"The Imam of modern Egypt was a sceptic": Mustafa Sabri's Radical Critique of Muhammad ʿAbduh and Modernist Theology

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Abstract

This article re-examines the theology of Egyptian ʿalim *Muhammad ʿAbduh (1849–1905) through the writing of Late Ottoman sheikh ül-Islam Mustafa Sabri (1869–1954) and his radical critique of the Muslim reform (*tajdīd*) movement. One of Mustafa Kemal's most implacable foes, Sabri was alarmed to find Egyptian* ʿulama' *and intellectuals advancing the positivist-materialist agenda he had challenged in Istanbul before fleeing in 1922 from Ankara's victorious nationalist forces. Debating the leading lights of the modernist movement in Egypt of the 1930s and 1940s, Sabri came to see its reform theology as little more than a calque on Enlightenment notions of religion; his ideas became influential through his close relationship with Hasan al-Banna and other figures from the Muslim Brotherhood. Examining Sabri's work in Istanbul and Cairo, ʿAbduh's early and later writing, and texts such as ʿAbduh's famous debate with Farah Antun, the* islāmiyyāt *literature of Egypt's liberal age, and material by Sayyid Qutb, I argue that Sabri was instrumental in formulating the hostile discourse that came to dominate Muslim views of ʿAbduh in the later twentieth century once the ideologies of Salafism and Brotherhood Islamism had eclipsed that of the reformers.*

Keywords: Mustafa Sabri; Hasan al-Banna; Egypt's modernist movement

Introduction

In his biography of the pioneering reformist religious scholar Muhammad ʿAbduh (1849–1905), Mark Sedgwick notes that, despite the attention lavished on ʿAbduh in Western writing on modern Islamic thought, his legacy in Egypt and the Arab world was to fade with surprising speed. By the 1950s when the era of decolonisation was in full swing and what Albert Hourani called the "liberal age" was over, nationalist movements across the Middle East region had extracted from Islamic reformism that which served the project of statist modernisation, reducing the revivalist intellectuals and religious scholars to bit players in

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their prosecution of secular nationalism.[1] ʿAbduh seemed to be a product of no more than his time, "an age that was soon to pass".[2] Yet it has not been easy to trace with precision the demise of this liberal Islamic modernism in Muslim public discourse, in particular the fate of the theological claims at the heart of the reform agenda. ʿAbduh's followers gained in status in the 1930s and 1940s, but in the rise of new religious movements across the region from the 1970s these modernists played little or no role at all. The modernist trend that began in the Western region of the Islamic world with ʿAbduh and his early collaborator Jamal al-Din Afghani (1839–1897) had all but collapsed. Scholarly interest in liberal modernism picked up from the 1980s in the context of the broader interest in modern Islamic thought and politics stemming from the Iranian Revolution and growing social and political clout of Islamic movements across the Middle East region, but did not offer a detailed examination of its theological aspects and ambitions.[3] This article aims to address the lacuna in the literature on this phenomenon by looking at the work of the Late Ottoman Grand Mufti, or sheikh ül-Islam, Mustafa Sabri (1869–1954). Sabri's controversial career spanned a period of enthusiastic embrace of ʿAbduh as an activist, anti-colonial theologian held on a pedestal by fellow *ʿulama'* and devout intellectuals in both Egypt and Turkey in the early twentieth century, and a later reappraisal during his Egypt years that led Sabri to author one of the most comprehensive, searing refutations of the *tajdīd* movement ever written, published at a time when the star of reformism had begun to wane as anti-colonial movements swept to power across the region. This work was *Mawqif al-ʿAql wa-l-ʿIlm wa-l-ʿAlam min Rabb al-ʿAlamin wa-Rusulihi* (The Position of Reason, Knowledge, and the World on God and His Messengers, 1949), an extensive study over four volumes of the impact of modern European philosophy on Islamic thought and a defence of the Islamic tradition.

Following the Ottoman defeat in late 1918, Sabri served on five separate occasions as the head of the Ottoman Islamic bureaucracy (İlmiye) during the period of two rival authorities, that of the sultan in British-occupied Istanbul and that of Mustafa Kemal's national parliament in Ankara. Leaving the country after the nationalists swept into Istanbul in late 1922, Sabri moved for several years between Egypt, the Hijaz, Romania, and Greece, before finally settling in Cairo in 1930 where he would shift to writing Arabic, in the traditional manner of the ʿulama' class, to address a wider audience that was both local and transnational.[4] Denounced as a traitor in his homeland, Sabri used his twilight years in Egypt to cast an eye over his long career as a champion of religious conservatives following the Young Turk revolution of 1908 an opponent of both Islamic reform and secular nationalism, and his subsequent polemical battles throughout the 1930s and 1940s with the Egyptian modernists who had begun to enjoy a privileged position in Egyptian media, university posts and government after an initial period of rejection. Sabri noted that while ʿAli ʿAbd al-Raziq lost his status as both judge and credentialed Azhari *ʿalim* over his book *al-Islam wa-Usul al-Hukm*

[1]I am extending the years of Egypt's "liberal age" beyond Hourani's endpoint of 1939 in *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1789–1939* (1962) up to 1952, the year of the Egyptian military coup.

[2]Mark Sedgwick, *Muhammad Abduh* (Oxford, 2009), p. 128.

[3]There are many studies on ʿAbduh, later political movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and general overviews, but few on liberal modernism and its collapse per se. The most direct study is Leonard Binder's *Islamic Liberalism* (Chicago, 1988), which rued its passing; see also Charles Kurzman, *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook* (Oxford, 1998) and Kurzman, *Modernist Islam, 1840–1940: A Sourcebook* (Oxford, 2002).

[4]Sabri was among Istanbul ministers condemned to death for treason by the Ankara High Court in July 1920.

(Islam and the Foundations of Governance, 1925), which advanced Islamic justifications for a Westernised political order shorn of both caliph and shariʿa court, he later served as minister of religious endowments in the period 1947–1949. Similarly, Taha Husayn became dean of Fuad (Cairo) University's faculty of arts years after *Fi al-Shiʿr al-Jahili* (On Jahili Poetry, 1926) saw him dismissed from the same university for suggesting, as European Orientalists had done, that early Arabic poetry had been falsely backdated in Muslim scholarship to the pre-Islamic era.

In Cairo Sabri wrote of his shock at exiting the Turkish milieu, where positivist-materialist thinking had taken hold in key institutions of the state since 1908, only to find that those same philosophical trends had taken hold in Egypt too.[5] Whereas in Turkey Durkeimian positivism as elaborated by Turkish nationalist intellectuals such as Ziya Gökalp was the guiding ideology of the Kemalist regime since its inception in 1923, in Egypt positivist thinking had made inroads through nothing but the willingness of its intellectual elites to embrace it.[6] "I found the cultural atmosphere in Egypt poisoned by the Western trend [*masmūm min tayyār al-gharb*], and this shook me more than what was happening in the new Turkey, as did the realisation that my Arab brothers prefer this Turkey to the old Muslim Turkey," he wrote.[7] Sabri came to believe not only that Islamic revivalism sought to make of Islam a calque on Enlightenment notions of religion, but that ʿAbduh, its eponymous leader, should be viewed as a disruptor of the Islamic tradition, not its defender. In the following pages I will examine Sabri's arguments, including his analysis of ʿAbduh's famous debate with Farah Antun, the genesis of his thinking, and its impact on the reception of ʿAbduh's thought.

Before proceeding, a brief word on definitions is in order regarding my use of (liberal) modernism. Enlightenment ideas and their universalisation through European colonial expansion engendered new ways of thinking about religion that were rooted in Europe's experience of religious institutions as an oppressive force in political and social life. As a result, in European public debate Islam came to be objectified as a category of world religion, leading to what historian of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith theorised in his book *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1962) as the "reification" of Islam through a series of new meanings and referents produced by Europeans but adopted through apologetic osmosis by Muslims themselves. This discourse allowed for a proliferation of phenomena understood as "Islamic", including history, peoples, philosophy, sexual practices, cuisine, sartorial standards, culture, while Christian traditions were the template for thinking of *kalām* and *ʿaqīda* as theology, *shariʿa* as law, or *salat* as prayer.[8] The Muslim approach to the Islamic tradition located in this conceptual framework of European thought I term modernist. One line of modernism—defined by its highly political and activist nature—would subsequently

[5]Sabri uses *ithbātiyya* in Arabic rather than *al-falsafa al-waḍʿiyya* which was preferred in Egypt; Mustafa Sabri, *Mawqif al-ʿAql wa-l-ʿIlm wa-l-ʿAlam min Rabb al-ʿAlamin wa-Rusulihi*, 4 vols. (Beirut, 1981 [1949]), i, p. 147, footnote 3. The Ottoman term was *isbatiye*.

[6]The Young Turk movement was influenced by the French positivism of Auguste Comte and its notion of religion as an impediment to societal progress and the German materialism of Ludwig Büchner and its belief in natural forces as the organising principle of the universe. For an overview see M. Şükrü Hanioğlu, *Atatürk: An Intellectual Biography* (Princeton, 2017), pp. 48–67.

[7]*Ibid.*, i, p. 23.

[8]Joseph Massad, *Islam in Liberalism* (Chicago, 2015), pp. 4–6.

develop a theory of Islam as a complete system of life with implications for not only the individual but the state, expressed through innovative use of words such as *niẓām* and often termed Islamism,[9] while another strand within Muslim modernism sought to align itself with the social, economic, and political model of Western liberalism, including its individualist notion of religion as, in anthropologist Talal Asad's description, "anchored in personal experience, expressible as belief-statements, dependent on private institutions, and practised in one's spare-time".[10] It is to this second group that I refer here. Sabri's terms for them included *mujaddidūn* (renewers), *iṣlaḥiyyūn* (reformers), and *mulḥidūn* (atheists), and he was of course their vehement critic, but, as we shall see, he was in fact rather open to the first group, the Islamists.

Sabri in Istanbul: His early attitude towards ʿAbduh

With the opening up of public debate following the Young Turk revolution in 1908, leading devout intellectuals of the Ottoman Islamic reform movement such as Mehmed Akif (1873–1936) aggressively promoted the recently deceased ʿAbduh as a foundational figure in their dispute with the Turkish nationalist trend that was coming to dominate the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP). For Akif and other prominent reformers such as intellectual İsmail Hakkı (1869–1946) and religious scholar Musa Kazım (1858–1920) Islam should remain the ideological glue holding together the Ottoman state.[11] Yet Sabri, who had quickly risen through the ranks of the religious bureaucracy to become the leading voice of conservative, traditionalist Islam, did not mention ʿAbduh at all in his early writing in the journal he edited, *Beyanülhak*. This was despite the fact that the thrust of his views in a series of articles published from 1908 to 1911 was to uphold a conservative approach to *fiqh* at odds with that of ʿAbduh on polygamy, divorce, inheritance, and interest in ʿAbduh's final years as Egypt's chief mufti, working with his disciple Rashid Rida (1865–1935) on the journal *al-Manar*.[12] Sabri made politely disparaging comments about other modernist themes associated with ʿAbduh such as linking divine texts to modern science, but if he was aware that ʿAbduh had made such points he did not say so. It is all well and good to

[9]Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis, 1991), pp. 115–117.

[10]Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, 1993), p. 207.

[11]See M. Sait Özervarlı, "Alternative Approaches to Modernization in the Late Ottoman Period: Izmirli Ismail Hakkı's Religious Thought against Materialist Scientism", *Int. J. Middle East Stud.*, 39/1 (2007), pp. 77–102. Also, Amit Bein, *Ottoman Ulema, Turkish Republic: Agents of Change and Guardians of Tradition* (Stanford, 2011) and Ahmet Şeyhun, *Islamist Thinkers in the Late Ottoman Empire and Early Turkish Republic* (Leiden, 2015).

[12]See his defence of the fez, "Fes ve Kalpak", *Beyanülhak*, 3 Teşrinisani 1324 (16 November 1908), 1/7, pp. 146–149; on polygamy, "Teaddüd-ü Zevcāt", *Beyanülhak*, 1 Kanunuevvel 1324 (14 December 1908), 1/11, pp. 226–231; on divorce, "Din-i İslam'da hedef-i münakaşa olan mesailden: Talak", *Beyanülhak*, 16 Mart 1325 (29 March 1909), 1/26, pp. 595–598; on Islamic inheritance, "Din-i İslam'da hedef-i münakaşa olan mesailden: İrs, Zekve", *Beyanülhak*, 22 Şubat 1325 (7 March 1910), 2/50, pp. 1060–1062; he objected to photography (which ʿAbduh approved of), "Din-i İslam'da hedef-i münakaşa olan mesailden: Suret", *Beyanülhak*, 26 Kanunusani 1324 (8 February 1909), 1/19, pp. 426–428; on action and work ethic (without referencing ʿAbduh), "Din-i İslam'da hedef-i münakaşa olan mesailden: Say ve Servet", *Beyanülhak*, 8 Şubat 1909 (21 February 1909), 2/48, pp. 1020–1023; on insurance, "Din-i İslam'da hedef-i münakaşa olan mesailden: Sigorta, Kumar", *Beyanülhak*, 21 Şubat 1326 (6 March 1911), 4/100, pp. 1858–1861; and the limits of permissability in music, "Din-i İslam'da hedef-i münakaşa olan mesailden: Musiki", *Beyanülhak*, 24 Mayıs 1326 (6 June 1910), 3/63, pp. 1258–1262.

uncover references in the Qurʾan to the Earth moving around the Sun or in prophetic hadith to aspects of modern medicine, Sabri wrote, but we should remember that this is not their basic function.[13]

Sabri first mentioned ʿAbduh directly in his book *Yeni İslam Müctehidlerinin Kıymet-i İlmiyesi* (The Scholarly Value of Islam's New Mujtahids, 1919) as an exemplar of true *tajdīd* vis-à-vis the reformist writing of the Tatar intellectual Musa Jarullah Bigiev (1874–1949), who at that time was Sabri's poster child for outlandish modernist attempts to refashion Islam in rationalist and empiricist terms.[14] Sabri ridiculed efforts in Ottoman reformist circles to cast Bigiev as Islam's Luther who would institute an Islamic version of the Reformation that for Hegel (d. 1831) had been Europe's "all-enlightening sun" (*die Alles verklärende Sonne*) and without which Islam had "vanished from the stage of history at large… retreated into Oriental ease and repose".[15] This theme, repeated throughout the nineteenth century by numerous European writers and officials (Guizot, Renan, Blunt, Hanotaux, etc.), was internalised by ʿAbduh's early collaborator Afghani, who suggested in one work, which ʿAbduh helped to translate into Arabic, that Islam required just such a religious revolution.[16] Elaborating on what this revolution would look like, Bigiev challenged the relevance of speculative theology (*kalām*) as a disciplinary practice whose traditional function had been to elaborate arguments about God's nature and existence, as premodern Christian theology had also done. Bigiev took up issues such as divine punishment, accusing the Muslim theologians (*mutakallimūn*) of misinterpreting Qurʾanic material in order to restrict divine mercy to believers (*muʾminūn*) and presenting the Sufi tradition as an alternative source for a new theology at one with modernity, which he understood as an intrinsically Western phenomenon.[17] Sabri saw these arguments as pandering to the secular humanism that had come to occupy central ground in European public discourse. Sabri sought support in ʿAbduh, "one of the renewers of the last era" (*son asır müceddidlerinden*), in his *tafsīr* of Qurʾan 88:1–26 on the afterlife and God's judgement, citing his comment that there is no escape from God's warning.[18] Sabri was relying on material that Akif had published in translation in his journal *Sebilürreşad*; in other words, at this stage Sabri's views of ʿAbduh echoed those of the Ottoman reform *milieu*.[19]

Once in Egypt, Sabri's understanding of ʿAbduh's importance evolved quickly through engaging with the work of those who presented themselves as his heirs. His first book

[13]Sabri, "Din-i İslam'da hedef-i münakaşa olan mesailden: Mukaddime 3", *Beyanülhak*, 27 Teşrinievvel 1324 (9 November 1908), 1/6, p. 107. ʿAbduh said microbes could be understood as a form of jinn and jinn could be responsible for epilepsy: ʿAbduh, "Bab Tafsir al-Qurʾan al-Hakim", *al-Manar*, 23 June 1906, 9/5, pp. 334–335.

[14]Bigiev's first book to provoke controversy in Istanbul was *Rahmet-i İlahiye Burhanları* (Proofs of God's Mercy, 1911). A modern Turkish edition was published along with Sabri's book; Ömer H. Özalp, *İlâhî Adale* (Istanbul, 1996).

[15]G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (Mineola, NY, 1956), pp. 355–360.

[16]Afghani, *Hakikat-i Madhhab-i Naychari*, ʿAbduh cited as translator into Arabic as *al-Radd ʿala al-Dahriyyin*, 3rd edition (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Mawsuʿat, 1903 [1886]), pp. 65–66; he refers to Guizot's discussion of the Reformation in *Histoire générale de la civilisation en Europe* (1851). Bigiev as Luther was advanced in Istanbul by Haşim Nahid, *Türkiye İçin: Necat ve İğtila Yolları* (Istanbul, 1912), p. 214.

[17]Musa Jarullah Bigiev, *Rahmet-i İlahiye Bürhanları*, in *İlâhî Adalet*, (ed.) Ömer Özalp (Istanbul, 1996), pp. 263–271.

[18]Mustafa Sabri, *Yeni İslam Müctehidlerinin Kıymet-i İlmiyesi* (Istanbul, no date), p. 68. Muhammad ʿAbduh (ed. Muhammad ʿImara), *al-Aʿmal al-Kamila*, 5 vols. (Cairo, 1993), v, pp. 375–381.

[19]Muhammad ʿAbduh (translation Mehmed Akif), "Tefsir-i Sure-i Gaşiye, 17–26", *Sebilürreşad*, 24 Şubat 1327 (9 March 1911), 8/1, pp. 183–184.

there, *Masʾalat Tarjamat al-Qurʾan* (The Issue of Translating the Qurʾan, 1932), took aim at Mustafa al-Maraghi, shaykh of al-Azhar in the periods 1937–1929 and 1935–1945, and the intellectual Muhammad Farid Wajdi, editor of *Majallat al-Azhar* from 1936, over their support for translating the Qurʾan into national languages. With the establishment of the Turkish republic in 1923 and abolition of the caliphate in 1924, the centre of the intense debate over the question of translation had shifted to Egypt as the post-Ottoman nexus of intellectual authority in the Western Islamicate. Al-Azhar's authoritative Arabic imprints of 1924 and 1936 enhanced Egypt's status, but al-Maraghi saw in an English Qurʾan a chance to push back against Christian missionary activity with a missionary drive of Islam's own and to check the propaganda efforts of the Lahore Ahmadiyya who had published their own translation in 1917. In his book Sabri pressed the point that in following in the footsteps of republican Turkey his Egyptian interlocuters were unaware of the underlying aims of the Kemalists to nationalise religion—the call to prayer became compulsory in Turkish from 1932—in order to render it ineffective as a societal force other than as a tool for realising the policy and propaganda goals of the state.[20] With al-Maraghi reappointed to head al-Azhar in 1935, Egypt began printing English Qurʾans in 1938.[21]

Sabri began to think more critically about what was happening in contemporary *kalām* in Egypt with his book *Mawqif al-Bashar Taht Sultan al-Qadar* (Man's Subordination to Divine Decree, 1933). His starting point was an article by Shaykh Bakhit al-Mutiʿi (d. 1935), who had succeeded ʿAbduh as chief mufti, that attacked traditionally dominant Ashʿari theology for an understanding of human action guided by God's will that al-Mutiʿi said was responsible for Muslim's society's failure to develop as the Europeans had done—a criticism long levelled by European Orientalists.[22] For the first time, Sabri suggested ʿAbduh may have been responsible for the spread of this thinking in Islamic theological discourse, and he turned to some of ʿAbduh's work in an effort to trace its origin.[23] The nature and impulses of any thinker's ideas are *ipso facto* hard to define, but in ʿAbduh's case the issue is complicated by his changing views, the unclear authorship of some works, and the attempts of peers and successors to airbrush the historical record from material they found uncomfortable. For example, the *Risalat al-Waridat* (Treatise on Mystical Inspirations), published in 1908 though apparently written in 1874, has been the subject of debate because it expresses a pantheistic and illuminationist theosophy absent in *Risalat al-Tawhid* (1897), the treatise that is normally considered the *summa* of his views.[24] Editors both early (Rida) and later (Muhammad ʿImara) have implied Afghani was responsible for this interest in Sufism,[25] which runs

[20]Mustafa Sabri, *Masʾalat Tarjamat al-Qurʾan* (Cairo, 1932), pp. 35–67.

[21]Brett Wilson, *Translating the Qurʾan in an Age of Nationalism: Print Culture and Modern Islam in Turkey* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 186–209.

[22]Mustafa Sabri, *Mawqif al-Bashar Taht Sultan al-Qadar* (Cairo, 1933), pp. 20–22.

[23]Some question the degree to which he should be viewed as a disciple; Charles Adams, *Islam and Modernism Islam and Modernism in Egypt: A Study of the Modern Reform Movement* (London, 1933), p. 208; Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 189–192.

[24]Charles Adams considered it to be ʿAbduh's work, while Muhammad ʿImara left it out of his collected works of ʿAbduh first published in 1972. From personal papers he examined in Tehran, Sayyid Hadi Khusraw Shahi supported this view of Afghani as the primary author, a view also upheld by Rotraud Wielandt; "Main Trends of Islamic Theological Thought from the Late Nineteenth Century to Present Times", in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, (ed.) Sabine Schmidtke (Oxford, 2016)," pp. 716–719.

[25]Vincent J. Cornell, "Muhammad ʿAbduh: A Sufi-Inspired Modernist?" in *Tradition and Modernity: Christian and Muslim Perspectives*, (ed.) David Marshall (Washington, 2013), pp. 108–111.

counter to the dominant trends of twentieth century Sunnism, while Rida tried to configure him as a successor to theologian Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328).[26] ʿAbduh's Qurʾan commentary was first published from 1900 in *al-Manar*, based on fragmentary lecture notes taken by Rida, and then later published by Rida as *Tafsir al-Manar* in 1927, but ʿAbduh may only have been closely involved in the text up to 4:125.[27] As for the 18 issues of the journal *al-ʿUrwa al-Wuthqa* that ʿAbduh produced with Afghani in Paris in 1884, they are attributed variously to ʿAbduh, Afghani or both.[28]

Indeed, Sabri took up the well-known article in *al-ʿUrwa al-Wuthqa* that discusses the question of free will and predestination (*al-qaḍāʾ wa-l-qadar*) and compared it to what ʿAbduh had written in the *Risala*.[29] The article presents itself as a defence of the Ashʿari view vis-à-vis the European claims that it had been the source of numerous forms of Muslim social, political, and economic malaise. Though it argues that mainstream Islamic theology had never advocated a fatalistic approach that taught Muslims to believe in a God perpetually intervening in their affairs according to His plan, it concludes with an apparent concession to the criticism: "We do not deny that in the souls of some Muslims the creed has been spoiled by the belief in *al-jabr* [predestination], which could be the cause of some of the calamities they have suffered in recent times."[30] The text could, then, be seen as in fact an indirect affirmation of the European accusations of fatalism in that it acknowledges the problematisation of Islamic theology by Orientalist scholars. However, Sabri overlooks this ambiguity to focus on the starkly different language deployed in ʿAbduh's *Risala*. In its section on human actions, ʿAbduh states in the first line that man is fully aware of his existence through his reason and senses, without need for evidence or a teacher to guide him, a familiar position in Ottoman Maturidi theology that diverges from Ashʿarism's assertion of the need for a prophet and establishment of divine law, and which would in itself be unobjectionable to Sabri.[31] ʿAbduh then outlines a view of God as an enabler of the voluntary mental and physical actions of men that he describes as a mid-way between, on the one hand, the early Muʿtazili belief in the total independence of human action, which implies God has no power in the created world, and, on the other, the supporters of predestination, including "those who upheld it, although they disavowed the name" (*man qāla bihi wa-tabarraʾa min ismihi*), who negate the responsibilities of reason as inscribed in the divine law.[32] This latter description of an unnamed group holding this position has been widely understood as a critical reference to Ashʿarism,[33] and Sabri certainly took it in that manner.

Seeing here a repudiation of centuries of standard doctrine, Sabri rebuked ʿAbduh for allowing himself to become an unwitting accomplice to the "falsification of one after

[26]Rida rebukes ʿAbduh for neglecting to mention Ibn Taymiyya in his edition of ʿAbduh's *Risala*; *Risalat al-Tawhid* (Cairo, 1942), p. 26, footnote 2.

[27]Mohammad Hassan Khalil, *Islam and The Fate of Others*: *The Salvation Question* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 111–112.

[28]The ideas were said to be Afghani's but the words ʿAbduh's. See Nikki Keddie, "Al-Sayyid Jamal al-Din 'al-Afghani'", in *Pioneers of Islamic Revival*, (ed.) Ali Rahnema (London, 1994), p. 28; Rashid Rida, *al-Ustadh al-Imam al-Shaykh Muhammad ʿAbduh,* 3 vols. (Cairo, 2006), iii, p. 190.

[29]Sabri, *Mawqif al-Bashar*, pp. 27, 46.

[30]Afghani and ʿAbduh, *al-ʿUrwa al-Wuthqa* (Cairo, 2014), p. 87.

[31]Muhammad ʿAbduh (ed. Muhammad ʿImara), *Risalat al-Tawhid* (Cairo, 1994), p. 61. See Toshihiko Izutsu, *The Concept of Belief in Islamic Theology* (Kuala Lumpur, 2006), pp. 108–119.

[32]*Ibid*., pp. 61–62.

[33]ʿImara says this in a footnote; Rida makes no comment.

another of Islam's ideas and beliefs and their replacement with what Europe wants for us [*istibdāl mā tarḍāhu lanā urubbā makānahā*]".[34] Sabri was sensitive to the nuances of this debate because, as he explained in *Mawqif al-Bashar*, he had switched positions on predestination from Ottoman Maturidism, which had developed its own terminology of the particular and the universal will (*al-irāda al-juzʾiyya/al-juzʾ al-ikhtiyārī* and *al-irāda al-kulliyya*),[35] to Ashʿari thinking. He described his new position as an Ashʿari "midway determinism" (*al-jabr al-mutawassiṭ*),[36] in that volition (*irāda/ikhtiyār*) is entirely God's but realised upon man's "readiness for will" (*al-istiʿdād li-l-irāda*) via a divine *tafwīḍ* (authorisation) that empowers action. He saw this as an intersection of divine causation and human desire to act (*jabr wa-tafwīḍ maʿan*) that avoided any implication of God's distance from the created world.[37] Sabri thought reform intellectuals were unwilling to challenge Kemalist radicalism and the positivist-materialist ideology underpinning it because they believed both Maturidi and Ashʿari creed put restrictions on human agency.[38] The Egyptian reformers were no less set on reconfiguring the Islamic concept of free will in response to the Orientalists' argument that theology was a valid explanation for the rise and fall of nations.[39] *Mawqif al-Bashar* registered Sabri's shock at the extent to which this modernist *apologia* had taken hold in Egypt and the first realisation that ʿAbduh—still his "genius shaykh"[40]—was in some way responsible.

Sabri and the Farah Antun debate: "The imam of modern Egypt was a sceptic"[41]

These ideas were transformed into a comprehensive critique of the reform movement in *Mawqif al-ʿAql*. The book was in fact written throughout the 1940s through the medium of Sabri's previously unrevealed links to the Muslim Brotherhood (Jamaʿat al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin), the Muslim anti-colonial movement whose dramatic rise from 1928 was the background to Sabri's years in Egypt.[42] Since Sabri was a conservative traditionalist defending what he calls throughout *Mawqif al-ʿAql* the "old knowledge" (*al-ʿilm al-qadīm*) of the premodern Islamic epistemological system, one might expect to see him objecting *tout court* to such manifestations of the new as Hasan al-Banna's organisation, which was in broad terms revivalist. Yet Sabri's understanding that a radical rupture had taken place in the Islamic episteme meant he was amenable to radical solutions, which is what the Brotherhood offered in its reformulation of Islam in ideological terms as a modern political actor (I take this transformation as expressing the terminological shift from "Islamic" to "Islamist"). Sabri's Turkish students in Cairo write in their memoirs of his friendship with

[34]Sabri, *Mawqif al-Bashar*, p. 45.

[35]Philipp Bruckmayr, "The Particular Will (*al-irādat al-juzʾiyya*): Excavations Regarding a Latecomer in Kalām Terminology on Human Agency and its Position in Naqshbandi Discourse", *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 13/2011, pp. 2–20. ʿAbduh did not use this language.

[36]Sabri, *Mawqif al-Bashar*, pp. 56, 148.

[37]*Ibid*., pp. 47, 72.

[38]*Ibid*., 93–94. As outlined in his last Turkish work *Dinî Müceddidler* (1922) and first Arabic work *al-Nakir ʿala Munkiri al-Niʿma min al-Din wa-l-Khilafa wa-l-Umma* (1924).

[39]*Ibid*., pp. 145, 160–163, 219–220.

[40]*Ibid*., p. 33.

[41]Sabri, *Mawqif al-ʿAql*, i, p. 305. Sabri uses the term *raybī*.

[42]I used the standardised English term Brotherhood although Brethren would be a more correct translation.

al-Banna, who would visit Sabri's home regularly[43] and considered him an informal advisor among non-Egyptian 'ulama'.[44] One of them, Ali Yakub Cenkçiler (1913–1988), describes Sabri as the main point of contact between the Turkish diaspora and the Brotherhood, the "chief wrestler" of a vibrant Muslim intellectual scene (*bu münakaşa ve münazara meydanının başpehlivanı*), in frequent debate with reform intellectuals on the pages of journals and newspaper and in private salons.[45] The Turkish students also came to Cairo to study with Sabri's deputy in charge of education at the İlmiye, Zahid al-Kawthari (1879–1952), who also fled Istanbul in late 1922. Alongside their teachers, Sabri and al-Kawthari's students explain their idolisation of al-Banna and latterly Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966), whose works they would make popular on their return to Turkey during the Nasserist persecution of the Brotherhood in the 1950s. Al-Kawthari's students included 'Abd al-Fattah Abu Ghudda (1917-1997), a Syrian who also drew close to al-Banna and went on to serve as Mufti of Aleppo and Supreme Guide of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. For Cenkçiler al-Banna was the great activist of the era and Sabri its theoretician.[46] Ali Ulvi Kurucu (1922–2002), another member of the Turkish cohort, relates a meeting between Amin Husayni (1895–1974), the well-known Mufti of Jerusalem, and Sabri and his students in Cairo in 1945, during which Sabri led the conversation to the topic of al-Banna, asking al-Husayni if he had met him yet. Al-Husayni lavishes praise on al-Banna for an integrity he declares won him huge following among youth inside and outside Egypt. "My sons," he exhorts the group, "live by me, live by Hassan al-Banna—God-willing, you'll become like sheikh ül-Islam Mustafa Sabri or Zahid al-Kawthari".[47]

It was in this context that a group of Brotherhood-linked 'ulama' approached Sabri sometime around 1940 to publish a book countering reformist Islam, which they felt had become alarming in its claims and ambitions.[48] This led to Sabri's first text, *al-Qawl al-Fasl bayn Alladhina Yu'minun bi-l-Ghayb wa-Alladhina La Yu'minun* (The Definitive Word on Those Who Believe in the Unseen and Those Who Don't), which was published in 1942 through an agreement with al-Banna that the Brotherhood would buy a large batch in advance to cover printing costs. The title, a reference to Qur'an 2:3's "*alladhīna yu'minūn bi-l-ghayb*", carried the clear implication that the modernists under discussion were not believers, but formerly-believing apostates. Al-Banna baulked at this accusation, suggesting the alternative title *al-Qawl al-Fasl bayn Imanayn: Iman Alladhina Yu'minun bi-l-Ghayb wa-Iman Alladhina La Yu'minun* (The Definitive Word on the Faith of Those Who Believe in the Unseen and the Faith of Those Who Don't), but Sabri insisted that the modernists' empirical turn placed them outside traditional Islamic understandings of faith (*īmān*) and so stuck to his own version.[49]

[43]Ali Ulvi Kurucu, interview, in Mufarrih ibn Sulayman al-Qawsi, *Mustafa Sabri: al-Mufakkir al-Islami wa-l-'Alim al-'Alami wa-Shaykh al-Islam fi al-Dawla al-'Uthmaniyya Sabiqan* (Damascus, 2006), pp. 442–443; Saraç, interview, in al-Qawsi, *Mustafa Sabri*, p. 430; and Ali Yakub Cenkçiler, *Hatıra Kitabı* (Istanbul, 2005), pp. 25, 40-41, 91, 116, 118, 127.

[44]Ibrahim Munir, deputy general guide of the Muslim Brotherhood; interview, London, 30 January 2019. Other advisors included Afghan ambassador Shaykh Sadiq Mujaddidi and Algerian shaykh al-Bashir al-Ibrahimi.

[45]Ali Yakub Cenkçiler, *Hatıra Kitabı* (Istanbul, 2005), p. 116.

[46]*Ibid.*, pp. 25, 155.

[47]M. Ertuğrul Düzdağ, *Üstad Ali Ulvi Kurucu Hatıralar*, 5 vols. (Istanbul, 2007), ii, p. 234. The meeting took place after al-Husayni left France for Cairo in May 1945 when Britain sought his arrest.

[48]Kurucu, interview, p. 442.

[49]*Ibid.*, pp. 442–443.

Later incorporated as *Mawqif al-ʿAql*'s final volume on its publication in 1949, this text contained theoretical musings on the nature of the modern state and demise of the Islamic juridical system similar to those of Sabri's contemporaries Qutb and the Indian-Pakistani theorist Abul Aʿla Mawdudi (1903–1979). However, here I will focus on Sabri's main objective—the demolition of modernism through exposing its theological radicalism.

The starting point for Sabri's grand critique of Egyptian *tajdīd* was ʿAbduh's celebrated debate in 1901 with Farah Antun (1874–1922), a Lebanese Christian who had left Tripoli in 1897 to establish the journal *al-Jamiʿa al-ʿUthmaniyya* in Egypt.[50] Antun stirred the ire of ʿAbduh and Rida with a series of articles on the figure of Ibn Rushd (d. 1198), the Andalusian philosopher who elaborated Aristotle's view of a distant creator in whose dominion natural laws were created through a continuous divine agency that did not impinge directly upon individual human acts, the issue Sabri had already identified as a trope of modernist discourse. Like French Orientalist Ernest Renan (1823–1920), Antun viewed Ibn Rushd as a heroic figure who had suffered persecution for efforts to harmonise Greek rationalism with Islam's conceptual framing of salvation through revelation. For them, Ibn Rushd's experience was emblematic of intolerance within religious systems in general and a need to separate the temporal and spiritual functions of the state. Religion must be restricted to its own sacred space so that societies of "the East", by which they meant Islam, may "keep pace with the new trend of European civilisation" (*mujārāt tayyār al-tamaddun al-urubbī al-jadīd*), Antun wrote.[51]

In his initial article Antun argued that despite protestations to the contrary Ibn Rushd did in fact believe in the three positions that Ghazali (d. 1111) famously held up as heretical among the philosophers—the eternity (*qidam*) of the world, denial of God's knowledge of secondary causes (*juzʾiyyāt*), and denial of bodily resurrection (*baʿth al-ajsād wa-ḥashruha*).[52] But the key element that concerned Antun was the second, the orthodoxy that all matter is created by a God who has absolute powers of intervention in all matters of creation (*khāliq muṭlaq al-taṣarruf fī al-kawn*).[53] Ibn Rushd is to be considered among an identifiable trans-historical body of materialists (*māddiyyūn*) comprising both ancient Greek and modern European philosophers, who see only a creator's initiation of existence but no more.[54] Thus, man only attains knowledge of God and the possibility of communion with God through his own acquired knowledge or ascetic practices such as those of Sufism. As for the afterlife, Antun cites Ibn Rushd's language around the individual intellect (*al-ʿaql al-khāṣṣ al-munfaʿil*) that would not survive physical death.[55] ʿAbduh responded to this that Antun was oversimplifying classical debates over creed. The Muslim *mutakallimūn* had never claimed that all causes come from God,[56] and Ibn Rushd, who lived after Ghazali, did

[50]Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, p. 254.
[51]Farah Antun, *Ibn Rushd wa-Falsafatuhu* (Alexandria, 1903), dedication (Ihdaʾ al-Kitab).
[52]Ibn Rushd, *Tahafut al-Tahafut* (Beirut, 2005), pp. 372–375.
[53]Antun, *Ibn Rushd*, p. 34.
[54]*Ibid*., p. 34.
[55]*Ibid*., pp. 36–37. On Ibn Rushd's concept of universal (active) and individual (habitual/material) intellect see R. Arnaldez, "Ibn Rushd", in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, (ed.) P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W. P. Heinrichs; http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0340 (accessed 14 December 2020). Also, Richard C. Taylor, "Averroes on the Ontology of the Human Soul", *The Muslim World*, 102/3-4 (2012), pp. 580–596.
[56]Antun, *Ibn Rushd*, p. 90.

indeed hold to the orthodox conception of God as the sole eternal (*azalī*) entity, aware of all universals and particulars in creation, and judge of the soul in death.[57] ʿAbduh said Antun was simply following in the tracks of European thinkers who liked to think of Ibn Rushd as a materialist whose ideas formed a stepping stone to modern European thought.[58]

Antun pressed on, accusing ʿAbduh now of denying secondary causes.[59] ʿAbduh knows full well, he charged, that Ibn Rushd was indeed a materialist whose writing on the soul and the afterlife also flouted Ghazali's standard regarding what can and cannot be subject to allegorical interpretation (*taʾwīl*) in the Qurʾan.[60] From this he shifted to his main point, that in the modern era the power and influence of religion in terms of both faith and institutions should be rolled back, restricted to "the realm of the heart" (*dāʾirat al-qalb*), to allow reason to attend to the real world of empirical knowledge (*al-mushāhada wa-l-tajriba wa-l-imtiḥān*).[61] This, he asserted, is what European Christianity alone has thus far been able to achieve. ʿAbduh now found himself rebutting the charge that Islam was intolerant because it was bound up the structures of the state.[62] It was a charge he never addressed directly. Instead he pointed out that the Qurʾan states there should be no compulsion in religion, many Muslims send their children to Christian missionary schools, and in Antun's own country communities seen as heretical by other Muslims are able to live in peace. Christianity, on the other hand, has been characterised by heavy dependence on miracles as signs of truth, a tendency towards extreme asceticism, creed detached from rational argumentation, and centuries of internecine strife.[63] No religion can be described in its essence as subject to temporal authority in that authority derives ultimately from God.[64]

In the final stretch, Antun aggressively advocated the humanist conception of the most rational social and political system. The duty of modern government is to ensure freedom of the individual regardless of sect and belief within the framework of a constitution (*ḥurriyyat kull shakhṣ ḍimn dāʾirat al-dustūr*) and the wider public good (*maṣlaḥat al-jumhūr*).[65] National unity is possible but religious unity is not;[66] thus, what Europe has attained could be called *dīn al-insāniyya* ("humanist religion") that embraces all religions outside government functions.[67] It is useless to argue that Islam is the religion of reason and Christianity that of miracles because all religions are ultimately irrational;[68] religion can only attain the status of true knowledge if it is rational (*ʿaqlī*), but the Islamic among them insists on faith in an unseen creator, an afterlife, revelation, prophecy, and miracles.[69] Christian Europe's

[57] *Ibid.*, p. 96.
[58] *Ibid.*, pp. 76–84.
[59] *Ibid.*, p. 98, p. 104.
[60] *Ibid.*, p. 121; see al-Ghazali, *Tahafut*, pp. 215–216. On Ghazali's notion of *taʾwīl* see Martin Whittingham, *Al-Ghazālī and the Qurʾān: One Book, Many Meanings* (London, 2007). Also, Frank Griffel, Al-Ghazālī's Philosophical Theology (New York/Oxford, 2009), pp. 71, 118.
[61] *Ibid.*, p. 122. This thinking can be traced back to Descartes' *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia* (1641) and Blaise Pascal's *Pensées* (1669). See John Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach* (New York, 2014), pp. 13–17.
[62] *Ibid.*, pp. 124–125.
[63] *Ibid.*, pp. 133–141.
[64] *Ibid.*, pp. 140–141.
[65] *Ibid.*, pp. 151–152.
[66] *Ibid.*, pp. 158–159.
[67] *Ibid.*, p. 171.
[68] *Ibid.*, p. 182.
[69] *Ibid.*, pp. 182–183.

separation of *dīn* and *dunyā* was what facilitated civilisation in the world (*al-madaniyya fī al-ʿālam*), which speaks to something in the essence of Christianity lacking in Islam.[70] A final response from ʿAbduh was summarised in one page, in which he gave alternative reasons for the advances of European science that did not rely on the notion of Christianity's purported natural propensity to separate from the state, but concluded with praise for the tolerance of British colonial rule.[71] Antun allowed himself one more reply, in which he welcomed ʿAbduh's comment on British empire as "the words of a rational man" (*qawl rajul ʿāqil*), while noting that the Irish might not agree.[72]

The views of scholars of the Western academe who studied this debate have generally been influenced by the source through which they received it. In *al-Islam wa-l-Nasraniyya* (Islam and Christianity, 1905), a collection of ʿAbduh's articles of response first published in *al-Manar* in 1902 and issued in book form after his death, Rida offered only a summation of Antun's positions in the introduction. The text often diverges from the responses ʿAbduh sent to *al-Jamiʿa*, and the early stage of the debate over the question of secondary causes is omitted in its entirety. The historian Charles Adams relied upon Rida's collection, and so views the debate as an extension of ʿAbduh's other great debate with French diplomat Gabriel Hanotaux, published over the pages of *Le Journal de Paris* and *al-Muʾayyad* in 1900. The combined effect of both was that ʿAbduh became the foremost defender of Islam in the face of the European political and intellectual onslaught, Adams argued. In this view ʿAbduh responded effectively to the charge that Islam is less tolerant than other faiths, that Islam is hostile to learning and knowledge, and that European modernity is a consequence of Christianity's tolerance and limited claims on the state.[73] More recently, also relying on Rida's presentation of the debate,[74] Samira Haj sees ʿAbduh as arguing the view that Enlightenment marginalisation of religion in the public sphere is the result of a historical trajectory unique to Europe. ʿAbduh was not rejecting the notion of secular authority per se, Haj says, but suggesting it was for Muslims to define the boundaries of civic power and the role of religious scholars, shariʿa law, and Islamic ethics.[75] Mark Sedgwick has a similar view: ʿAbduh argued that Islam did not merge civic and religious authority in the past so why should it do so today.[76] On the other hand, based on his reading of Antun's book, Albert Hourani saw ʿAbduh as the loser. He picked up on the confidence of Antun's claims and their basis in Antun's penchant for Renan, as well as Antun's ulterior motive as a Lebanese Orthodox Christian in advocating a supra-religious state in which Islam had no privileged position.[77] In Hourani's view, ʿAbduh in essence agreed with Antun's vision of national freedom and equality, but got bogged down in trying to wed this with the idea of an Islamic political order.

[70]*Ibid*., p. 208.

[71]*Ibid*., p. 218. See Muhammad ʿAbduh, *al-Islam wa-l-Nasraniyya fi al-ʿIlm wa-l-Madaniyya* (Beirut, 1988), pp. 196–198.

[72]Antun, *Ibn Rushd*, p. 225.

[73]Charles Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt: A Study of the Modern Reform Movement Inaugurated by Muḥammad ʿAbduh* (London, 1933), pp. 86, 89–90.

[74]Rida, *Tarikh*, i, pp. 805–816.

[75]Samira Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition: Reform, Rationality, and Modernity* (Stanford, 2009), p. 98.

[76]Sedgwick, *Muhammad Abduh*, pp. 53–54. See also D. M. Reid, *The Odyssey of Farah Antun: A Syrian Christian's Quest for Secularism* (Minneapolis, 1975), pp. 80–97.

[77]Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, pp. 255–257.

Sabri's approach was different in two ways: firstly, he based his argument on both books, and secondly, he focussed most of all on ʿAbduh's handling of the theological and philosophical claims of his opponent. In this view, Rida's compilation was an attempt to compensate for ʿAbduh's capitulation as outlined in Antun's, but it is to that earlier book laying out the back and forth as it played out at the time that one should look to understand the apologetic nature of Islamic modernism.[78] Critical for Sabri was that ʿAbduh had failed to counter Antun's central claim that religion is contrary to reason because it is not verifiable by the empirical standard of modern knowledge. Religion is "faith in an unseen creator and unseen afterlife, and revelation, prophecy, miracles, gathering of the dead and their resurrection, reward, and punishment are all unperceivable and irrational [*ghayr maḥsūsa wa-ghayr maʿqūla*]", Antun had written,[79] but ʿAbduh left that unanswered because he himself was a sceptic (*raybī*).[80] ʿAbduh was disingenuous in repudiating the presentation of Ibn Rushd as a proto-materialist of the Enlightenment era who believes in the causative powers of matter (*mādda/hayūlā*) because ʿAbduh shares that opinion himself.[81] Further, ʿAbduh could not defend Islam because he agrees with the Antun-Renan thesis of civilisational stagnation (*jumūd*) for which Muslim creed is responsible.[82]

Sabri describes his own book *Mawqif al-ʿAql* as an effort to resume Antun's debate with ʿAbduh, articulating the arguments ʿAbduh could or would not and addressing ʿAbduh's disciples among Sabri's Egyptian contemporaries as ʿAbduh should have addressed Antun.[83] Discussing Descartes, Hume, Kant, and Hegel in detail, Sabri saw that in questioning the ability of abstract logic (*al-manṭiq al-tajrīdī*)—the essence of the *kalām* tradition—to establish truth and relying instead on the fideistic notion of naturally intuited religion, the modernists were taking cues from the Western philosophical tradition's response to the scientific revolution.[84] To Sabri this new consensus that the only demonstrative rationality that mattered was the empirical meant that Islam was left as the sole torchbearer of the Aristotelian tradition.[85] Antun did not believe in Jesus' divinity yet could still describe himself as a Christian;[86] his intent then was to entice Muslims towards this vague religiosity in which good, virtue, and righteousness (*khayr, faḍīla, ṣalāḥ*) replace reason and knowledge (*ʿaql* and *ʿilm*), the traditional (premodern) means of proving God's existence and creation of the world.[87] Sabri wrote: "The conflict over denying and proving certainty [*al-yaqīn*] concerns me a lot. It is the central axis of this book, in that Islam turns on proving certainty. We Muslims do not hesitate in acknowledging the existence of certainty in human knowledge, and we do not consider this to be contrary to reason as the Christian West did."[88] For

[78]Sabri, *Mawqif al-ʿAql*, i, p. 133.
[79]*Ibid.*, i, p. 23 and iv, p. 17. Antun, *Ibn Rushd*, p. 183.
[80]Sabri, *Mawqif al-ʿAql*, i, pp. 304–305.
[81]*Ibid.*, iii, p. 360; *hayūlā* is derived from Aristotle's *hulē*.
[82]*Ibid.*, i, pp. 14, 103 (footnote 1), 134, 143, 223 (footnote 1), 370, iv, pp. 345–346. Also, *Mawqif al-Bashar*, p. 23. ʿAbduh discusses stagnation at length; *al-Islam wa-l-Nasraniyya*, pp. 133–167.
[83]Sabri, *Mawqif al-ʿAql*, iv, p. 18, footnote 1.
[84]*Ibid.* i, p. 305, ii, p. 210. Sabri relied to some degree on Ahmad Amin and Zaki Nagib Mahmud's study of European philosophy, *Qissat al-Falsafa al-Haditha* (Cairo, 1935) for his views of the European philosophers.
[85]*Ibid.*, ii, pp. 149, 151. On Descartes, ii, pp. 211–228, and Kant, ii, pp. 228–233, iii, pp. 66–75.
[86]*Ibid.*, ii, p. 51.
[87]*Ibid.*, ii, pp. 62–63.
[88]*Ibid.*, ii, p. 155.

the spread in Muslim ranks of this confusion over certitude Sabri held ʿAbduh responsible, noting that Britain's colonial administrator in Egypt, Lord Cromer, had also suspected that ʿAbduh was *raybī*—Sabri's translation of Cromer's "agnostic"—about God's existence.[89]

Sabri's further arguments against ʿAbduh

Sabri added a further two sets of examples to support his claim that ʿAbduh had indulged European accusations of fatalism in the Ashʿari creedal system and distanced God from the material world. Firstly, Sabri turns to other details of theological argumentation in ʿAbduh's writings. The first of these came in Afghani and ʿAbduh's commentary on *Sharh al-ʿAqaʾid al-ʿAdudiyya*, Jalal al-Din Dawani (d. 1502)'s well-known gloss of ʿAdud al-Din al-Iji's creedal work *Mawaqif fi ʿIlm al-Kalam* (Opinions in Speculative Theology), a key Ashʿari teaching text. Published in 1904 as *al-Taʿliqat ʿala Sharh al-ʿAqaʾid al-ʿAdudiyya* (Comments on ʿAdud al-Din's Creed), it was apparently first written in 1876 and like others among ʿAbduh's early works its authorship is disputed. Muhammad ʿImara thinks it is primarily Afghani's, bar footnotes that carry ʿAbduh's signature, but Robert Wisnovsky argues ʿAbduh was its prime author.[90] Sabri does too, possibly because, just as ʿImara preferred not to believe ʿAbduh could have upheld some of the views expressed, for Sabri it confirms his worst fears in that it rejects the *kalām* argument, adduced in the complex of proofs of the need for a creator of all existence (i.e. the notion of God as *wājib al-wujūd*), that there can be no infinite chain of causes (*al-tasalsul*).[91] Sabri cites one of numerous statements in the text on this point: "Thus far no proof has been posited of finitude to any chain whose parts are in existence, let alone one that is indisputable".[92] There is no such mention of the theory of infinite regress in *Risalat al-Tawhid*, but nevertheless Sabri notes unconventional approaches elsewhere in the *Risala*, such as that ʿAbduh omits *wājib al-wujūd* in establishing the oneness of God (*waḥdāniyyat Allāh*), relying solely on the *kalām* proof known as *burhān al-tamānuʿ*.[93] Sabri suggests ʿAbduh adopts these positions to avoid arguments located in abstract logic that would not pass the European test of rationalist and empirical knowledge (*shahādat al-ḥiss wa-l-tajriba*).[94]

Secondly, Sabri lays out a range of reform tropes he has encountered in Egypt that he considers as stemming from a further two broad themes he identifies in ʿAbduh's work: the discrediting of paranormal phenomena (*al-khawāriq*) such as belief in the existence of angels, the devil, and the miracles (which accords with his dismissal of Christianity's miracles), and, related to this, a discourse of the Muslim prophet as merely one of the "great reformers"

[89]*Ibid.*, i, p. 304. Earl of Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, 2 vols. (London, 1908), ii, pp. 179–180.

[90]Robert Wisnovsky, "Avicenna's Islamic reception", in *Interpreting Avicenna: Critical Essays*, (ed.) Peter Adamson (Cambridge, 2013), p. 191, footnote 4. See Alnoor Dhanani, "Al-Mawāqif fī ʿilm al-kalām by ʿAḍūd al-Dīn al-Ījī (d. 1355), and Its Commentaries", in *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Philosophy*, (ed.) Khaled El-Rouayheb and Sabine Schmidtke (New York, 2016), pp. 375–398.

[91]This is the proof referred to in *kalām* as *buṭlān al-tasalsul*, or *burhān al-taṭbīq*.

[92]Al-Afghani and ʿAbduh, *al-Taʿliqat ʿala Sharh al-ʿAqaʾid al-ʿAdudiyya* (Cairo, 2002), p. 217. See Sabri, *Mawqif al-ʿAql*, i, p. 230 and iii, pp. 365–389.

[93]Sabri says this because ʿAbduh discusses the proof in terms of rival creative forces causing disorder in the universe, rather than to establish that no god could be God if he was obliged to negotiate creation with another entity; *Mawqif al-ʿAql*, i, pp. 136–138, ii, pp. 83–84, footnote 1. See ʿAbduh (ed. ʿImara), *Risalat al-Tawhid*, pp. 46–48.

[94]*Ibid.*, i, p. 141.

(*al-ʿuẓamāʾ al-muṣliḥūn*) among men.[95] Sabri takes ʿAbduh's views on prophethood again from the *Taʿliqat*, which defines a prophet (*nabī*) as someone "born with an innate sense of what's right in knowledge and practice [*fuṭira ʿalā al-haqq ʿilman wa-ʿamalan*]", omitting the concept of communion with the divine.[96] Sabri was remiss in failing to note that in *Risalat al-Tawhid* ʿAbduh is careful to state that the prophets enjoy an unbreakable spiritual bond with God.[97] Indeed, ʿAbduh writes very precisely in the *Risala* within the boundaries of the Ashʿari-Maturidi tradition of Cairo and Istanbul in describing faith as an affirmation of certain belief in God, His prophets, and the day of judgement that has been attained through the faculty of reason,[98] the same reason that is aware of the voluntary nature of human actions,[99] yet needful of the guidance of shariʿa to know which actions bring rewards and which bring punishments.[100] These positions align, and possibly deliberately so, with the First Vatican Council of 1869–1870's statement that God can be known through reason, Catholicism's own attempt to contend with the damage modern thought had wrought upon traditional theology.[101] Elsewhere in the *Risala* ʿAbduh was iconoclastic in rejecting the necessity of belief in the miraculous powers of saints (*karāmāt al-awliyāʾ*),[102] but this was a view that had clear antecedents within the Islamic tradition. In support of Sabri's critique, however, he appears to have overlooked ʿAbduh's statement that no believer is obliged to accept single-source (*āḥād*) hadiths,[103] which expressed the modernist view that the Qurʾan alone is to be held up as establishing certain knowledge. And he failed to pick up on ʿAbduh's aligning of Islamic salvation history with the Enlightenment notion of historical progress. The *Risala* presents the rejection of *taqlīd*—the legal concept of precedent which reformers generalised to mean Islam's resistance to change—in terms of a theory of human progress,[104] and talks in relative terms of God's validation of different religions and nations in different eras,[105] since "the need of nations for reform was general [*kānat ḥājat al-umam ilā al-iṣlāḥ*],[106] prompting Sedgwick to surmise that ʿAbduh's lost work, *Falsafat al-Ijtimaʿ wa-l-Tarikh*, had overtly applied Guizot's Hegelian philosophy of history to the Arabs and Islam.[107]

Sabri had uncovered broad themes that he could trace in the work of ʿAbduh's followers throughout the 1930s and 1940s, outlining a variety of positions that he described as a radical reworking of Islamic epistemology. Sabri finds writers promoting the notion of faith in the unseen as faith in the unrealistic (*ghayr wāqiʿ*);[108] downgrading prophethood as a category of

[95] *Ibid.*, i, pp. 142–143. For Sabri's discussion of these themes see *Mawqif al-ʿAql*, i, p. 30, iv, pp. 5–16, 40–42.
[96] Afghani and ʿAbduh, *al-Taʿliqat*, pp. 152–153.
[97] ʿAbduh (ed. ʿImara), *Risalat al-Tawhid*, pp. 81–82.
[98] *Ibid.*, p. 178.
[99] *Ibid.*, pp. 61–63.
[100] *Ibid.*, pp. 78–79, p. 175; "the law came to clarify that which exists, it is not the creator of good" (*muḥdith al-ḥusn*).
[101] Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. 30.
[102] ʿAbduh (ed. ʿImara), *Risalat al-Tawhid*, pp. 181–183.
[103] *Ibid.*, p. 177.
[104] *Ibid.*, pp. 140–144.
[105] *Ibid.*, p. 146.
[106] *Ibid.*, p. 160.
[107] Sedgwick, *Muhammad Abduh*, p. 16.
[108] Sabri, *Mawqif al-ʿAql*, iv, p. 4. Muhammad Farid Wajdi, "Muhammad Salla Allah ʿalayhi wa-Sallam fi Taqdir Qudat al-Raʾy fi Urubba", *Majallat al-Azhar*, 8/5 (1937), pp. 358–361.

human experience to the realm of human genius (*ʿabqariyya*);[109] reconceptualising the Qurʾan as Islam's single miraculous event whose most important element is the call to examine natural phenomena;[110] questioning the authenticity of prophetic hadith *tout court*;[111] reconfiguring elements of the Qurʾanic resurrection;[112] advocating the rejection of all ambiguous Qurʾanic material (the *mutashābihāt* verses);[113] rethinking the devil as allegory for "evil in the world";[114] and dismissing the contemporary application of Islamic law from the early Muslim centuries as "unreasonable" (*min ghayr al-maʿqūl*).[115] Sabri even notes efforts to introduce new vocabulary such as Farid Wajdi's *iʿtiqādiyyūn* as an alternative to *muʾminūn*, a clear calque on the English/French *believer/croyant*.[116] The outcome of this mass rationalisation of the Islamic tradition was, in Sabri's view, a soulless cult of the Prophet among the modernists ("through studying the life of the Prophet they tried to find the pleasure of faith and reassurance they had lost"),[117] some of whom were susceptible to faddish attempts to reinject meaning via spiritism,[118] vitalism,[119] pantheism,[120] or Ibn ʿArabi's *waḥdat al-wujūd*.[121] In Sabri's analysis it was in no small part due to the Antun-ʿAbduh debate that this new theology, formed in the crucible of Englightenment philosophy and Western scientism, had taken the minds of the intelligentsia, for whom the old knowledge had become "a bothersome unwanted tradition" (*turāth muzʿij lā yurghab fīhi*)[122] rather than a set of beliefs rooted in affirmation of a creator whose existence, in the traditional phraseology of *kalām*, is necessary (*wujūd mawjūd wājib al-wujūd*).[123] "The only difference between

[109]Among the contemporary texts Sabri discusses are: Zaki Mubarak, "Asmaʿuni Sihat al-Haqq", *al-Risala*, 27 February 1939, 7/295, pp. 387–389; Wajdi, "al-Sira al-Muhammadiyya Taht Dawʾ al-ʿIlm wa-l-Falsafa", *Majallat al-Azhar*, 11/7 (1940), pp. 385–390; Wajdi, "al-Sira al-Muhammadiyya Taht Dawʾ al-ʿIlm wa-l-Falsafa: Muqaddima", *Majallat al-Azhar*, 10/1 (1939), pp. 12–17; Wajdi, "Ma Hiya al-Nubuwwa wa-Ma Hiya al-Risala wa-l-Adilla al-ʿIlmiyya fi Imkan al-Wahy", *Majallat al-Azhar*, 10/2 (1939), pp. 90–98; Wajdi, "Ma Rabahahu al-Din min al-ʿIlm fi al-Zaman al-Akhar", *al-Risala*, 6 January 1947, 15/705, pp. 12–13; ʿAbbas al-ʿAqqad, *ʿAbqariyyat Muhammad* (1942); Muhammad Husayn Haykal, *Hayat Muhammad* (1935); Shibli Shumayyil, *Falsafat al-Nushuʾ wa-l-Irtiqaʾ* (1910).

[110]Sabri, *Mawqif al-ʿAql*, iv, p. 16.

[111]*Ibid*., iv, pp. 48–62. Muhammad Husayn Haykal, *Hayat Muhammad* (Cairo, 2001), pp. 46–50.

[112]Sabri, *Mawqif al-ʿAql*, iv, pp. 209–217, p. 241. Shaykh Shaltut said in series of opinions in 1942 that there are no binding explicatory hadith asserting that the Qurʾan requires belief in the resurrection of Jesus; "Rafʿ ʿIsa", *al-Risala*, 11 May 1942, 10/462, pp. 515–517 and later issues 516–519. Wajdi shifted position from rejecting both corporal and spiritual resurrection to accepting spiritual resurrection only.

[113]Sabri, *Mawqif al-ʿAql*, i, p. 175. See Wajdi, "Madhhab al-Qurʾan fi al-Ayat al-Mutashabihat", *al-Ahram*, 30 August 1933, in Sabri, iv, pp. 407–412; Wajdi, "Madhhab al-Qurʾan fi al-Ayat al-Mutashabihat", *al-Ahram*, 10 September 1933, in Sabri, iv, pp. 432–438; Wajdi, "Tafsil Baʿd Ma Ajmalnahu min al-Mutashabihat", *al-Ahram*, in Sabri, iv, pp. 450–453. See also Ahmad Zaki Pasha, "Ayna Wadi al-Naml al-Madhkur fi al-Qurʾan?" *al-Ahram*, 6 August 1933, in Sabri, iv, pp. 391-396, Wajdi's response, "Wadi al-Naml wa-Madhhab al-Qurʾan", in Sabri, iv, pp. 397–339, and Sabri's response to Wajdi and defence of Ahmad Zaki, "Wadi al-Zalal Baʿd Wadi al-Naml", *al-Ahram*, 26 August 1933, in Sabri, iv, pp. 400–406.

[114]Sabri, *Mawqif al-ʿAql*, i, p. 34, pp. 360–362. This opinion was argued by Shaykh Shaltut.

[115]*Ibid*., iv, pp. 285, 359; citing Shaykh of al-Azhar Mustafa al-Maraghi in the periods 1937–1929 and 1935–1945, as reported in *al-Ahram*, 28 February 1936.

[116]*Ibid*., i, p. 52. See Wajdi, "al-Din fi Muʿtarak al-Shukuk", *al-Risala*, 15 January 1945, 13/602, pp. 57–60.

[117]*Ibid*., i, p. 123.

[118]*Ibid*., i, p. 210, ii, p. 235 re Wajdi. Sabri's predecessor as Ottoman Grand Mufti Musa Kazım was among reformists interested in Spiritism; Midhat Cemal Kuntay, *Mehmet Akif: Hayatı-Seciyesi-Sanatı* (Istanbul, 2015), 42–43; and Marwa Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860-1950* (Chicago, 2013).

[119]Sabri, *Mawqif al-ʿAql*, ii, p. 304.

[120]*Ibid*., iii, p. 90.

[121]*Ibid*., iii, pp. 85–315.

[122]*Ibid*., i, pp. 441–442.

[123]*Ibid*., i, p. 433.

modern Egypt and Turkey in the victory of atheism [*ilḥād*] over religion is that while in Turkey the secular revolution [*al-inqilāb al-lādīnī*] was established by force in the era of Mustafa Kemal, in Egypt it spread through the publishing and propaganda of writers and the patronage of a government itself patronised by the West," Sabri wrote.[124]

Sabri's exile-in-arms al-Kawthari on ʿAbduh

It is worth noting in this regard that other elements of ʿAbduh's discourse were taken up by Sabri's colleague in exile al-Kawthari (in Turkish, Kevseri). A veteran of the struggles against the Turkist positivism of the Committee of Union Progress's leading cadres following the 1908 revolution, al-Kawthari left Istanbul during the First World War to avoid arrest after acquiring a reputation as an effective campaigner among conservative scholars for his work obstructing the removal of Arabic from the school syllabus. On settling in Egypt, al-Kawthari too came to adopt a view of ʿAbduh as a disruptor of the Islamic tradition, though he deployed notably more tact than Sabri in his treatment of an iconic figure. But while Sabri's concern was theology, al-Kawthari's was the rejection of the *madhhab* as the methodological framework for approaching *fiqh*, an iconoclastic trend developing in different circles since the nineteenth century that al-Kawthari dubbed *lā-madhhabiyya* (anti-madhhabism).[125] This traditionalist defence brought al-Kawthari into conflict with not only the modernists but the followers of Ibn Taymiyya who were making an aggressive play for sole rights to the prestigious term "Salafi", since they overlapped in their objection to the legal schools. Al-Kawthari would later become the *bête noire* of the Salafi movement when it emerged as a major force in the latter half of the twentieth century through the work of Syrian *ʿalim* Nasir al-Din al-Albani (1914–1999). With al-Albani, earlier efforts by figures such as Rida to associate the neologism *salafiyya* with ʿAbduh and the modernists finally met their end.[126] But al-Kawthari was no less harsh with the modernists. Writing in 1942, he denounced reform *ʿulamaʾ* for juridical reasoning that stepped outside the established legal tradition, citing the well-known Transvaal fatwa issued by ʿAbduh in 1903 and condemning "imposters in knowledge" (*adʿiyāʾ al-ʿilm*) who "break the bonds of *fiqh* one by one" (*yanquḍūn ʿurā al-fiqh al-islāmī ʿurwatan ʿurwatan*), a clear reference to ʿAbduh.[127] He also attacked the trend in anti-*madhhab* modernist and Salafi circles to pray while wearing sandals.[128] There are uncorroborated reports that ʿAbduh had at one time advocated this, though they are not recorded by Rida in his three-volume biography of ʿAbduh or the complete works of ʿAbduh compiled by Muhammad ʿImara.[129] If true,

[124]*Ibid*., i, p. 30.

[125]Zahid Al-Kawthari, "Al-Lamadhhabiyya Qantarat al-Ladiniyya", *al-Islam*, 6/40, 24 December 1937, in *Maqalat al-Kawthari*, (ed.) Yusuf Banuri (Cairo, 2000 [1953]), pp. 129–136.

[126]On early modernist usage see Henri Lauzière, "The Construction of Salafiyya: Reconsidering Salafism from the Perspective of Conceptual History", *Int. J. Middle East Stud*., 42/3 (2010), pp. 369–389. On the term's transformation see Andrew Hammond, "Producing Salafism: From Invented Tradition to State Agitprop", in *Salman's Legacy: The Dilemmas of a New Era in Saudi Arabia*, (ed.) M. Al-Rasheed (London, 2018), pp. 147–164.

[127]Al-Kawthari, "Mansha' Ilzam Ahl al-Dhimma bi-Shuʿar Khass wa-Hukm Talabbus al-Muslim bihi ʿInd al-Fuqahaʾ", *al-Islam*, 11/23, 26 June 1942, in *Maqalat*, p. 227.

[128]Al-Kawthari, "Kashf al-Ruʾus wa-Libs al-Naʿal fi al-Salat", *al-Sharq al-ʿArabi*, 30 May 1947, in *Maqalat*, pp. 165–180.

[129]Sedgwick, *Muhammed ʿAbduh*, p. 101. The incident is recounted in Jacques Jomier, *Le Commentaire Coranique du Manar: Tendances Modernes d'Exégèse Coranique en Egypte* (Paris, 1954), pp. 100–101, footnote 2.

Sedgwick suggests the motive would have been to align Muslim practice with that of Europe i.e. Sabri's Enlightenment calque.[130] This was certainly the logic behind the Ankara government's unrealised plans to introduce church-like pews in mosques in the 1930s and at least one public call for wearing sandals in Turkish mosques.[131]

However, al-Kawthari's tight moorings in Ottoman Hanafi-Maturidism meant he was less inclined to see the nefarious intent that Sabri surmised in ʿAbduh's theological shifts. ʿAbduh was, for example, excoriated by many senior Azharis on the publication of the first edition of *Risalat al-Tawhid* in 1897 over his comments on the createdness of the Qurʾan. In stating that the pronounced word is created and cannot be said to be eternal (*qadīm*),[132] a position consonant with the post-classical Ashʿari-Maturidi consensus, ʿAbduh nevertheless exposed himself to the polemical charge of Muʿtazilism, around which so much scholarship on ʿAbduh has also centred, and the passage was edited out of subsequent editions.[133] Al-Kawthari had no qualms in defending this view in his extensive polemical debates throughout the 1930s and 1940s with the followers of Ibn Taymiyya, that "as for what is on the tongue of reciters, in the minds of memorisers, and on pages in terms of vocalisation, mental images and textual writing, it is created like those bearing them".[134] Al-Kawthari was also more appreciative than Sabri of ʿAbduh's early life as a Sufi adept and proponent of Sufi theosophy during his years of collaboration with Afghani.[135] On the other hand, ʿAbduh's later views—banning both popular practices associated with Sufi sects and the publication of Ibn ʿArabi's works during his final years as chief mufti[136]—served as a positive in his memorialisation among diverse constituencies of Muslim opinion in the decades following his death.

Changing views of the Islamic reform project

Sabri's conclusions about the modernists align with those of Western observers at the time. Hamilton Gibb was at first positive about the revivalist trend in a series of articles published between 1928 and 1933, titled "Studies in Contemporary Arabic Literature".[137] Charles

[130]Muhammad ʿAbduh Blog, 18 April 2012, http://Abduhinfo.blogspot.com/2012/04/solution-to-problem-ofwhy-muhammad.html.

[131]Richard Hattemer, "Atatürk and the Reforms in Turkey as Reflected in the Egyptian Press", *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 11/1 (Jan 2000), pp. 21–42.

[132]Mahmud Abu Rayya, (ed.), *Risalat al-Tawhid*, 1st edition (Cairo, 2003), p. 14, footnote 1; the pages removed in subsequent editions are at pp. 53–55.

[133]On these accusations, see Indira Falk Gesink, *Islamic Reform and Conservatism: Al-Azhar and the Evolution of Modern Sunni Islam* (London, 2010), pp. 93–97. Those discussing ʿAbduh as a neo-Muʿtazili include Elie Kedourie, *Afghani and Abduh: An Essay on Religious Unbelief and Political Activism in Modern Islam* (London, 1966), pp. 13–14; Detlev Khalid, "Some Aspects of Neo-Muʿtazilism", *Islamic Studies* 8/4 (1969), pp. 320-321; Robert Caspar, "Un aspect de la pensée musulmane moderne: le renouveau du moʿtazilisme", *Melanges de l'Institut Dominicain d'Etudes Orientales du Caire* 4 (1957), pp. 141–202; Louis Gardet, "Signification du 'renouveau Muʿtazilite' dans la pensée musulmane contemporaine", *Islamic Philosophy and the Classical Tradition*, (ed.) S. M. Stern, A. Hourani, V. Brown (Oxford, 1972), pp. 63–75.

[134]Zahid Al-Kawthari, *Taʾnib al-Khatib ʿala Ma Saqahu fi Tarjamat Abi Hanifa min al-Akadhib* (Cairo, 1990 [1941]), pp. 107–108.

[135]Al-Kawthari, "Raʾy Shaykh Muhammad ʿAbduh fi Baʿd al-Masaʾil", in *Maqalat*, pp. 468–470; al-Kawthari, "Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab wa-Muhammad ʿAbduh fi Nazar Sahib al-Thaqafa", *Maqalat*, pp. 333–338.

[136]Oliver Scharbrodt, "The Salafiyya and Sufism: Muḥammad ʿAbduh and His Risālat al-Wāridāt (Treatise on Mystical Inspirations)", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 70/1 (2007), pp. 89–115.

[137]H. A. R. Gibb, "Studies in Contemporary Arabic Literature — III", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 5/3 (1929), pp. 451, 459, 465.

Adams elaborated further on the nature of the movement in *Islam and Modernism in Egypt: The Reform Movement Inaugurated by Muhammad ʿAbduh* (1933), defining it as "an attempt to free the religion of Islam from the shackles of a too rigid orthodoxy, and to accomplish reforms which will render it adaptable to the complex demands of modern life".[138] Adams supported ʿAbduh's identification of Azhari education, the culture of Sufism, and the methodology of *taqlīd* in the legal tradition as premodern phenomena hindering the achievement of modernity, while praising too the later ʿAbduh's rejection of Afghani's pan-Islamic activism—presumably because he perceived the latter as a threat to Western power and the universalist claims of its knowledge. Like Sabri, Adams also noted that ʿAbduh had tried to dilute the notion of God as the immediate cause of all things, align the Qurʾan with empirical thinking, assert free will over predetermination, downplay miracles, promote the doctrine of the created Qurʾan, and match scientific knowledge with Qurʾanic knowledge.[139] But by the late 1940s, with the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood from within modernism and its anti-colonial agitation, Western scholars had notably soured on the entire venture.[140] Judging that it had been overtaken by radical political elements within its ranks, now they reappraised its bold theological claims as weak and a failure. Gibb would denounce the liberal modernists he previously praised as intellectually incoherent, reserving sympathy for only ʿAbduh himself for having internalised the Enlightenment notion of historical progress. "The [Islamic] tradition as a whole… is treated by modernists with scant respect when it runs counter to their ideas and European scholarship has itself furnished them with the means to discredit it," he wrote.[141] Unencumbered by the investment of the classic Orientalists in the colonial dispensation, recent scholarship has been kinder to ʿAbduh and his followers. Israel Gershoni describes the modernist intellectuals as a natural component of the Egyptian urban bourgeoisie in a typical developing nation during the era of decolonisation, inserting humanism and rationalism into Egyptian Islamic cultural traditions.[142] Samira Haj argues ʿAbduh wanted to preserve Islamic social, ethical, and institutional functions vis-à-vis the tradition-free and individualist Western model and its universalist assertions.[143] Yet these views appear to affirm Sabri's point that the modernists had given away Islam's claim to public authority.

Perhaps the most striking element about the modernist project, however, was the suddenness of its collapse. Though it continues to have the backing of state entities in the service of various national political goals—legislation operating outside the boundaries of the *madhhab*, state-appointed rectors of al-Azhar approving the use of interest, etc.[144]—it has little pur-

[138]Adams, *Islam and Modernism*, vi.
[139]Ibid., pp. 137–138.
[140]Israel Gershoni, "The Theory of Crisis and the Crisis in a Theory: Intellectual History in Twentieth-Century Middle Eastern Studies", in *Middle East Historiographies: Narrating the Twentieth Century*, (ed.) Israel Gershoni, Amy Singer, Hakan Erdem (Seattle, 2011), p. 138.
[141]H. A. R. Gibb, *Modern Trends in Islam* (Chicago, 1947), pp. 73, 128.
[142]Gershoni, "The Theory of Crisis", p. 169.
[143]Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition*, pp. 98–99, 113.
[144]See Sedgwick's appraisal, *Muhammad Abduh*, p. 119. The Egyptian Civil Code of 1948, merging shariʿa, French, and American law and becoming the basis for civil codes in numerous post-colonial Arab states. Full executive control was established over Al-Azhar and remaining shariʿa courts abolished in 1961. Turkey ended the İlmiye and shariʿa system in the period 1924 to 1926.

chase with Muslim opinion in the public and political arena in Egypt, Turkey, and the Islamic world more broadly, surviving only in elite circles and Western academia.[145] The timing, if not the cause, of its demise is bound with the turn towards religious conservativism following the reverses suffered by secular Arab nationalism from the 1960s and the gradual rollback of Kemalism from 1945, but more generally with the retreat of positivism in its various forms as a political and social philosophy in the mid-twentieth century—not least the verificationist approach to religious belief—and the associated collapse of modernisation theory, i.e. the Weberian notion of inevitable progress from premodern to modern through the adoption of the Western political, economic, and social model.[146] This manifested itself in new theories of alterity impacting numerous disciplines throughout the 1970s, and in Middle East Studies a renewed interest in the Islamic that has dominated the field ever since. John Voll writes in the preface to the 1993 edition of Richard Mitchell's classic monograph *The Society of Muslim Brothers* that when it was published in 1969 the Muslim Brotherhood was viewed as a fringe group of little importance, given the finality imputed to the dominance of secularism in Arab politics at the time.[147] The alliance established between a conservative scholar like Sabri, defending the premodern Islamic tradition, and a modernist like al-Banna whose movement effectively reframed that tradition in terms of political ideology while drawing on the early anti-imperialism of ʿAbduh and Afghani, is indicative of what fate lay ahead for the Muslim reform movement. Sabri was at the cusp of this turn against the liberal intelligentsia, if not in some small way too its cause, fleshing out its theological elements to the applause of the Islamist movement.

Indeed, Sayyid Qutb was scathing about the liberal age intelligentsia, many if not most of whom saw themselves in one way or another as reformers of Islam, in a series of works that marked his Islamic turn, starting with *al-ʿAdala al-Ijtimaʿiyya fi al-Islam* (Social Justice in Islam, 1949) and *Maʿrakat al-Islam wa-l-Raʾsmaliyya* (The Battle of Islam and Capitalism, 1951). Though also operating within a non-traditionalist ideological paradigm himself, Qutb excoriated the liberal-era intellectuals, many of whom served as government ministers, as servants of colonial exploitation who acquired benefits from it as a class. Qutb was clear that some of his ideas were influenced by Mawdudi, whose work he became aware of from 1950 through meeting the Indian Islamic scholar Abul Hasan Nadvi (1914–1999),[148] but rather than Ibn Taymiyya or Lenin, as some of the vast material on Qutb has suggested, we should look to Sabri as an earlier inspiration.[149] Sabri's student Ali Ulvi Kurucu writes of how Sabri and Qutb would sit together at the salons of intellectuals such as the poet

[145]It continued through the scholarly work studying the phenomenon of figures such as Fazlur Rahman, Leonard Binder, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, and others in Western academia.

[146]Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 35–39; John Gray, *Seven Types of Atheism* (London, 2019), pp. 9–23.

[147]John Voll, "Foreword", in *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, Richard Mitchell (New York, London, 1993), pp. xxiii–xxiv.

[148]Abul Hasan Nadvi, *Madha Khasira al-ʿAlam bi-Inhitat al-Muslimin* (Cairo, 1994), p. 27.

[149]In *Fi Zilal al-Qurʾan* (In the Shadow of the Qurʾan), composed between 1952 and 1961, Qutb cites widely from *al-Jihad fi Sabil Allah*, the 1960 Arabic translation from Urdu of Mawdudi's *al-Jihad fi al-Islam* (1927). See Muhammad Qasim Zaman, "The Sovereignty of God in Modern Islamic Thought", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 25/3 (July 2015), pp. 389–418. On Ibn Taymiyya, see Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* (New Haven/London, 1990), p. 94, p. 102. On Lenin, see John Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism* (London, 2010), p. 16, p. 231; and Glenn Robinson, "Jihadi information strategy: sources, opportunities, and vulnerabilities", in *Information Strategy and Warfare: A Guide to Theory and Practice*, (ed.) John Arquilla and Douglas A. Borer (London, 2007), p. 92.

Mahmud Shakir (1909–1997).[150] Qutb would have been aware of the friendship between Sabri and al-Banna, who was assassinated in 1949, and of their differences over the faith or apostasy of the modernists. Sabri's text shows that he was fond of Qutb, even before his embrace of Islamism, describing him as "the closest to the right path among those erring in evaluation of the Qurʾan" (*aqrab al-ḍāllīn fī taqdīr al-qurʾān min al-hudā*).[151] Many of Qutb's ideas in his first Islamist works reflect the thinking of Sabri. Muslim rulers who replace sharīʿa codes, the only guarantor of social justice and equality, with European law are no longer Muslim;[152] positivist and materialist thinking allows no place for the ethics and morality of the sharīʿa system;[153] liberal era intellectuals such as Muhammad Husayn Haykal have unjustly attempted to rationalise the motives of early Muslim leaders driven by the Islamic mission.[154] In later writing Qutb addressed the work of ʿAbduh directly, judging that in falling into the trap of stressing reason (*ʿaql*) as if it were the antithesis of revelation (*waḥy*) ʿAbduh had appeased the materialists, responding to deviation with more deviation.[155]

The influential traditionalist Saʿid Ramadan al-Buti (1929–2013), a staunch opponent of al-Albani Salafism who dominated Sunni Islam in Syria from the 1980s to his death, was explicit about his debt to Sabri.[156] *Mawqif al-ʿAql* was clearly the template for al-Buti's own refutation of ʿAbduh, revivalist theology, and the materialist historical and philosophical trends of the modern era, *Kubra al-Yaqiniyyat al-Kawniyya* (The Greatest of Universal Certainties, 1969).[157] While Qutb is not mentioned once in his analysis, al-Buti says of Sabri's book that "nothing like it has been written in this age [*lam yuktab mithluhu fī hādhā al-ʿaṣr*]".[158] In Turkey, the returning students of Sabri and al-Kawthari set themselves to translating Qutb's work into Turkish in the 1960s, creating an important body of literature that the Turkish Islamic movement drew upon during its rise in subsequent decades. While this attention to Qutb provoked some controversy at the time,[159] it was easier than lionising Sabri in public space: Sabri was viewed as more extreme because of his overt opposition to Mustafa Kemal's Nationalist Forces (Kuva-ı Milliye), his campaigning from abroad against the policies of the early Turkish republic, and comments in various works arguing that knowledge of Arabic is more important for Turkish Muslims than Turkish ethnicity.[160] He was typically denounced as a fanatic by republican historians: for example, Niyazi

[150]Düzdağ, *Hatıralar,* ii, p. 301.
[151]Sabri, *Mawqif al-ʿAql*, i, p. 329, footnote 1.
[152]Sayyid Qutb, *al-ʿAdala al-Ijtimaʾiyya fi al-Islam* (Cairo, 1954), pp. 225–227.
[153]*Ibid*., pp. 252–256.
[154]*Ibid.,* pp. 132–135.
[155]Sayyid Qutb, *Khasaʾis al-Tasawwur al-Islami wa-Muqawwimatuhu* (Cairo, 2002 [1962]), pp. 18–20. Its original title was *Fikrat al-Islam ʿan Allah wa-l-Kawn wa-l-Hayat wa-l-Insan*, which bears a resemblance to not only Mawdudi's title *al-Mustalahat al-Arbaʿa fi al-Qurʾan: al-Ilah, al-Rabb, al-ʿIbada, al-Din* (1955) but also Sabri's *Mawqif al-ʿAql.*
[156]Andreas Christmann, "Islamic scholar and religious leader: A portrait of Shaykh Muhammad Saʿid Ramadan al-Būti", *Islam & Christian Muslim Relations*, 9/2 (1998), pp. 149–169; Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 76–82.
[157]Saʿid Ramadan al-Buti, *Kubra al-Yaqiniyyat al-Kawniyya: Wujud al-Khaliq wa-Wazifat al-Makhluq* (Damascus, 1997). On ʿAbduh and his followers, see pp. 185, 222–235, 327–337 and on Sabri, see pp. 84–85, 94, 148–49, 185, 230, 233, 329.
[158]*Ibid*., p. 85, footnote 1.
[159]The leading Islamic journal *Hilal*'s translation of *Maʿalim fi al-Tariq* was confiscated and its translator arrested after Qutb's execution in 1966 over his discussion of rebellion and violence in the book.
[160]These comments were removed from the modern imprint of Sabri's *Dinî Müceddidler* (Istanbul, 1994), p. 249. See the original Ottoman version: *Dinî Müceddidler* (Istanbul: Âsitâne Kitabevi, nda [1922]), p. 260.

Berkes's *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (1964) and *Türk Düsününde Batı Sorunu* (The Western Question in Turkish Thought, 1975).[161] Although there was renewed interest in his legacy after the Islamist AKP (Justice and Development Party) took power in 2002, including the publication in Turkish of *Mawqif al-ʿAql*, Sabri's memory remained a sensitive issue—nationalists vandalised a religious school established in his home town of Tokat in 2017, forcing it to change its name.[162] By contrast, his major Arabic works including *Mawqif al-ʿAql* have seen a series of reprints in Arabic in Cairo and Beirut since the 1980s, and the main biography of Sabri published thus far is an Arabic study from 2006 by Emirati researcher Mufarrih ibn Sulayman al-Qawsi. Al-Qawsi describes Sabri as a leading light of modern Islamic thought who challenged subordination (*tabaʿiyya*) to Western intellectual culture and its atheistic core.[163] Writing in 1952, Palestinian academic Ishaq Musa al-Husayni, a former student of Hamilton Gibb in London, had made a similar appraisal. In one of the first studies of the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Husayni named Sabri as the leading, archetypal figure in one of three groups characterising contemporary Muslim debate: those content with the evolving separation between religion (*al-dīn*) and science (*al-ʿilm*), those like Farid Wajdi attempting to reconcile the two, and those such as Sabri seeking to reestablish the theological-philosophical credentials of religious belief.[164] Sabri's recent book, *Mawqif al-ʿAql*, al-Husayni noted, defended the rationalist underpinnings of faith and attacked those such as ʿAbduh who hold that reason alone cannot sustain some aspects of creed.

Conclusion

Sabri rejected modernist theology because he viewed it as an apologetic concession to secular nationalism that advanced a materialist understanding of man's place in the world and relegated religion to the private sphere, doing colonialism's work in destroying the epistemic framework of the shariʿa system and its hegemonic hold over the Muslim subject. Sabri's Ottoman background gave him to sense the opening that Maturidism offered the Egyptian intellectuals to rethink the social function of Islam through accentuating human agency to the point of removing God as an active player in human society, an opening that republican intellectuals and the state have also exploited in propagating the notion of a unique Turkish Islam.[165]

[161]Pro-Sabri works began to appear from the 1980s, such as Sadık Albayrak's *Son Devir Osmanlı Uleması* (1981) and *Hilafet ve Kemalizm* (1992). İsmail Kara's three-volume scholarly overview of Islamist thought in Turkey, *Türkiye'de İslamcılık Düşüncesi* (1986), was a milestone in its comprehensive approach. Articles published since the 1990s include Yusuf Şevki Yavuz, "Mustafa Sabri Efendi", *İslam Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 31 (2006), pp. 350–353.

[162]*Mawqif al-ʿAql* was published in 2005 as *Şeyhulislâm Mustafa Sabri Efendi'nin Mısır Ulemâsı ile İlmî Münâkaşaları* and *al-Qawl al-Fasl* as *Gaybın Önünde: El-Kavlu'l-Fasl* in 2019. His Ottoman Turkish works were reproduced in modern Turkish earlier, starting with *Dinî Müceddidler* in 1977.

[163]Mufarrih ibn Sulayman al-Qawsi, *Mustafa Sabri: al-Mufakkir al-Islami wa-l-ʿAlim al-ʿAlami wa-Shaykh al-Islam fi al-Dawla al-ʿUthmaniyya Sabiqan* (Damascus, 2006), p. 381. English studies include Mehmet Kadri Karabela, *One of the Last Ottoman Şeyhülislams, Mustafa Sabri Efendi (1869–1954): His Life, Works and Intellectual Contributions* (MA Thesis, McGill University, 2003) and Amit Bein, "'ulama' and Political Activism in the Late Ottoman Empire: The Political Career of Şeyhülislâm Mustafa Sabri Efendi", in *Guardians of Faith in Modern Times: 'ulama' in the Middle East*, (ed.) Meir Hatina (Leiden, 2009), pp. 67–90.

[164]Ishaq Musa al-Husayni, *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun: Kubra al-Harakat al-Diniyya al-Haditha* (Beirut, 1952), pp. 180–181; published as *The Moslem Brethren: The Greatest of Modern Islamic Movements* (Beirut, 1956). Sabri was also cited early in Muhammad Husayn, *al-Ittijahat al-Wataniyya fi al-Adab al-Muʿasir* (Cairo, 1954), p. 348.

[165]Mehmet Zeki İşcan, "Türk Basınında Matüridi ve Matüridilik", *Marmara University İlahiyat Fakültesi Vakfi Yayınları*, No. 261 (2012), pp. 478–492.

Scholarly appreciation of Sabri's role in discrediting the Islamic reform movement has been obscured by his status as a Turkish scholar writing in Egyptian exile in Arabic, and luminary of an Ottoman Islamic establishment swept away by the modernising state at that. This meant he fell foul of disciplinary conventions that define writers and historical fields along ethnic, linguistic, and national lines. However, it can be said that Sabri's discourse is significant on three levels. Firstly, it is consonant with the broad trend away from positivism in the second half of the twentieth century; second, contra Adams et al., it subjected the ideas of ʿAbduh and his followers to rigorous critique from within the Islamic tradition; and finally, it provided the intellectual basis for the dismissal of liberal modernism that left the political arena open to the Muslim Brotherhood and its calques, on one hand, and the Salafi movement, on the other, as the dominant forces in Muslim politics in the later twentieth century. The former rejected modernism's insistence on the apolitical nature of Islam as both faith and a complex of institutions, while the latter presented an originalist puritanism untainted by modern European ideas. Reformist Islam met neither of those standards and its standing accordingly paid the price. Secular regimes co-opted its thinkers and extracted the elements of their programme that suited their statist interests. When religious movements established a strong social base from which to begin acquiring political power in the late twentieth century, they had little use for an antecedent now tainted in historical memory by association with the colonial age. Sabri's colleague Zahid al-Kawthari was more forgiving of ʿAbduh specifically, appreciating the Sufi and Maturidi elements in his thought. But together their devastating critique was a significant marker in the demise of a trend fatally aligned in the communal memory with Western liberalism in its various manifestations.

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