



## Reinventing Islam, Sublating Modernity: A Conflict of Enlightenments

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**Abstract:** *The present paper aims to show how the return to Islam initially conceived by Muslim reformists has not been simply a conflictual reaction to the secular ideology sustaining modernity, but rather an effort to transform Islam into a religion within modernity. It argues that this return has in fact been a major paradigm shift within the theologico-political discourse of Islamic tradition and that it is this very shift that led to the reformation of this religion. In this perspective, this study shows how the reactivation of sharia by reformist thinkers did not mean a rejection of the Islamic intellectual tradition, but it was precisely the result of the encounter between this tradition and the modern social sciences. The paper then reconstructs the dialogue between Muslim reformists and 19th century European thinkers, dialogue which was crucial in shaping Islamic reformation. It shows to what extent reformed Islam was a response of Muslim reformers to the diagnosis of the project of modernity made by European reformist thinkers such as François Guizot or Auguste Comte. Through their confrontation, the paper develops a comparison between the theoretical backdrop of European modernity and the premises of Islamic reformation as two alternative conceptions of the Enlightenment project. By discussing Kant, Foucault, Habermas and Koselleck's thesis on the historical and philosophical roots of the European Enlightenment, this study ultimately seeks to understand in which way the theological structure of Islam has led the project of the Islamic Enlightenment in an analogous but fairly differentiated direction.*

**Keywords:** *Conflict; Enlightenment; Islam; Sharia, Modernity; Political Thought; Islamic Reform; Social Sciences; Constitutionalism.*

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## Introduction

Today's political understanding of Islam views the latter as part of a conflict that is as profound as it is easy to identify, a conflict that pits modernity, its principles, or its values, against a traditionalist reaction based on a religious vision that is fundamentally at odds with the political or social rationality characterizing modernity. The political, social, and economic conditions in which this conflict has occurred and evolved are well known. Indeed, the colonial context of Islamic countries and the cultural extension of this context by late capitalism have actively contributed to shaping the conflict. From a theologico-political point of view, however, the critical question consists in knowing what the role of Islam, as a religion, has been in this conflict, which itself is a primarily political, social, or even cultural one. The answer to this question requires that we return to the original moment of confrontation between the Muslim and the modern worlds. This moment, which started with the French Company in Egypt, is marked by a series of defeats that European states inflicted on various

Oriental governments, the most important of them being the Ottoman Empire. But what characterizes the nineteenth-century aftermath is that Muslim world thinkers, for the first time, started to realize that defeat is not merely a matter of a change in power relations or a circumstantial military weakness. A generational consciousness ensued for which the West's supremacy was deemed to come from its different political system and its new way of organizing the community. The West's real weapon in procuring victory, concluded these thinkers, should be sought in its entirely different worldview, that is, in its utterly different way of thinking *and* living<sup>1</sup>.

This awareness was the beginning of a reform movement that affected the cultural and metaphysical foundations of the worldview largely shared by Muslim and, even more generally, Middle Eastern subjects. However, the reform movement developed in an apparently contradictory direction: the encounter with conquering modernity and the effort for renewal undertaken by the defeated people did not lead them to renounce their religion and adopt a disenchanted worldview, as the quintessence of modern ideology. Instead, at this historical turning point in the Muslim world, we seemingly observed an ascendant return to Islam. This puzzling return has led contemporary reflections on the recent evolution of Islam to regard this historical momentum as a double origin: as a starting point for the reform of this religion *and* as an originating point in the conflict that Islamic neo-orthodoxy has actively waged against modernity and its intellectual foundations ever since.

How can we correlate these two historically coincident phenomena: on the one hand, a religious reformation, and, on the other, a conflict that bases itself ideologically on the very same religion undergoing reformation? Two hypotheses have been put forward to answer this question. According to the first, the return to Islam and the attempt to recast it is part, perhaps the most crucial part, of a conflictual reaction to modernity as the ideology of foreign conquerors. From this point of view, it may be supposed that this reactionary logic drew Muslim thinkers into a two-step process: first, they put their religion forward as the very antithesis of modern ideology and the secular rationality sustaining it. Then, in order to make this religion an even more efficient device against modern ideology, they sought to revise the Islamic faith by underlining the elements it contains that are most contradictory to rationality or secular thought<sup>2</sup>. This underlining would entail the repression of other elements or factors in this religion that might have converged with the intellectual foundations of modernity, or at least have been less antagonistic with them. This is how this theory aims to explain Islam's modern shift towards literalism at the expense of more spiritual readings of this religion; its shift towards orthodoxy that focuses on the practice of sharia law at the expense of rational theology and Islamic philosophy; its shift towards a public religion at the expense of the idea of a private and personal one; and its shift towards religious traditionalism at the expense of critical thinking, or the principle of free inquiry.

Let us now turn to the second hypothesis, according to which the conflictual posture that Islam has taken in the modern context is, in fact, the symptom of a failure: one precisely of its internal process of reformation in the wake of the Muslim world's encounter with modern thought. The argument is that if Islam has not been able to reform itself to meet the new

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<sup>1</sup> On this diagnosis in Muslim world, see Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), chap. 3; and Hamid Enâyat, *Seyri Dar Andisheh-ye Sijâsi-e 'Arab* [*An Overview of Arabic Political Thought*] (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1355 [1976]), chap. 1.

<sup>2</sup> For an example of such an interpretation, see Nasr Hâmid Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass, al-Sulta, al-Haqîqa* [*Text, Authority, Truth*] (Beirut and Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqâfi al-'Arabî, 1995), 28 ff.

social, political, economic, or intellectual requirements — something Christianity had managed in analogous circumstances — it is because the roots of Islamic reformation lie in its conflict with a victorious adversary. On the basis of Weber's sociology of religions,<sup>3</sup> the proponents of this hypothesis claim that such an Islamic reformation emerging after a defeat could only take the form of a passive translation of ideas imposed, and in hegemonic fashion, from the outside into Islamic discourse, which formed the dominant conceptual language in the Islamic East. Critics have said that if Islam's recasting shows some aspects typical of "reformed" religion, for instance, its literalist quietism or its ethical orthodoxy, these aspects nonetheless do not express an internal dynamic indicative of progress. Comparing the role that such aspects took on in the Protestant Reformation, they represent no more than false appearances incapable of coming to terms with the project of modernity. As one commentator puts it:

The Protestant Ethic theme in modern Islam was a response to an external threat which utilized European concepts to reinterpret traditional Islam in such a way as to reconcile two different cultural traditions.<sup>4</sup>

In the present paper, I propose to revisit this crucial historical momentum, which unfolded through the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, in order to put both hypotheses to the test. We will see that what was happening consisted of a process of translation but in an original and active sense. As I try to explain, beyond its different historical backdrop, this process took up the very theological and dogmatic structure of Islam. Furthermore, it enabled this religion to interact differently than Christianity did with the intellectual project of modernity by providing new possibilities of interaction with the latter and of course, new kinds of limits or impossibilities. It is this difference that effectively allowed reformist thinkers in the Islamic world to conceive the project of translating/appropriating modernity not in opposition to religion but as an activation of a potential intrinsic to Islam. Inspired by later developments of modern social thought in the nineteenth century, the dream they shared was to transform Islam into a "religion of modernity" in a particular sense: a religion that could overcome the opposition between the modern project and religion, and that could thus sublimate the project of modernity precisely by bypassing a set of conflicts, or splits, that European thinkers themselves had identified as symptoms of the project, the most problematic being the conflict between morality and politics. To put forward a legalistic and literalist conception of Islam, as first generations of Oriental reformists would theorize, was therefore not a reactionary reactivation of tradition: as we will see, this literalist legalism was above all the result of the renewal of Islamic political thought through its encounter with modern social thought. In this sense, contrary to what commentators have suggested,<sup>5</sup> these reformists did not see "the modernization of Islam" and "the Islamization of modernity" as two different projects. They saw them as part of the same endeavor. To understand this overlapping identification of both projects, we must also consider how the particular religious dynamic in Islam had sprung from theologico-political conflicts that were already at work within this religion before its encounter with modernity.

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<sup>3</sup> Weberian approach to Islamic theologico-political issues, especially in a modern context, has been for a long time dominant in contemporary studies. For a representative set of such approach, see *Max Weber & Islam*, ed. Toby E. Huff and Wolfgang Schluchter (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Bryan S. Turner, *Weber and Islam* (London and New York: Routledge, 1974), 148.

<sup>5</sup> See Abdelmajid Charfi, *Al-Islam wa-l-hadâtha* [*Islam and Modernity*] (Tunis: al-Dâr al-Tunisiyya li-l-Nashr, 1991), 183 ff.

## I. From the Governed Community to Modern Society: Sharia against Spiritual Guidance

To grasp the issues involved in Islam's internal reform, we must briefly recall how this religion and its socio-political status were hegemonically understood on the eve of the historical momentum under consideration; because this understanding is what the reformation project aimed to change. Islamic faith in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which is to say the last period of premodern Islam, included two essential components. On the one hand, a normative component that, under the name of sharia, guaranteed the continuity of customs by imposing a particular form of life on individuals. As an authority of legal knowledge, doctors of the law represented this normative component within and for the community. Despite this normative function, however, sharia, as such, had hardly any non-mediated political significance. Whether under the Ottoman Empire, the Mughal dynasties in India, or the governments of the Safavids and their Qajar successors in Iran—that is, under regimes ruling over the majority of Islamic lands—this normative component never came to constitute alone a legal device for legitimizing or controlling political power.

In fact, the mediated status of sharia here mainly reflected the significant but discreet shift in the theologico-political paradigm that gradually took place throughout the Islamic world after the twelfth century. As a result of this shift, the other component of Islamic faith, namely spiritual guidance (*hidāya*), came to the fore. From then on, the theologico-political structure of Islam came increasingly to develop around the idea of such guidance.<sup>6</sup> According to this idea, it was Muhammad's revelation that opened the era of the Divine Will's continuous presence in the world; this presence supposedly existing in concrete and personified form. This Providential Will accordingly comes to be translated for the believer as a form of guidance and is mediated by the person of the Guide. The believer's faith and his salvation, therefore, depend, first of all, not on respect for religious norms but his submission to this Guide and his teaching. For, only by a Guide and through a spiritual relationship with him can one gain an understanding of the true meaning of the norms. It is not difficult to imagine how, by defining divine Guidance in this fashion and by instituting it as the very principle of faith, Islamic tradition conferred governmental significance on it. Indeed, by his Guidance and the mediation of his Guides, God himself was thought to govern the world, each individual, and the community of believers. This kind of individualized government, which I have dubbed “pastoral,”<sup>7</sup> was attributed to the great mystical masters,<sup>8</sup> Maraboutic saints (in

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<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed discussion on guidance as a theologico-political authority paradigm in Islam, its historical development, and its dialectical relationship to sharia, see Anoush Ganjipour, *L'ambivalence politique de l'islam : Pasteur et Léviathan ?* (Paris: Seuil, 2020 [forthcoming]).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> The case of the Naqshbandiyya as one of the most important Sufi order is quite relevant: between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, the order continued to develop its spiritual and political influence almost everywhere in the Sunni world, from India to the Maghreb. For a survey of the order's history as well as its governmental function within the Muslim community, see Itzhak Weismann, *The Naqshbandiyya. Orthodoxy and Activism in a Worldwide Sufi Tradition* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).

Sunnism)<sup>9</sup> and Imams (most specifically according to Shi'ite doctrine).<sup>10</sup> Naturally, their singular function provided them with a theological *and* political status within the Islamic community.<sup>11</sup>

Closer to the era we are dealing with, after a long series of historical changes or events, the governmental understanding of religious authority then became hegemonic, and Muslim populations began universally to see it as the essence of the Islamic message. From at least the sixteenth century onwards, religious intervention into the political domain occurred predominantly within such a governmental paradigm<sup>12</sup> – so much so that to gain political influence in either the Sunni or Shi'ite contexts, the so-called doctors of the law were also obliged to attain guidance status.<sup>13</sup> It was during the same period that the mystical corpus, which was elaborated around the idea of spiritual guidance, ended up entering the official curriculum of religious schools in the intellectual centers of the Muslim world.<sup>14</sup> This modification in the school curriculum is, in fact, a symptom of a more profound change: it reveals the extent to which, by becoming the hegemonic reading of the Islamic message, guidance and the idea of divine government had penetrated metaphysics, the epistemology of Islamic sciences,<sup>15</sup> and, in a word, into the Muslim's *Weltanschauung*. In the nineteenth century,

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<sup>9</sup> In his classic study, Clifford Geertz outlines the main characteristics of the theological and political presence of lineages of *marabouts* in the Maghreb. His study is important for us in two respects: first, it compares the *marabouts* tradition with another Islamic mystical tradition that is present in South Asia, and the theologico-political governments they formed in two different Islamic contexts. Secondly, Geertz points out the contrast between the *marabout*-based Islam in the premodern Maghreb and a new understanding of the same religion emerging in the new era. See Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

<sup>10</sup> For the Shi'ite significance of this guidance and its central place in the doctrine of Imamate, see Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *Le guide divin dans le shi'isme original, Aux sources de l'ésotérisme en Islam*, (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> See Anoush Ganjipour, *L'ambivalence politique de l'islam*, especially chapter V and VI.

<sup>12</sup> The pastoral understanding of the Islamic authority extended even to the ideological foundations of the Ottoman Empire. For an overview of the development of mystical discourse under the Empire and of its governmental significance for legitimating Ottoman rule, see Hüseyin Yilmaz, *Caliphate Redefined, The Mystical Turn in Ottoman Political Thought* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> For this convergence under the Ottoman Empire in the Sunni case, see Albert Hourani's discussion of the mystical order of Naqshbandiyya and one of its leading early nineteenth-century figures: Albert Hourani, *The Emergence of the Modern Middle East* (Berkeley-Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1981), chap. 5. Concerning the North African context, see Michael Brett, "Islam in North Africa," *The World's Religions*, ed. Peter Clarke (London: Routledge, 1990), 34. The Shi'ite form of the same phenomenon is explained in Mohammad-Ali Amir-Moezzi, *La preuve de Dieu, La mystique shi'ite à travers l'œuvre de Kulaynî (IXe-Xe siècle)* (Paris : Cerf, 2018), 296.

<sup>14</sup> On this transformation of the curriculum during the period in question, see Francis Robinson's comparative study, "Ottomans-Safavids-Mughals: Shared Knowledge and Connective Systems," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 8/2 (July 1997): 164 ff.

<sup>15</sup> For a synthetic account of Islamic knowledge and epistemology on the eve of the reform period, see J. B. Voll, *Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982), chap. 3. In a more recent study, Khaled El-Rouayheb has revealed the internal dynamics of these forms of knowledge by focusing on the territory of the Ottoman Empire during the seventeenth century. See Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century, Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). Despite the merits of this study, its author does not adopt a social and political point of view and is therefore unable to perceive the inadequacy of

the first generation of reformers was indeed immersed in such a *Weltanschauung* before their direct contact with modern society and politics thoroughly challenged it.

In 1826, the first group of Egyptian students was sent to France to study the modern sciences by the then-governor of Egypt, Muhammad Ali. One member of this group, a young scholar who would become a leading figure in the new Arabic Humanities, was Rifā'a Tahtāwī (1801-1873). Tahtāwī's initial experience with a modern way of life seems rather instructive about the whole generation of young Muslim scholars who were then discovering the "new world." Fortunately, he also provided us with an account of his *Bildungsreise* written during his five-year stay in Paris, an account that should be read as this Arab observer's ethnography of modern people. Yet, Tahtāwī's observations on morals, progress in the arts and the sciences, and the educational situation or life conditions of "Parisian people," all lead him to a critical remark: that the very heart of a civilization consists of its system of laws (*shari'a*), its political system and specifically the interlinkage between them. Through a comparative reading of the theories of Montesquieu and of Ibn Khaldun, the young scholar then attempted to understand how these binary systems change from one civilization to another.

Through Montesquieu, Tahtāwī discovered how European people had based their system of laws on the rational distinction between good and evil and, accordingly, on the approval (*al-tahsīn*) of the former and the disapproval (*al-taqbīl*) of the latter.<sup>16</sup> Montesquieu thus allowed him to grasp the logic by which each system of laws corresponds to a specific political system, namely the different ways the system of laws could restrict and regulate political power.<sup>17</sup> It was this regulative relationship that seemed to Tahtāwī to be the real secret of any civilization's capacity to survive and develop in full, a secret of which modern civilization might well remind Muslims. To understand why our author grasped this secret of modernity as a simple reminder, we should distinguish two discrete steps in his argument. First, for Tahtāwī, the regulative relationship he discerned both in the modern community and in Montesquieu's theory confirmed Ibn Khaldun's definition of "rational politics." According to Ibn Khaldun, regulating the sovereign's power, keeping him from transgressing justice, and, ultimately, helping to maintain the stability of this power itself necessitated political rules that were "well known and respected by everyone."<sup>18</sup> Moreover, when such rules are conceived by wise men and have a rational basis, they give rise to "rational politics." But, for Ibn Khaldun, in the table of perfections, rational politics ranks only second, because a more perfect politics is conceivable: one in which divine law guarantees the regulatory role. The "religious politics" resulting from the regulatory function of divine law, he claimed, would be the most useful one not only for temporal life but also for a man's future life.<sup>19</sup>

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these internal intellectual dynamics for the reformers who would arrive on the scene around two centuries later and who thus sought to reverse it.

<sup>16</sup> In fact, this is how Tahtāwī understood the concept of natural law upon his reading of Burlamaqui's theory. See Rifā'a Rāfi' al-Tahtāwī, *Takhlīs al-Ibrīz fī Talkhīs Bārīz* [The extraction of Gold, or an Overview of Paris] (Le Caire: Kalimat Arabia, 2011), 222. During his European residency, Tahtāwī likely translated Burlamaqui's *Principes du droit naturel et politique*, but did not ever publish it. On this point, see Alain Silvera, "The First Egyptian Student Mission to France under Muhammad Ali," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 16/ 2 (May 1980):15.

<sup>17</sup> See Al-Tahtāwī, *Takhlīs al-Ibrīz fī Talkhīs Bārīz*.

<sup>18</sup> See Ibn Khaldūn, *Le Livre des Exemples*, trans. Adessalam Cheddadi (Paris: Gallimard/Pléiade, 2002), 468-9.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 470.

Tahtâwî's comparative reading of Montesquieu and Ibn Khaldun — a reading in which the former is depicted as a “Western Ibn Khaldun,” and the latter as a “Oriental Montesquieu,”<sup>20</sup>—persuaded him that the Islamic tradition had not only anticipated the secret of modern civilization, but had also deployed it in a more elaborate form. The second step in Tahtâwî's argument concerns this precise point. For in Tahtâwî's view, the Khaldunian thesis about perfect politics emerged as a formulation about a political reality that had previously come about in Islamic history. He therefore concluded that the regulative function of the law was once the very grounding of Islamic civilization in its golden age. His idea about the secret of modernity now appears in a clearer light; Muslims, he thought, must not let themselves be dazzled by modernity's charm, which ought not to lead them to break with their past. Instead, modernity must serve as a reminder to those who have forgotten the secret of civilization. Becoming modern thus meant reactivating this secret within Islamic civilization, which is moribund precisely because of this forgetting. Tahtâwî's conclusion in fact announced a new era in which modernity would be ever inscribed on a kind of palimpsest throughout the Muslim world.

The particular understanding of the modern relationship between law and political power that we witness in Tahtâwî's account is reflected in the new terminology featuring in reformist political discourse. Following a set of linguistic displacements in the Arabic translations of a French term (*la Charte*), the constitutional system of politics became understood as a conditional (*maṣbrūṭa*) system in the main languages of the Muslim world, that is, Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. This overlap between the conceptual and linguistic translations of a key term of modern politics determined the direction in which the reformist discourse developed.<sup>21</sup> According to Tahtâwî himself, conditioning power essentially involves the equality of the sovereign (*hâkim*) and his subjects before laws and judgments (= commandments: *ahkâm*).<sup>22</sup> He argues that if both sides have respect for such laws, this is because these laws were legislated and approved — in the French context — both by the House of Peers and the Assembly of Deputies, the former defending the Sovereign's interests, and the latter being representative of his subjects. Thus, the French system of laws could legitimately limit the French political system because both had their roots in the same source of legitimacy. Tahtâwî's point, however, was that this source of legitimacy typical of modern rational politics entailed a limitation which was not self-evident for a non-European and Muslim like him. Instead, he considered that it revealed an imperfection visibly inherent in rational politics when seen in contrast to the religious politics delineated by Ibn Khaldun.

Insofar as the modern system of laws cannot be “deduced from the Heavenly Books,” Tahtâwî argued, the rights or duties expressed by it simply committed French people to each other.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, for a spectator with a Muslim cultural background such as his, the situation inevitably raised the following question: why had modernity stopped at this stage of the process, why had it not gone further and set out an ideal system of laws able to restrict the sovereign and its subjects in an absolutely just polity? The question has been crucial for Islam's

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<sup>20</sup> See Al-Tahtâwî, *Takhlīs al-Ibrīz fī Talkhīs Bārīz*, 222.

<sup>21</sup> For more details on this traductological displacement, see my discussion in “La pensée politique islamique et l'idée de société moderne,” *Archives de philosophie* 82/4(2019), 733-34. In a more global scope, Ami Ayalon analyses the linguistic transformation the Islamic political discourse underwent through its encounter with the discourse of modernity. See Ami Ayalon, *Language and Change in the Arab Middle East. The Evolution of Modern Political Discourse* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). Concerning the question of constitutional vocabulary, see especially Chap. 6.

<sup>22</sup> Al-Tahtâwî, *Takhlīs al-Ibrīz fī Talkhīs Bārīz*, 113-14.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.



modernity, what is more, because of the answer provided by Tahtâwî and his successors: modernity's imperfection, they have claimed, is due to its Christian backdrop. In other words, it is because western modernity originally had to rely on a religion that had no concrete system of laws.

While the encounter with the Moderns “reminded” Muslim thinkers of the regulatory potential of sharia over political power; it also led them to a real discovery: society *per se*. A distinctive feature of Islamic political thought in its classical development during the medieval and premodern periods lies in the very marginal room it gives to the social. It could plausibly be said that, for it, social existence as a political problematic was systemically dissolved into two other problematics with a predominant presence in this tradition, that is, on the one hand, the political submission of subjects and, on the other, the problematic of civil war that continuously haunted Islamic political thought. In such a sharply polarized discourse, no political relevance could naturally be assigned to the social as such.<sup>24</sup> We may correctly grasp the newfound interest in sharia, which even non-Muslim Oriental reformers expressed, by taking into account the following: these reformers discovered that the law is not simply a means for restricting power, but that also it underpins subjects' social belonging.

From this perspective, shifting the center of gravity of Islamic belief from spiritual guidance to the normative dimension of sharia had a priority issue: how to remove what was diagnosed to be a real obstacle to shaping the social existence? For the governmental paradigm that was typical of the idea of individual guidance by God or his representative removes the subject from all forms of social belonging and instead directly introduces him into a spiritual community. This alternative community belonging was at most able to sustain solidarity inside the mystical orders. However, it remained at an infra-social level: the vertical mediation involved in the governmental relationship suppressed the development of an autonomous network of social links. If it is true that the internal conflict constitutive of the process of Islamic reformation occurred in the shift between two theologico-political paradigms, that of spiritual government and that of the rule of sharia laws, then the central issue of the conflict was undoubtedly to introduce, on the one hand, social consistency into the fragmented lives forming Muslim communities, and, on the other, a social consciousness among the members of these communities. The reformers were actually convinced that both the said consistency and the said consciousness necessitated a socially-oriented morality. By contrast with forms of split belonging (e.g., heavenly versus worldly) that pushed subjects away from social life, sharia normativity aimed at providing them with a double link or belonging, both inward and outward, to social life.

## II. From Morality to Politics

No one has spelled out the reasons for this shift in Islamic dogma more explicitly than Jamâl al-Dîn Afghani (1838-1897), the founding figure of reformism as an intellectual project in the Muslim world. It was indeed with him that the idea of reform first became a systematic and global project. What was specific about Afghani's contribution, however, was the fact that society no longer took the place of a simple object of reform attempted from above and through a state plan; it became its very subject. And if reforming the religious structure of Islam and redefining its theologico-political function were primary questions for Afghani, they stemmed from a more general line of investigation with which he was concerned: In

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<sup>24</sup> Makram Abbès seems to refer to the same phenomenon when he criticizes the absence of the idea of the people in Islamic political thought in its classical development. See Makram Abbès, *Islam et politique à l'âge classique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2009), 306-8.

order to shape a society-subject, that is, a truly enlightened society, what role could religion play?

In this perspective, Afghani's critical approach both to the traditional understanding of Islam and to the secular attitude of his European contemporaries may be easily grasped. For Afghani, however, the decisive conflict lay elsewhere; it was inside the project of reformation, for the project took root in two different ways of interpreting the relation between religion and social life. He believed that efforts at reform were genuinely threatened by reformists who sought to use Islamic faith as a popular medium to spread the materialist tenets allegedly underlying modern social life and politics. In other words, for him, reforming Islam was not about removing it from its otherworldly teachings or reducing its normative aspects to the practical requirements of everyday modern life.

Afghani's most developed essay indeed focuses on the materialistic tendency in the reform movement. In a bid to refute a pragmatist reading of Islam, he begins from an anthropological argument quite close to that of Hobbes. Man, he explains, is originally unfair and ignorant, greedy, and ferocious towards his neighbor. Against the unlimited desire of this man, who is, in fact, "a wolf for man,"<sup>25</sup> the state seems at first glance to constitute the only effective means for guaranteeing universal respect for rights, thus preventing injustice among men, and allowing them to live together. Nevertheless, this means is revealing of the state's insufficiency insofar as state authority only applies to the public sphere and overt crimes. How then, the author wonders, are we able to prohibit internal vice or corruption, hidden mischief or transgression? To put it another way: how could the state be shaped in order to remedy such injustice? This is made even more problematic, Afghani argues, insofar as the sovereign or his magistrates are also subject to desires like everyone else.<sup>26</sup>

For Afghani, the only appropriate means that man has to satisfy this need is religion with its two main articles of faith, that is, belief in the Creator Provident and the Last Judgment. These articles of faith enable religion to moderate desires and to prevent both external or public transgressions as well as private ones. As the best guarantors of human rights, these beliefs are thus for Afghani the very conditions of possibility of social life. Through a silent dialogue with Ibn Khaldun, he indeed takes up and modifies the Khaldunian argument according to which religion constitutes an internally coercive authority that, in an ideal case like that of the caliphate, can endorse a coercive state authority. In Ibn Khaldun's view, external state authority, when reinforced by the solidarity (*'asabiyya*) that unifies the ruling group, is conceived as sufficient in itself to sustain social life.<sup>27</sup> In Afghani's view, however, the roles are reversed: when both main articles of faith are combined with a set of creeds or habitus (*malakât*) that is inculcated in individuals by a given religion, then that religion is capable of establishing the foundation of social and civic life. Afghani considers both that the state's contribution comes afterward, and that this contribution should be subordinate to the already existing interaction between a society and *its* religion. By inverting the Khaldunian

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<sup>25</sup> Jamâlodin Assad-âbâdi (Afghani), *Haqiqat-e mazhab-e neycheri va bayân-e bâl-e neycheriyân* [The Truth about Materialism and Materialists' State of Mind], in *Majmueh rasâ'el va maqbâlât* [Works in Persian], edited by Hâdi Khosroshâhi, (Tehran : Kolbeh-ye Shorûq, 1379 [2000]), 25.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 53-7.

<sup>27</sup> See Ibn Khalûn, *Le Livre des Exemples*, 465, 497-8. In Khaldunian terminology, the term *wâzi'* means both internal and external coercive authorities. On this subject, see the French translator's explanations in note 2, *ibid.*, 1330.

thesis, Afghani is even able to make the genesis of the idea of religion the preliminary step in the formation of social order and the condition of any civilization.<sup>28</sup>

It is perhaps surprising, then, that the fundamental creeds that Afghani highlights in this respect do not aim at some rationalist justification of religion, and rather concern the angelic essence of man, his belonging to an elected nation (*umma*), or his eschatological destiny. The point is that, by their very irrational nature, they connect religion to social reason. They make it possible for a believer to seek perfection not beyond social life, but within society and through his attitude as an ideal citizen of the Virtuous City.<sup>29</sup> As Afghani reinterprets them, such creeds ultimately function to combine in everyone the path of progress of one's own nation together with one's own moral progression along the "Straight Path" (*sirât al-mustaqîm*)<sup>30</sup> of justice. The same is true for the *habitus* or character traits by which religion shapes souls. Among these traits, Afghani focuses on modesty, loyalty, and honesty. The great interest of these traits, he claims, resides in the fact that, in relations between individuals, they turn out to be essential to upholding the rights granted to individuals through the contracts that sustain their social life. As far as the state is concerned, these traits warrant its efficient functioning, specifically the dispensation of justice, or the effective use of force.<sup>31</sup>

This approach is what led Afghani to suggest that even the worst religion, as false as it may be, is preferable to materialism, a point on which he is interestingly in agreement with Montesquieu, who preferred idolatry to an absence of religion.<sup>32</sup> For, Afghani argues, insofar as a religion commands creeds and engraves *habitus* in its followers, it contributes in some way to the organization of social life and underlies human transactions or contracts.<sup>33</sup> In an essay on the difference between Islam and Christianity, he went even further by claiming that, because of its exceptional power over souls, religion forms an initial education whose function is to regulate the individual's will or steer it from within. It marks souls with an indelible seal, including even the heretic, who tries to reject all kinds of belief. Indeed, in Afghani's opinion, the more religion comes to be based on solid principles, the more effectively it plays this role within society to the betterment of human spiritual and material progress.

What is hence at stake in the conflict with materialism is civilization itself, understood in its nineteenth-century meaning. In Afghani's opinion, materialism's immediate consequence is disorder in society, and, at the political level, it inevitably ends in a disaster such as the French Revolution. The political regime that ultimately emanates from materialism is communism, which for Afghani amounts to the loss of both the inherent meritocratic hierarchy in society and the division of labor, which he considers to be fundamental to social

<sup>28</sup> Jamâlodin Assad-âbâdi (Afghani), *Haqiqat-e mazhab-e neycheri va bayân-e hâl-e neycheriyân*, 24, 57.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>30</sup> This is a Koranic expression that is central to Islamic belief. In its original use in the Koranic context, the expression conveys an ambivalent signification by referring both to the path of spiritual guidance and to sharia regarded as the way traced by God and towards Him. See Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi (ed.), *Dictionnaire du Coran* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2007), 840-2.

<sup>31</sup> Jamâlodin Assad-âbâdi (Afghani), *Haqiqat-e mazhab-e neycheri va bayân-e hâl-e neycheriyân*, 28-32. In the background of Afghani's developments, we should recognize the Farabian theory of the Virtuous City as well as the Avicenna's psychology. Afghani's way of using the legacy of Islamic philosophy to counter the metaphysical and esoteric orientation of this philosophy is quite an interesting topic and deserving of a separate study.

<sup>32</sup> It is significant that Montesquieu's argumentation also meant to invalidate modern atheism, namely Bayle's. See Montesquieu, *De l'Esprit des lois* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), XXIV, 2-8.

<sup>33</sup> Jamâlodin Assad-âbâdi (Afghani), *Haqiqat-e mazhab-e neycheri va bayân-e hâl-e neycheriyân*, 59.

organization. This explains his open antipathy towards Rousseau and Voltaire, whom he takes for the Revolution's true leaders: in the name of the Enlightenment and the struggle against superstition, he argues, they introduced materialism and thus paved the way for the decline of French civilization, formerly the most illustrious in all Europe.<sup>34</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Afghani tries to demonstrate that Islam of all religions is based on the most solid of principles. The radical notion of monotheism expressed in it, he claims, refuses any pretention to be able to represent God's absolute authority over the world. Islam does not give anyone the right to impose its law on others. In Afghani's Islam, all worldly divine authority is substituted by the authority of sharia, which basically translates fundamental creeds and habitus into a set of laws. Indeed, as some scholars have already noted, it is as if Afghani's reformed Islam sought to put God as far behind as possible in order to fill the vacant place of divinity with the presence of sharia.<sup>35</sup> This re-formed Islam would then be eminently modern in Afghani's eyes insofar as it precisely constitutes a framework for practice, or better put an "archaic morality": a morality imposed on society from an absolute outside (as an archaic authority) in order to maintain it better from within, namely within each of its members.

As such, Afghani's Islam occupies a pole that is diametrically opposed to Christianity. So much so that he saw in the relationship between these two religions and modernity a historical paradox. How, he wondered, could Christianity give rise to modernity even though authentic Islam (the sharia-based one) is the more compatible with modern values? Those responsible for this paradoxical situation are, in Afghani's view, Muslims themselves, who have allowed their religion to degenerate throughout history. As a result of this historical degeneration, Islam has become more Christian than Christianity. The sharp contrast that Afghani tries to stage between "true" Islam and Christianity thus goes hand in hand with his critique of existing or non-reformed Islam. In fact, these are two aspects of the same strategic conflict against the governmental conception of religion. To become a religion *of* modernity, Islam would have to fight against two tendencies, one that threatened it from outside and one from inside. It would have to fight against Christianity as a religion that forms the backdrop to modernity and against the guidance-based and esoteric (*bâtiniyya*) version of Islam.

The damage that both religions have inflicted has involved dissolving creeds and habitus into metaphysical ideas. In esoteric Islam, which is Afghani's main target, this dissolution has a precise mechanism, spiritual exegesis (*ta'wîl*). Through Islam's exegetical approach, Afghani argues, ideas of guidance or spiritual path came to replace the divine system of rights and duties. *Ta'wîl* even transforms God himself into a metaphysical concept — a "name without content" — and, once this is achieved, He can be represented by those who give themselves legitimacy to bind men to each other, or to each's spiritual destiny, beyond their social link. The main trap to be avoided is, therefore, the very privilege which Matthew's Gospel afforded the apostles:

Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound  
in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in  
heaven. (Matthew 18:18, NIV)<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 47-8.

<sup>35</sup> See, for instance, Henri Laurens, *L'Orient arabe, Arabisme et islamisme de 1798 à 1945* (Paris : Armand Colin, 2015), 89.

<sup>36</sup> Afghani, "The Truth about Materialism," 63.

From this point of view, Afghani considers both esoteric Islam and Christianity to be merely kinds of materialism *avant la lettre*. Both deprive man's social life in this world of its supernatural and religious implications.<sup>37</sup> By freeing Christianity from such "anti-religious" dogma, Afghani explains, Luther's Reformation simply followed in the footsteps of the true Islam.

### III. From Exegesis to Critique

To explain the paradox he identified in the historical relationship that Christianity and Islam have with modernity, Afghani and his reformist disciples found a conceptual clue in François Guizot's analysis of modern European history. In Afghani's understanding of the analysis, Europe was able to emancipate itself from the Popes, or the Christianity of the Church, and pave the way to modern civilization only after it had denounced dogmatic imitation in favor of free inquiry. In other words, Guizot reveals the historical process by which the internal rationalization of religion lays the foundations of the social morality that is essential for modern society, politics, and, ultimately, for progress. Indeed, the reformist turn taken in the discourse of Afghani and his followers cannot entirely be grasped without taking into account the crucial influence that the first Arabic translation of Guizot's *History of Civilization in Europe*<sup>38</sup> had on them. Recognizing its revelatory significance for their reformist project, Afghani and Abduh immediately decided to publish a review in the Egyptian newspaper *al-Abrâm*. The review's explicit aim was to invite all Arab elites to read this book, which, according to the authors, points the "path of salvation."<sup>39</sup> In what way was Guizot's historical account enlightening for Islamic reform? A comparative look at his approach and the reformists' strategy brings to light a process of translation whereby reformist discourse could endow itself with a critical conceptual tool: the translation that allowed the transition from free inquiry in its modern sense to *ijtihad* or a hermeneutics of the law.<sup>40</sup> In other words, inspired European thinkers' analysis and first of all by Guizot's, Afghani reactivated an old notion of Islamic tradition precisely against it.<sup>41</sup> By taking on a new meaning, *ijtihad* could be used to discredit imitation (*taqlid*), another Islamic notion that, in two different forms, became the very modality of Islamic faith underlying Sunnism and Shi'ism. A new interpretation of Islamic sources now aimed at establishing the idea that a belief that is not rationally legitimated through individual inquiry is worthless. By practicing *ijtihad*, everyone must derive his own faith from Koranic teaching and base it on Islamic *Bildung*.

In the Islamic context of Afghani's time, stipulating this requirement for individual faith implied stipulating another one. For, as an interpretative approach to the law, according to both Islam's canonic sources and principles of reason, the issue of *ijtihad* was problematic in

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 43-5.

<sup>38</sup> François Guizot, *Histoire de la civilisation en Europe*, présenté par Pierre Rosanvallon (Paris : Hachette, 1985 [1st ed. 1882]).

<sup>39</sup> The review is reprinted in Rachid Rida, *Târîkh al-ustâd al-imâm al-shaykh Muhammad 'Abdû*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Le Caire: Dâr al-fadîla, 2006), 45-8.

<sup>40</sup> For a concise overview of the notion and its evolution in Islamic tradition, see "Idjtiḥād" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, edited by Bearman et al., Brill Reference Online: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912\\_islam\\_COM\\_0351](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0351).

<sup>41</sup> Interestingly, Afghani took the notion of *ijtihad* from his Shi'ite education, while Shi'ite faith, which places guidance and governmental authority at its core, was one of the strategic targets in his recasting of this notion.

Islamic tradition, more specifically in the post-classical period. *Ijtihād* had genuine anarchic and anti-pastoral potential: to deal with this, Sunni jurisprudence tended to practically suspend its implementation, while the Shi'ite ulema (preeminent Islamic doctors of the law) attempted to monopolize it for themselves as a restricted group. Here, the real rupture with pre-modern Muslim scholarship was precisely to go beyond the simple debate among doctors about the possibility or impossibility of *ijtihād* from a purely doctrinal point of view: the rupture initiated by reformist discourse consisted rather, on the one hand, in democratizing the implementation of *ijtihād* and, on the other hand, in drawing immediate social and political consequences from it. In Afghani's reformed Islam, *ijtihād* actually became the duty of everyone. The real rupture was therefore to argue that in a "true Islamic society" there would be no room for imitation (*taqlīd*).<sup>42</sup> *Ijtihād* was thus no longer a technical mechanism within the system of Islamic jurisprudence, it no longer remained limited to the principles of the Islamic faith, but was thought to be the very mechanism by which all ought to discern between good and evil for themselves through reference to the "archaic morality" constituted by Islam and its system of norms. So that this discernment did not reduce to a kind of individual ethics, however, it was necessary to take a further step: reformist discourse produced a short-circuit thanks to a Koranic commandment that one finds notably in the following verses:

You are the best *umma* that ever existed among humanity, *commanding right* (*ma'rūf*: decent) and *forbidding wrong* (*munkar*: indecency), and believing in God ... (Koran 3: 110)

There are among the People of the Book an upstanding *umma* that [...] who believe in God and the Last Day, who *command right and forbid wrong* and race in good works. These are the righteous. (Koran 3: 113-14, emphases added)

It may easily be imagined that, in a sharia-oriented Islam, even ethics would have to conflate an ethical dualism between good and evil with a normative and social dualism between right/wrong or decent/indecent conduct. However, the short-circuit in question lies elsewhere, namely in the articulation between two types of action: on the one hand, discerning, and, on the other, commanding and forbidding. *Commanding right and forbidding wrong*, this commandment, whose meaning has been incessantly interpreted and its conditions of implementation discussed throughout the history of Islamic tradition,<sup>43</sup> takes on an entirely new meaning and function at the heart of a reformed Islam; it becomes the *modus operandi* of the coming Islamic society. From this perspective, at issue was not to found some ethics but instead to provide foundations for universalizing critique. Which is to say that in the ideal society which reformist discourse wished to construct on Islamic grounds, every member would have to command and forbid according to "archaic morality" and, in return, could be subjected to the commanding and forbidding of others. As a result, on may notice, society now becomes both the subject and object of critique.

Accordingly, members' solidarity in such a society or its unity — which is identified with the "unity of the *umma*" stressed by the Koran — depend on the implementation of this

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<sup>42</sup> For a historical study on technical meanings of the notion of *taqlīd* and their evolution, see Wael B. Hallaq, *Authority, Continuity, and Change in Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), Chap. 4.

<sup>43</sup> For a survey on the long history of juridical, theologico-political and also mystical interpretations of this Koranic commandment, see Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

universal critique. In the reformist perspective, the very singularity of Islam would, therefore, consist in its constituting a *religion of critique*, and this precisely because of the new dogmatic value granted to the Koranic commandment of *commanding right and forbidding wrong*. Referring to the abovementioned first verse (Koran 3: 110), Muhammad Abduh pointed out that *commanding-and-forbidding*<sup>44</sup> even precedes belief in God. Hence, he argued, the commandment has exceptional importance, since it ought to be considered as the guardian of Islamic faith and its endorsement. Abduh's conclusion, then, is unsurprising: *commanding-and-forbidding* must be seen to come before and to be more important than all other Islamic commandments or duties.<sup>45</sup> His aim here was to highlight the intrinsic relationship between Islamic morality and social life. Indeed, reformation theorists, including first and foremost Afghani, were not merely trying to show how, in Islam, religious morality could be useful for worldly life. If they stressed the intrinsic nature of the relationship in question, it was because they intended to show that according to "true" Islam, even moral progress depends on one's life within society, and more precisely on the moral critique stemming from this specific mode of human life.

We see how reformist discourse quite methodically achieved to abolish in theory the pastoral paradigm. Somewhat unexpectedly, however, this critique against pastoral government reproduces in a reasonably comparable fashion the heart of the intellectual project of the Enlightenment as, for instance, it is expressed in Kantian thought. In his famous answer to the question, "What is Enlightenment?" Kant presented the phenomenon as a historical conflict between two modes of existence of a subject or, bluntly put, as a paradigm shift: "the human being's emancipation from its self-incurred immaturity"<sup>46</sup> and its entering the age of maturity. Yet, as Kant explains from the outset, this self-incurred immaturity precisely involves a voluntary submission to the guidance of others, while maturity consists in releasing oneself from this guidance by taking the "courage to make use of one's understanding without the guidance of another."<sup>47</sup> Kantian-style Enlightenment by definition sought to put an end to guidance (*Leitung*). But couldn't a paradigmatic analogy be conceived between the latter and the theologico-political guidance (*hidāya*) targeted by the Islamic reformation? The comparison appears even more relevant when we note, thanks to Michel Foucault's analysis of Kant's text, the extent to which the disruption that Kant highlighted as the very core of the Enlightenment project had a governmental paradigm as its target.<sup>48</sup> In fact, the courage Kant evoked in his *Answer* was the courage to get rid of the sort of governmental authority that had ruled over premodern Europe. Critique, by contrast, was supposed to provide the Enlightenment with an epistemological weapon in its anti-governmental struggle.<sup>49</sup>

In a Western context, where the secularized form of pastoral guidance extended to politics and social life through the various types of government as exercised by educator, father, magistrate, etc., critique actually consisted of an intellectual praxis that immediately involved

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<sup>44</sup> In the following, the Koranic commandment of "commanding right and forbidding wrong" is referred to by this abbreviated form.

<sup>45</sup> Cheik Mohammad Abdou, *Rissalat al Tawbid, Exposé de la religion musulmane*, trans. by B. Michel & Moustapha Abdel Razik (Paris : Librairie Paul Geuthner, 1965), 121.

<sup>46</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Toward Perpetual Peace, and Other Writings on Politics, Peace and History* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2006), 17.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. (translation modified)

<sup>48</sup> See Michel Foucault, *Qu'est-ce que la critique*, suivi de *La culture de soi* (Paris : Vrin, 2015), 34 ff.

<sup>49</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the Western paradigm of pastoral government and its Judeo-Christian origins, see Michel Foucault, "'Omnes et singulatim': vers une critique de la raison politique," *Dits et écrits II* (Paris : Gallimard, 2001), 953-997.

the subject in anti-government disobedience: on the one hand, subjects were supposed to adopt critique as a “moral attitude,” insofar as critique aimed to provide these subjects with the foundations of an autonomous and rational morality; on the other hand, its consequences were definitely theologico-political, because it set limits to governmental reach. What is instructive for our discussion is the fact that, in the struggle against governmental authority, critique in Western Enlightenment (following the Lutheran way) and in the Islamic reformation relied on the same scriptural strategy of promoting a literal return to the sacred Book. If everyone was invited to approach the source of truth directly and to bring his own critical judgment to bear on it, this act of so doing would constitute a radical challenge to the exegetical legitimacy that sustained pastoral authority and the governmental guidance it sought to implement: everyone could then oppose to governmental authority the requirement to found one’s own faith and conscience individually and critically.

But here we note the first difference between the two strategies. In the Western case, as Foucault points out, the return to scripture was also a critical one. In other words, the Bible’s very authenticity and truth content became a capital issue for critical inquiry.<sup>50</sup> In Islam, however, the Book kept its status as the absolute truth. Accordingly, reformist discourse in Islam did not seek to extend critique to the Koranic text. Instead, by taking the absolute truth of the Koran for granted, the reformist discourse sought to make it the ultimate reference for a system of absolute morality, for that “archaic morality” with which this discourse aimed to structure the newly founded society, and to guarantee its consistency as well as its autonomy from any governmental power.<sup>51</sup>

Instead of pastoral faith, the dogmatic framework of reformed Islam now put forward a combination of a critical attitude and a sort of Islamic pietism that stressed an almost literalist respect for the Law. This entailed the replacement of individual and spiritual government as the constituent relationship in the premodern Islamic community with the moral responsibility of *omnes et singulatis*. According to its new form, the community would thus unfold in the horizontal space created by this new type of relationship that bound all its members to each other: it would become a “society.” The concomitance between guidance and government here no longer gives the community an always-already political essence: as conceived in the reformist discourse, the Islamic community/society has first and foremost a moral essence.

From this new perspective, the reformist reading could draw a new meaning from the whole Islamic tradition. A significant instance of such a shift can be seen in the reinterpretation of a hadith in which Mohammed affirms that Muslims are all shepherds and responsible for each other, a hadith that was constantly referred to in premodern theologico-

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<sup>50</sup> Michel Foucault, *Qu’est-ce que la critique*, 38.

<sup>51</sup> Based on the case of contemporary Wahabism in Saudi context, Talal Asad has confronted this critique, which focuses on the literalist approach to the sacred corpus, with the Kantian critique. See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion, Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 210 ff. However, the anhistorical and rather ethnological observation of the specific case of Saudi Arabia does not obviously allow Asad to take into account two main aspects of the phenomenon: first, the fact that such a critical use of corpus is not innate to the Islamic tradition, but is a historical construction and profoundly due to the encounter of this tradition with modernity. Secondly, Asad fails to see, beyond the Saudi case, the initial aim of this return to the sacred corpus by Muslim reformers, that is, the idea of a democratized and universalized critique within the community and against political power. I will come back to both points later.



political discussions — in Sunni as much in Shi'ite contexts — as being in support of the Islamic notion of pastoral government<sup>52</sup>. 'Abd al-Rahmān Kawākibī (1855-1902), another leading figure among reformists, reveals the “true” meaning of this hadith in a book that has been a source of inspiration for the Islamic reform movement, *The Nature of Despotism and the Struggle Against Subjugation*. The real meaning of the hadith, he suggested, can only be understood when it is associated with the universal duty to *commanding-and-forbidding*. Kawākibī's argument sought to conclude that this shepherdhood, performed through advice and blame, and this responsibility, which is fundamentally moral, are not directly constitutive of a political or theological community, but aim above all to protect the social order.<sup>53</sup>

Once again, both Enlightenment projects exhibit comparative processes that put the relationship of the absolutist state with society in crisis, insofar as this society's autonomy now comes from its moral essence. As Reinhart Koselleck points out, for the European Enlightenment, this crisis stems from the new status conferred on morality. In fact, if this morality was able to refound society independently of political power, it is because it was defined as fundamentally supra-political. And yet precisely because of its supra-political status, this morality could gain leverage over politics and legitimately act on it. In other words, the political force that it contained resulted from the fact that any kind of political authority now had to subordinate itself to its control. Moral values, therefore, became a political weapon in the hands of the nascent social elite:

Armed with its postulates, the new elite entered the arena of political dispute with the existing State. In doing so, it did not relinquish the moral position that gave support to its inner superiority and innocence. On the contrary, it broadened it. The critical disjunction between the realm of natural goodness and a polity which this division had turned into a realm of sheer power became intensified. It now served to ensure the innocence of the attack.<sup>54</sup>

The political crisis was thus a crisis whose political nature was mediated and overlaid by morality.<sup>55</sup> It is indeed in the same sense that, through the reciprocal practice of *commanding-and-forbidding*, the moral critique of Islamist reformers was expected to give society a supra-political consistency and simultaneously allow it some leverage in the political arena. To the extent that this critique relied on the unlimited power of Islamic morality, no power had the legitimacy to limit it. Kawākibī's argument here is straightforward:

Forbidding wrong is the responsibility of whoever is sincerely committed to the organization of his community. Everyone can criticize both the weak and the strong, not only targeting wounded poor but also stubborn powerful. He endeavors to intervene relentlessly for reducing oppression and challenging

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<sup>52</sup> The hadith is mentioned with some variations in both Sunni and Shi'ite hadith canon. According to its most common variant, the Prophet said: “Each of you is a shepherd and is responsible for his flock. The leader of people is a shepherd and is responsible for his subjects. A man is the shepherd of his household and he is responsible for its members. A woman is the shepherd of her husband's home and his children and she is responsible for them. The servant of a man is a shepherd of the property of his master and he is responsible for it. No doubt, every one of you is a shepherd and is responsible for his flock.” (<https://abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2011/07/03/shepherd-his-or-her-flock>)

<sup>53</sup> 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Kawākibī, *Du despotisme et autres textes*, trans. Hala Kodmani (Arles: Actes Sud, 2016), 100, 163.

<sup>54</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis, Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modernity* (Oxford: Berg Publishers Ltd, 1988), 170.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

the rulers. This would be the truly useful “negative advice” (*al-nash al-inkârî*) that the Prophet identified with religion when he said: “Religion is advice.”

It is therefore unsurprising that, according to Kawâkibî, the public sphere or freedom of expression as conceived by the Moderns represents the very condition for the implementation of Islamic morality. Here we see more clearly how this morality could end up becoming a supra-political force. Once this force is activated by critics, which is to say all members of Islamic society, these critics alone confer legitimacy on the political power exerted over their society. But if morality gives legitimacy to political power, it is to the precise extent that it constrains and conditions it. In fact, the universal practice of *commanding-and-forbidding* opens up a public sphere through which Islamic morality is transformed into a hegemonic political force. However, the point to note here is how the roles are reversed through the process of reform: at the outset, according to the reformists, both political and social reform required a religious reformation; in return, the thus-reformed religion would inevitably entail political reform.

We can better grasp how the alleged conflict between this conception of a reformed and consequently politicized Islam and the European Enlightenment is not really a conflict but rather a “divergent agreement” between two Enlightenment projects. A source of their divergence may perhaps be sought in the specific historical contexts in which each project was embedded. In the European context, the Enlightenment was concomitant with the genesis of the bourgeoisie and the capitalist transformation of the mode of production. As Jürgen Habermas has shown, it is the hegemonic domination of the idea of free trade and the autonomization of the status of private owners vis-à-vis absolutist political power that entailed the formation of a public sphere as a self-regulating space for the confrontation of opinions and the shaping of social consensus: two mechanisms by which social morality as a system of laws inherent to civil society could emanate from the latter.<sup>56</sup> Between such morality and the extra-moral interest of each individual owner, public opinion played the role of a catalyst, in the sense that it served to transform the interests, conflicting by definition, of individual proprietors into a common good for all members of bourgeois society.<sup>57</sup> The basis of this social morality was, therefore, not religion, but the regime of exchange and capital accumulation that was imposed on all proprietors, regardless of the quantitative differences of their holdings.

When Kant made the freedom of using reason publicly the Enlightenment’s sole condition, he took for granted the autonomy of subjects who reasoned in this way. Yet, such autonomy actually stemmed from their status as proprietors in the sphere of commodity exchange, conceived by way of contrast with the public sphere. The subjects that Kant admitted into critical public debate were thus only ever interested proprietors. This meant that the legal equality of those who participated in public debate depended on their having a private status conferred by the market of commodity exchange, which Enlightenment thinkers regarded as the “natural order” in the private sphere of human social life.

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<sup>56</sup> See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989), 74.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 79.

The fiction of a justice immanent in free commerce was what rendered plausible the conflation of *bourgeois* and *homme*, of self-interested, property-owning private people and autonomous individuals per se.<sup>58</sup>

In effect, the ideology of the nascent bourgeoisie, in its struggle against the absolutist state, disguised itself as society's morality precisely in a bid to restrict and limit state power.<sup>59</sup> In the Oriental context, where the bourgeois condition was absent, social morality instead relied on the absolute value of religion and on universal justice, which Islam specifically promised to believers, to achieve the same objective as was pursued by the Western Enlightenment: in both social morality aimed to impose itself on political power.

In the European Enlightenment, critique ultimately committed the political authorities to show respect for the "eternal laws of reason," which society was in the process of discovering, by means of parliament and the Constitution. In the modern Muslim society of our reformers, this authority would be compelled to submit to the divine Law as interpreted by the community through the *Ijtihād*. Concerning the forms of this submission, the Islamic reformists once again proceeded by translating: they had no difficulty in using traditional Islamic mechanisms, including those of consultation (*mashwara*), advice (*nasiba*) and interpretative consensus (*ijmā'*), to incorporate ideas of parliament or democratic procedure into Islamic discourse. As we see in the very first attempts at reform within the Ottoman Empire, Turkish and Arab thinkers drew on a Koranic passage (Sura III) to insist on the religious status of political consultation: one in which God orders his Prophet to consult his people "on every matter" (verse 159).

#### IV. From Modernity to Islam

Among the Turks, the systematic reference to the same Koranic verse and to the notion of *mashwara* clearly began with Namik Kemal (1840-1888), a leading figure of Ottoman reform who was himself the translator of *The Spirit of Laws*.<sup>60</sup> In 1895, an identification of the idea of consultation with the idea of parliament was obviously complete when the Young Turks named their official journal *Meşveret* (= *mashwara*)<sup>61</sup>. The title of the newspaper was accompanied by a motto: *intizam ve terakki* (order and progress). In fact, taken together, the title and the motto summed up the reformist trajectory that we have been investigating. The motto was suggested by Ahmed Rıza (1859-1930), a young Turk who was a disciple of Pierre Laffitte and deeply marked by Comtian positivism. It was by following this hybrid path between Islamic and modern political thought that the Young Turks sought to challenge Ottoman monarchical power under the banner of Union and Progress—yet another clear reference to Auguste Comte and his positive politics. When after the Young Turk Revolution, the Ottoman Sultan made his inaugural speech to Parliament in 1909, he consequently began by recalling that "the form of parliamentary government is prescribed by sharia."<sup>62</sup>

Should we regard as insignificant those signatures of the reformist discourse which explicitly referred to key words taken from social theories that preoccupied European thinkers during the nineteenth century, or references to the founders of these theories that, like an

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>59</sup> See Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis, Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modernity*, 171.

<sup>60</sup> See Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 142.

<sup>61</sup> For a global overview on the relationship of Young Turks with the legacy of the Islamic tradition, see Şerif Mardin, *The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought. A Study in the Modernization of Turkish Political Ideas* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), Chap. 3.

<sup>62</sup> Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, 145, 198 ff.

iceberg, emerge at the decisive turning points of this discourse? All of this leads us to postulate another conflict of interpretations, which I see as fundamental to grasping the dynamics of reformed Islam from an internal point of view. In contemporary research, the literalist legalism that resulted from the project of reforming, or returning to, Islam is predominantly considered a reactionary rejection not only of modern rationality but first and foremost of the heritage of metaphysical thought in Islam. Yet, we saw how the normative literalization of Islam was initially part of a project whose motivation and purpose run exactly counter to any such hypothesis. For this reason, I put forward the opposite thesis: that the literalist and sharia-based Islam issuing from reformist discourse should be considered first of all as the outcome of the encounter between the tradition of Islamic thought and the modern social sciences.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, if one looks at the constitutive corpus of the reformist discourse, it can be noted that, whether explicitly stated or not, it dominantly developed through the dialogue that the leading figures of the reform movement engaged with the ongoing debates in the social sciences in Europe.

If it is true that the return to Islam was correlated with a desire for modernity among Oriental reformers, it must be noted that their project of religious reformation was inspired foremost by the internal critique of modernity undertaken by modern European thought. The Islam of these reformers was accordingly supposed to fill the void in social and political organization that was of such concern to the critical consciousness of modern European thinkers. In other words, our reformers conceived *their* reformed Islam as the ideal religion to fill the lack that nineteenth-century critical consciousness, especially in its French version, continually deplored: a civil religion *for* modernity. The strong but discreet presence of Auguste Comte in reformist discourse is particularly revealing in this respect. All the above-identified characteristics of reformist discourse could be reconsidered in the light of Comte's positive sociology and his "religion of Humanity," that is, the religious system by which he sought to complement and overcome the project of modernity.

The possibility of such a convergence between the Comtian program and Islamic reformation was not something Comte himself was unaware of. He even went so far as to envisage their theoretical fusion. In 1853, he wrote a letter to Rechid Pasha<sup>64</sup>, the former Ottoman Grand Wazir, arguing that with the invention of his positive religion, this truly universal religion, the time had finally arrived to put an end to the historical divergence between Orient and West. A reunification of both worlds had become singularly possible. For not only had, Comte explained in his letter, the political situation under the Ottoman Empire made its people more able to embrace the new religion, but his positive religion accomplished the religious reformation that had already been begun by the Prophet of Islam. Comte continued that Muhammad saw the theological problem holding Christianity back, that he had understood the moral and intellectual advantages of distinguishing between

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<sup>63</sup> As we can see, in both its intellectual roots and its objectives, this reformist project was fundamentally different from the Wahabbi literalism that started to impose itself at the same period with the establishment of the Saudi State. The conflation of the two projects is itself the result of a historical process that occurred afterward. For this conflation process, see Henri Lauzière, "The Construction of *Salafīyya*: Reconsidering Salafism From the Perspective of Conceptual History," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42/ 3 (August 2010): 369-389.

<sup>64</sup> The correspondence is published by Comte in the Preface of his *Système de politique positive, ou Traité de sociologie*, vol. 3 (Osnabrück: Otto Zeller, 1967 [reprint of the 1851-1881 edition]).

spiritual and temporal powers.<sup>65</sup> Yet, insisting on the understanding of this distinction had a clear meaning in Comtian jargon: it indicated from the outset the superiority of Islam over the sociological materialism that dominated the ideology of modernity and that Comte accused of ignoring the complementarity of these two powers regarding the social organization.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, Comte argued, precisely because of “his eminently social genius,” Muhammad was aware that a positive religion would be out of step with a civilization that had much historical progress to accomplish before it could emancipate itself from its theological roots. Between monotheistic theology and positive religion, Islam thus marked, according to Comte, an intermediate step, a theologism turned towards reality and concerned with practice.

Comte explained to Rechid Pasha that Muhammad’s reformation had nonetheless to pay a historical price: precisely because of its relatively advanced character, Islam would later form an obstacle to the revolutionary break with theologism in the Orient. Instead, it was the West that, challenging its Catholic determination, forged ahead towards social revolution. The human emancipation and civilizational progress stemming from this revolution prepared in return the emergence of positive religion, that is, the religion of Humanity. Despite this Western background, however, Oriental people continued to be more disposed than those in the West to adopt the ultimate positive faith, and this precisely because of Islam.<sup>67</sup> In Comte’s view, Christianity, already too theological, had lost its religious function when it donned a metaphysical state and underwent the Reformation. If Islam, by contrast, remained genetically close to positive religion, it was essentially because it somehow fulfilled the two fundamental functions of religion according to Comte’s positive approach: Islam is singularly able to regulate each personal constitution taken separately, and, at the same time, it possesses the means to rally together diverse persons. Albeit imperfectly, as Comte would say, Islam provides its believers with a kind of harmony in individual as well as in collective existence.<sup>68</sup>

It is not difficult to understand how the reinvented Islam of our reformers was a response to the Comtian call. For only a religion based on the Law, which is to say a religion able to constitute an archaic moral system, could aptly fill the vacant place of religion that Comte had identified in modern society and politics. In fact, what modernity lacked in Comte’s opinion was not internal regulation or external rallying, but a particular way of combining them. By operating these two functions separately, Comte said, a pathological divide is introduced into modernity between inside and outside, between private and public, and, ultimately, a fatal division separating society from politics. By combining both functions, the religion he sought for was thus to cross all these divisions by subsuming them.

Is this Comtian challenge really different from the one that we saw lay at the heart of the Muslim reformers’ enterprise: namely, to ensure, by means of a religious system, that an order coming from outside affirms itself from within as a subjective rule; and that, in return, actions that externally translate this affirmation operate as if the agent was already and objectively participating in this external order.<sup>69</sup> In other words, the idea was to establish a socio-

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., XLVIII.

<sup>66</sup> See Auguste Comte, *Discours sur l'ensemble du positivisme* (Paris : GF Flammarion, 1998), 92. As far as the reasons for this superiority are concerned, we saw how Afghani’s argument took the same direction.

<sup>67</sup> Auguste Comte, *Système de politique positive*.

<sup>68</sup> See Auguste Comte, *Système de politique positive*, vol. 2, 8-9.

<sup>69</sup> On this aspect of Comte’s social thought, see Bruno Karsenti, *Politique de l'esprit, Auguste Comte et la naissance de la science sociale* (Paris : Hermann, 2006), 166-7.

psychological mechanism by which outside and inside extend the same order as in a Möbius strip. Only through the two operations of regulating and rallying would political power become indiscernible from social morality and individual ethics.

In his correspondence, Comte suggested the possibility of a direct transition “without the mediation of metaphysics, from Islam to positivism.” By those means, Muslims could, he thought, accomplish a “worthy plan already sketched by their great prophet, whose worship of Humanity irrevocably systematized the universal glorification.”<sup>70</sup> Comte argued that “deist degeneration,” of Protestant provenance, has no chance of occurring within Islamic belief, so one could be sure that the harmful political dialectic between “revolutionary corruption” and its antithesis, the modern form of state, would never occur in the Oriental context. As soon as the “religion of Humanity” was *identified with* Islam, it would no longer even be any need for concentrated political power. The message Comte thus sent to the Ottoman reformers<sup>71</sup> was that such a reformed Islam would even render obsolete any form of state conceived separately from society. On the condition of replacing God by Humanity, he concluded, Islam alone would guarantee the ultimate political aim, which is “to provide and consolidate the uniformity of opinions and customs.”<sup>72</sup>

## V. Conclusion: a Conflict of Translations?

Yet, despite the Comtian dream concerning the abolition of state by reformed Islam, the reformist discourse chose a different path by concentrating, in its next phase, on the idea of the caliphate. From reformed Islam as “the religion of modernity,” the second generation of Muslim reformists tried to derive a new idea of the Islamic state, that is, of a completely reshaped caliphate. Again, their challenge continued to be modern, the aim being to conceive of a form of sovereignty that emanates from the social system itself. Here the religious structure of Islam came to mediate between the social system and the caliphate apparatus. Thanks to the idea of the caliphate as a theologico-political sovereignty, an Islamic state became thinkable whose unity no longer depended on ethnic or territorial unity. For, in its new form, it was thought of as a sovereign body that encapsulated and intensified society’s unity in its full scope, namely wherever Islam *faisait loi*. A separate study would be needed to show how the project of rebuilding the caliphate reactivated the doctrinal split between Sunnism and Shi’ism, especially as this split was originally based on two different Islamic

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<sup>70</sup> Auguste Comte, *Système de politique positive*, vol. 3, XLIX.

<sup>71</sup> It is worth noting that, even beyond the case of the Young Turks, most of these reformers were Comte’s either students or indirectly among his disciples. For a short survey on enthusiastic reception of positivism during the last decades of Ottoman rule, see Enes Kabakci, “Entre l’universel et le national: les usages du positivisme dans l’Empire ottoman (1895-1923),” in *Turcs et Français, Une histoire culturelle 1860-1960*, ed. Güneş İşiksel and Emmanuel Szurek, (Rennes : Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014), 99-114. The same is true concerning the spread of Saint-Simonianism and Comtism in Egypt during the same period. To retrace the history of this dual influence, one should go back to the first scholars sent to France by Muhammad Ali. On this topic, see Philippe Régner, *Les Saint-Simoniens en Égypte (1833-1851)* (Le Caire : B. U. E., 1989), 118. In a more specific case, Albert Hourani notes a clear trace of Comtian ideas in Abduh’s conception of Oriental-Islamic modernity as a dialectical process of continuity and break regarding Islamic intellectual tradition: a modernity that is also critical about the modern excess of rationality and its metaphysical approach. See Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939*. 138 ff.

<sup>72</sup> Auguste Comte, *Système de politique positive*, vol. 3

conceptions of theologico-political authority. But the point most relevant to our discussion here is that by mobilizing the theological means specific to each of the two religious trends, Sunni and Shi'ite thinkers of the Islamic reformation ultimately followed the same goal: they attempted to rethink the caliphate as a constitutional monarchy, that ideal state of the nineteenth century. Because for them, the latter was the most befitting state form for a monotheistic *Weltanschauung*.<sup>73</sup>

The regeneration of Islam's political thought in the contemporary world thus continued until its logical completion, that is, until the idea of the caliphate state was reactivated, through a process of translation. From this perspective, the conflict that subsequently erupted between this theologico-politically reinvented Islam, and the moral or political values of Western modernity maybe reveals its real nature. For if we accept that Western modernity itself is a translation of the idea of Enlightenment under bourgeois conditions and within the power relations that were taking shape in European societies at the time, we must therefore acknowledge that the conflict between Islamic reformation and the modern West is essentially a conflict between two strategies by which to translate the idea of Enlightenment: it is a conflict of translations. A key question nonetheless remains: namely, whether the interpretative path taken in Oriental, Islamic lands was due to the social, economic and historical conditions that dominated this area and to the historical choices made by the first generations of Oriental reformers; or whether what was in fact determining was the very theologico-political structure of Islam. My answer would be: it was rather both.

Beyond the conflict of translations, however, what could be more instructive is to seek to understand how it was primarily the encounter between Islam and modernity that rendered critical internal conflicts within each of the two discourses: in Islam, as we saw, the encounter raised the conflict between pastoral guidance and a monarchical conception of theology associated with a new idea of normativity and divine legislation. In the discourse of modernity, the same encounter indeed cast a new light on the conflict between modern political rationality and its dialectical need for a civil religion that it tries to repress.

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<sup>73</sup> I have discussed this parallel rethinking of the caliphate in Anoush Ganjipour, "La pensée politique islamique et l'idée d'État moderne," *Archives de philosophie* 83/2(2020, forthcoming).

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