

The Perspective of Muhammad Abdoh about Religion and Wisdom

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Abstract

Mufti M. Abdoh is a well-known and respected name in the history of Islamic studies. He belonged to one of the ancient lands, Egypt. He was brought up in the community that followed Maalki (school of thought). He, through his books and essays in magazines and periodicals, strived to reveal the limitations of imitation and the fruitfulness of freedom of thought. He says that true spirit of Islam sprouts from the thinking that is beyond the restrictions of imitation. He declares that many of actions, deeds and rituals that we perform are a result of imitation and they can be proved vile if we have a deep look on their origin. He states that the real Islamic values have been abandoned, and so called Islam is in practice which is not only against Islamic spirit but also a crime against Islam. He is also of the opinion that ijtehad, should be utilized for the solution of modern day problems. For ijtehad he recommends the services of parliament consisting of members not only religious scholars but also representatives of all school of thoughts, specialists and experts. Regarding Ijtehad, he opines that it is the 3rd source of guidance for humanity after Holy Quran and Sunnah. The extent to what we follow these two in our lives matters, and what others say or do should not be focused upon. The real success on the doom's day depends upon the obedience (submission) to God and Prophet's teachings but they should not be taken only for granted, rather they should be adopted in the light of wisdom and consideration and much deliberation. Imitation without thinking should be abandoned at once to revive the true spirit of Islam.

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There comes a time in the history of religions when the principles, on which the religion was founded, are rejected, and the history occupies that place. The end result of this is the total chaos and

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decline of people because of the absence of true religion. At present (currently) same is the case with the Muslims, if looked deeply. The golden principles revealed by God to the Holy Prophet (PBUH) that came to us through the Holy Prophet (PBUH) have been put aside, and there is a dispute amongst us regarding.

“So and so reported, so and so said.” As we see that the enlightened section of our society (the mass of people with awareness) is against this blind obedience. Similarly, many famous scholars of 19th century protested against this dispute of reporting. Egyptian scholars also supported this movement raised by the scholars of Subcontinent. So, a group of reformers started a war (Jihad) against the overwhelming stagnation of the Muslims there. There came a wave of commotion (excitement) in the stagnant Egyptian society and the enlightened section of society was forced to think about the future of Islam as well as their own progress and wellbeing.

The name of Mufti Muhammad Abdoh is at the top of the list who revived the Egyptian thinking. At that time, his mighty personality that old ideas realized utilize his foresight (theories/beliefs) are face to face with new ones. Therefore, he will have to take a position (a way of thinking) which does not harm the basic teachings of the Holy Quran and Sunnah, which we can see in his writing. He desired to change this extremism without making any claims like any reformer. So, he thought it appropriate to take up the role of an instructor so that the individuals trained by him may help him in extension of his movement. He made his life an origin of guidance, enlightenment and reformation through his pen and invitation call towards enlightenment and helped Muslim community to realize and be aware about the teachings of Islam to have a better understanding of Islam before submission. He had discovered through many falsely based customs that in his era to make Islam according to the real spirit of Islam, he would have to be wise and skilful (cautious). Mufti M. Abdoh was not in favour of disagreement between Islamic teachings and Western knowledge. According to him, if Islamic teachings and knowledge are significant, on the other hand, Western knowledge is also not devoid of significance. That's why he completed his Ph.D in French language during the last decade of his life. Having gained command over French literature and philosophy, he used to think that for virtue some material changes are prerequisite (necessary). When he admitted that the material progress of West is very influential, he also acknowledged that Western secularism would be very destructive. That's why he had discovered that the Egypt

following the secularism is causing a disturbance in the people of Egypt, so he made the awakening of Egyptians against this disturbance as the purpose (motive / objective) of his life. He wished that being Muslims they should understand and realize their duties, and their religion is not a cause of their decline (backwardness) rather Islam aims at social development and progress. Islam is the force that is matchless, as far as the solutions of worldly problems are concerned. We need to bring about changes in the light of teachings of Islam with a firm faith. We need to reform ourselves; rather we should not favour to adopt an unfamiliar system in our lives.

The focus of M. Abdoh was not that we should accept or adopt modern world even after being a Muslim. The focus was whether Islam understands the demands of modern world? Keeping this in mind, he had the task to prove that Islam is the only real religion which serves the demands and needs of life of all times. He laid great stress on the idea that only Islam can transform the evils of this time into purity by eradicating the existing evils.

Although Mufti M. Abdoh got his education according to traditional teaching methods yet his extraordinary capabilities forced him to highlight (point out) the drawbacks (shortcomings) of traditional scholars and this mode of teaching. Having entered into practical life he realized that unfortunately, the impurities, against which Islam raised a question mark and a sort of protest, have been considered the true Islam. So, he writes in his magazine 'Al-Tauheed' explaining this situation:

*"The troops of ancestral imitation and following (submission), which were becoming dominant over humanity, were defeated by a severe attack of Islam and eradicated (uprooted) the principles of imitation that had become deep rooted in thinking and behaviours. Islam made people to rise (wake up) from slumber by rising the status of wisdom and declared loudly that humans are not created to be dragged or driven like animals (camels). It is embedded in him (human) or it is innate to acquire guidance through knowledge and learning, and strive to discover the causes and logics of incidents and events."*¹

According to M. Abdoh, Islam is a religion of Nature and is according to nature. No clause in its commands is beyond the access of human wisdom and reasoning. The Holy Quran lays great stress to use one's senses and wisdom. The Holy Quran commands us to have a careful observation of the creation, think (ponder) about it and discover truths. It forbids (prohibits) us to copy (follow) those who followed their ancestors blindly and

consequently their faiths and beliefs ended in darkness and they themselves became extinct (lost their existence) as an Ummah.²

M. Abdoh fought against this situation since the age when he was a student. He says, "I raised a voice of protest to make the wisdom and reasoning free from the restraints of imitation (submission).³ He writes while explaining the verse 242 Surah 2: "Where are those who imitate or follow the instruction of Holy Quran?"⁴

The Holy Quran awakens our reasoning, wisdom, invites us for deep consideration and pondering, and prohibits us to follow (imitate) blindly. But the imitators command us to be totally submissive (surrender ourselves) to those who are very much like them. They compel us to be deaf and dumb. If anyone of us intends to seek guidance from the Holy Quran and tries to follow the Holy Sunnah, they (the imitators) keep an eye on him. Even this man is not spare of the decree of non-believer or blasphemy. They have a false belief that through this sort of approach they are doing a great service and favour to the religion. They are guarding the religion. But these things have devastated and undermined Islam. If we keep following these imitation practices, none would be able to maintain his belief in Islam. We are observing that people are drifting away silently. If we return towards light of wisdom, reasoning and deliberation about which there are indications in the verses of Holy Quran, we may hope to revive religion. The religion acquired through this light of Holy Quran, wisdom and deliberation will be the origin (starting point) of all forces and nations.⁵

Islam, in this way, has freed the ruling wisdom from all restraints and imitation which had made it a subordinate (slave). Islam empowered wisdom to rule the Islamic Kingdom and in which it may take decisions using its logical and political insight, where it may follow according to the will of God only and be aware of the Laws of Almighty.⁶

The claimant of imitation was not spare of the criticism from Sheikh Abdoh. He said that the ailment of imitation is deep rooted in the heart of many who are regarded as special people. They establish a belief (faith) in something and then demand for the arguments. They also consider that the given argument must be in accordance with their established faith. If any contrary argument is put forward, they are inclined towards disagreement and further show resistance even if it leads to the refusal of wisdom and reason. Majority of these establish a faith first, and later they argue for it. Very few are those who argue for the faith first and establish a belief later.⁷

In his book of Quranic Exegesis, he has often criticized imitation, imitators and the preachers of imitation. He took the support of every verse of Holy Quran which favours (endorses) the freedom of reasoning and wisdom. Along with this objective, he does not miss the chance to criticize those who oppose the freedom of thought. Many examples can be quoted. Have a deep and careful look on the following explanation of verse 171 Ch. 2:

*“The parable of those who reject faith is As if one were to shout like a goat-herd, to things that listen to nothing but calls and cries: Deaf, dumb, and blind. They are void of wisdom.”*⁸

He explains this verse in the following way:

*“It is loud and clear announcement in the verse that imitation without deliberation is the practice of non-believers. A human becomes a believer only when he has a clear understanding of his faith (religion) and recognizes his innerself. If anyone acknowledges any idea without giving it deep thinking and acts (performs deeds) with just imitation, he can't be a believer even he is pious. The objective of faith and religion is not to make a human submissive to acts of virtue like an animal. Rather the object of it is the evolution of soul (innerself) using knowledge and discernment and perform the deeds of welfare and virtue. Because now he has the realization that well being of others is the most profitable. Now, he shuns the vices after being aware of the end result. He establishes a faith by judging it in the light of reasoning and wisdom. He does not adopt this faith only because his ancestors had the same faith. Therefore, Almighty Allah has described the characteristic (demerit) of non-believers that they are deaf. They do not listen to the words of truth with the ears of understanding and deliberation. They are dumb as they do not speak through knowledge. They are blind as do not have an eye on the signs of Almighty and not on themselves. They are void of reason and wisdom.”*⁹

The above mentioned statement is endorsed by his saying that he said at the end of his speech while addressing the scholars in Tunis.

“It is my own thinking. I don't want that the audience (listeners) of it accept it as it is. If anyone accepts it only because it is uttered by me, I would oppose him. Moreover, I don't think that any one of my audience is such that he accepts and acknowledges it on my demand. It is a suggestion, an advice that I am putting forward. If the listener regards it as true, he may

accept it, otherwise he is not bound to obey and he must not have any fear."¹⁰

M. Abdoh was a naturalist. His logical point of view, as mentioned above, is that actions must be taken for the propagation of all branches of knowledge among Muslims because he acknowledged that when reasoning and wisdom will be utilized for the study of natural phenomena and the signs of nature, on one hand it is helpful in access of discernment which has many religious benefits and, on the other hand it reveals the hidden mysteries of nature. That's why he says:

*"The deliberation and careful thinking about the phenomena of nature certainly grants religious benefits. There brightens a light inside the human soul regarding the enlightenment about Almighty and there showers the light of wonders, brilliance and manifestation upon him."*¹¹

He grounds his idea on the basis of Surah 2 Verse (29): "It is He who hath created for you all things on earth";¹² He, in his books and his scriptures, has often given an indication towards this particular verse. Some of this has been taken into account in above lines. He, while discussing the purpose of Prophet Muhammad's Prophet-hood, declares:

*"The purpose of Prophet-hood of Muhammad (S.A.W) is to call people so that they may discover that Allah has made all the worlds accessible for humanity and he has made them responsible for understanding of the universe and they can utilize these sources for their well being. The only condition for this is to follow moderation and the principles of justice."*¹³

Further he says that the Holy Quran invites people to have the same approach about universe and the creatures. It means Islam considers wisdom and reasoning as free and unchecked so that it may smooth the way to access several worlds. The Holy Quran does not put wisdom under restrictions. It invites humanity to have a careful and deep look in majority of its verses. If one demands to counts all such verses, I can put forward more than one third or even more than half of the Holy Book.¹⁴

Since Quran tempts to study and teach the natural phenomena and signs of nature in the whole universe, and there are no limits and boundaries for this. That's why it is essential that religion and science are in harmony and Sheikh M. Abdoh proves this objective in the following way:

“Religion is the scale of human wisdom which has been set by Almighty, so that it may reform the deficiencies as well as the increments. In this regard, religion is considered as the companion of knowledge and wisdom. It motivates for curiosity and fruitful discussion to discover hidden truths of the universe. It invites to regard the proved facts. It demands for the improvement of deed and the manners of soul through all these mentioned skills.”¹⁵

He says on another occasion:

“Allah has promised to bestow (reveal) his whole unit of light ... until He fulfills His promise, and until the religion gets a commanding control over knowledge and wisdom, and until both (the religion and the wisdom) join hands to lay foundations and strengthening of wisdom and intuition, the world and its business cannot come to an end.”¹⁶

Sheikh M. Abdoh gave high regards to knowledge and wisdom. Even through his scriptures and essays he motivates the Muslims to seek knowledge, even those branches of knowledge where Western nations have earned great fame so that the Muslims may have a reasonable speed in the race of knowledge and they may make a parallel way to progress. He says in one of his articles which he got published in *Jareedah-ul-Ahram* in his early period:

“The root cause of the progress, the power and wealth of Western nations is that evolution which they have made in knowledge and wisdom. Therefore, our basic and very first duty is to go greatest lengths to promote knowledge and learning in our countries.”¹⁷

Furthermore, he thinks that there are no hopes of the success of the Muslims as long as their comradeship with other nations is concerned, unless they raise their moral standards, they purify their hearts, they elevate their soul by attending to what is real Islam. For example, he says:

“The Muslims will excel Western nations in acquisition of knowledge and learning, and will equalize in culture and civilization, the moment when their ethical and moral values will sparkle with the religion (Islam).”¹⁸

The hints often have been made in the Holy Quran regarding the natural phenomena and the vestiges of the universe. While explaining these hints Sheikh M. Abdoh found a golden chance to declare the study of physical branches of knowledge as necessary. He criticizes those persons, in the explanation account of verse

159, Surah 2, who, in the name of religion, oppose the branch of knowledge known as (Ilm-ul-Kon) The Knowledge of Universe. Then he explains how the study and observation of the vestiges of the universe makes our access to God easy and possible. He further says:

“You have two books in view. One is the book of creatures that is the universe, and the second is the book of destination that is the Holy Quran. The Holy Quran guides our thinking and mental strength towards the way of knowledge and wisdom through the book of nature. The follower will succeed while the one who avoids will incur loss.”¹⁹

While discussing the physical branches of knowledge he motivates to acquire proficiency in various skills, so that the Muslims may be prepared and ready for their defence in case of war. He suggests to focus on verse 60-66 in Surah. 8:

“If thou fearest treachery from any group, throw back (their covenant) to them, (so as to be) on equal terms. For Allah loveth not the treacherous. Let not the unbelievers think that they have escaped, they will never frustrate (them). Against them make ready your strength to the utmost of your power, including steeds of war, to strike terror into (the hearts of) the enemies, of Allah and your enemies, And others besides, whom ye may not know, but whom Allah doth know. Whatever ye shall spend in the cause of Allah, shall be repaid unto you, and ye shall not be treated unjustly.”²⁰

Sh. M. Abdoh derives a command from above mentioned verse and that is: the war against non-believers must be with the same kind of weapons and sources what they use in war against the Muslims. He says:

“In this age, the encounter against non-believers is essential with guns, canons, ships, fighter jets and other such kind of warfare items and weapons. It all depends on the skill and expertness in mathematical and physical branches of knowledge. In modern age, they are obligatory for Muslims. Because the accomplishment of military competency cannot be achieved without these branches of knowledge.”²¹

M. Abdoh gave great importance to the role of wisdom in understanding of religion. In his book *Al-Islam and Christianity*, which he wrote in the defence of Islam and to confute Honotaux, from the very beginning to the very end he has tried to prove that Islam lays great stress on using wisdom for clear and wider comprehension and understanding. No Islamic teaching is such

that the human wisdom refuses to accept and obey. It is a worth mentioning point that M. Abdoh in his other books especially Magazine *Al-Tauheed* is bound to admit the limitations of human wisdom. But if considered, these limits are very much in accordance with the demands of human wisdom. But M. Abdoh takes the support of the following Hadith to prove it. "Have a deep look (deliberation) on the creation of God, but not in the existence of God, lest you may be ruined."

He writes in supporting this statement, "the saying (Hadith) may or may not be authentic, but in the context of general meaning, and the detailed teachings of Holy Quran declare it as true and authentic".²²

After harmonizing the religion and wisdom the question rises that "what about those which are not acceptable by wisdom, but they are according to spirit of religion. The answer that M. Abdoh presents for this sort of question, there is no chance of this collision between wisdom and religion. If there is some apparent conflict, it is not conflict, rather it is something beyond the access of human nature which is known only to Almighty Allah and Prophet (PBUH). There exists a very close relation between wisdom and religion. Wisdom is the strongest support while religion is the most powerful pillar of it. Other than these two are devilish illusions."²³

Mufti M. Abdoh was brought up in the Maalki sect (school of thought). But being the chief mufti of Egypt he set the standard (tradition) in many private religious decrees that a judge (justice) has all the rights to adopt any clause of Islamic Law according to his surrounding situations and he can decide accordingly, whether this chosen clause belongs to his own school of thought or to some other. The Islamic law here means the Holy Quran and Sunnah and different schools of thoughts include Hanfi, Malki, Shaafai and Hanbali. According to M. Abdoh to obey (follow) any clause of any sect (school of thought) without consideration and the blind imitation of it is not only a disliked act rather it is vile. So he writes in this context:

*"To exist in earlier age is not an evidence that they (our ancestors / predecessors) excelled us in knowledge and wisdom or their knowledge and wisdom of beings of earlier ages were several times more than the beings in current ages. All are equal in terms of nature as well as manners. Rather majority of modern people have become more experienced and enlightened by getting acquaintance with previous incidents and happenings."*²⁴

If we want to have a clearer comprehension of the Holy Quran and if we want to survive in this modern and developed world by reviving Islam and making it immortal, we will, first of all, have to break the restraints of imitation. We can have a contented life only if we break the idol that we ourselves have created against Islam in the name of Islam and make ourselves free from self-made restrictions.

Ijtehad, which has been abandoned by setting hard conditions for it, must be used for the solution of modern day problems. Without it, our culture and civilization can't survive. After leaving imitation, many disputes of jurisprudence will be eliminated automatically if they are researched as new, because several things have become useless and ultimately we will be able to understand the true spirit of Islam. Therefore, the bright future of Islam lies in returning towards its basic origin. In Doom's day, Almighty is not going to question us about who said so, rather it will be asked that to what extent did you follow the teachings of Holy Quran and Sunnah?²⁵

About Ijtehad, he thinks that it is included in Islamic obligations, because in several issues, the silence of Holy Quran advocates Ijtehad, otherwise nothing is hidden from the Almighty. In the eyes of M. Abdoh, the Islamic Shariah is based on human wisdom and its freedom which humanity has achieved by reaching the age of maturity. Furthermore he thinks that the base of Shariah rests upon Ijtehad and the obedience to those who have power (Power of Knowledge). The one who prohibits from Ijtehad in fact makes the distinctive pillar of Islamic Shariah to fall by abstaining people from God-gifted evidence. In reality, he is making Islam unsuitable for generations to come. It is, indeed, a crime, which these unenlightened people are committing against Islam. It is quite surprising that despite all these false steps they present themselves as scholars of Islam.

In the eyes of Mufti M. Abdoh, this condition (situation) rises because after reaching this age of maturity, it can be expected from a human that he can distinguish the good and evil and can act (take steps) accordingly.²⁶

The right of Ijtehad should be for those who possess command or authority, and these people, according to M. Abdoh, are not only scholars or ruling governments, but it means a group of those intellectuals which consists of nobles, rulers, scholars, commanders of army, respected and wealthy to whom people refer for their needs and for common problem solutions.²⁷

The common and unanimous decision, reached after discussion among the people who possess command and authority, will be the general agreement of the followers of Holy Prophet (PBUH). This agreement will be reached through parliament of modern age, but Abdoh has set certain conditions for this modern day parliament:

- (i) These people will be taken from us (the Muslims of that particular country)
- (ii) They should be authorized for the matter under consideration. It means that they are given permission by the masses. Their decision must not be contradictory to Holy Quran and the teachings of Sunnah.
- (iii) The decision they have reached must be unanimous to greater extent. Their agreement should be in the welfare of common people. Moreover, they should have full and in depth knowledge and awareness of that matter, and should be authorized for making a decision. As long as religious services (prayers and obligations) and beliefs are concerned, they are beyond their authority. The origin for these will be the saying of Almighty and Prophet (PBUH). No personal opinions can be allowed, but everyone is authorized to utilize his insight and wisdom for understanding.²⁸

So, Ijtehad, which will be given the status of Ijma (agreement) of Ummah, will be the 3rd origin for Islamic law. But it won't be final, and it may be changed according to new and changing social circumstances. The laws will be made for the majority, yet if any party puts the interest of Ummah aside and only for the interest of party or a certain group forms any law opposing the teachings of Quran and Sunnah will not be accepted and allowed.

M. Abdoh was a staunch opponent of religious sort of monopoly. That's why he does not favour the representatives of only religious scholars and so called religious chiefs, rather he suggests and recommends the representatives of various schools of thought and experts in the parliament. The reason for this, he says, is that Islam in the earliest stage did not contain these complications and vast demands of society which have occurred today. So, we see that in past ages only one man could have acquaintance about military related branch of knowledge, he could know the rule of trades and could serve as a justice (judge) at the same time. Therefore, the ideal situation is that the parliament members must be specialists. Any matter that comes across

parliament must be decided and laws must be formed after a discussion of experts and specialists.

M. Abdoh himself was well versed and well - acquainted regarding all ups and downs of the age like a researcher and an analyst. He advocated the freedom of thought and the regard for humanity. He raised the slogan for the freedom of thought, called for Ijtehad and made the imitators awake of slumber. He always strived to reproduce the ethics, manners and moral values among Muslims that their ancestors had. Patience, gratefulness, sympathy, sharing, firmness in belief and belief in action (deeds) were tried to revive. He always struggled to make the rights and duties of both the government and the public known to them so that no one may exploit and exceed the other group. He used to believe that the progress and development of Ummah solely depends upon following such a way that leads people to high status. That's why it is important (essential) to change habits, customs gradually. Simple ways of life should be adopted. It is most important duty of Ummah to adorn themselves with good manners; steps should be taken to raise people's thoughts and character to a high status. Reformation is impossible without these. But it is a long and time taking process, the first step of it is the reformation of education system and education. That's why he tried to combine the critical style of Islamic education and modern Western style of education. He founded a new and third style of education featuring the combination of imitation and modernity. If we declare that before M. Abdoh the scholars of Egypt did not have any clear and defined objective and aim, it won't be false, keeping in view the struggle and efforts of Mufti M. Abdoh.

Notes & References

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- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Ibid., 731-732.
- ⁶ Abdoh, *Reesala Al-Tauheed*, 177.
- ⁷ Ibid., 72.
- ⁸ Al-Quran, (2:171).
- ⁹ Raza, *Tafseer Al-Manaar*, Vol. 7, 442
- ¹⁰ Mufti Muhammad Abdoh, *Tafseer Surah Asar* (Cairo: Al-Manaar Publications, 1911), 92.
- ¹¹ Abdoh, *Reesala Al-Tauheed*, 55.
- ¹² Al-Quran, (2:29).
- ¹³ Ibid., 156.
- ¹⁴ Muhammad Abdoh, *Al-Islam and Al-Nasrania* (Cairo: Al-Manaar Publications, 1923), 48-50.
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- ¹⁷ Ibid., 23.
- ¹⁸ Syed Rasheed Raza, *Tareekh-ul-Ustaaz: Al-Imam M. Abdoh.*, Vol. 2 (Cairo: Daar-ul-Fazeelah, 2006), 480.
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- ²³ Ibid., 23.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 896.
- ²⁵ Raza, *Tafseer Al-Manaar*, Vol. 1, 24.
- ²⁶ Ibid., Vol. 6, 419, 420.
- ²⁷ Ibid., Vol. 5, 181.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 181.