformers. This work should be welcome among all scholars of Islamic thought.

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