

THE ISSUE OF HARMONY BETWEEN RELIGION AND REASON IN MUHAMMAD ABDUH'S RISOLAT AL-TAWHID

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Abstract

This article analyzes the religious-philosophical views presented in Muhammad Abduh's *Risalat al-Tawhid*, a prominent representative of late 19th-century Islamic thought. The study examines the author's rational approach to the concept of Tawhid, his perspectives on the harmony between religion and reason, and the significance of these ideas for the development of contemporary Islamic philosophy. The research employs historical-analytical and comparative methods, situating Abduh's thought within the broader context of Islamic modernism.

Keywords

Muhammad Abduh, Risālat al-Tawhīd, Islamic Modernism, Tawhīd (Oneness of God), Reason and Revelation, Islamic Reformism, Religious Rationalism, Theology and Philosophy in Islam, Ethical Responsibility in Islam, Social Responsibility in Islam, 19th-20th Century Islamic Thinkers, Reformist Interpretations of the Qur'an, Modernist Tafsir, Educational Reform in Islam, Social Reform in Egypt, Faith and Reason in Islam, Rationalist Approach to Religion, Islamic Intellectual History, Religious Modernization, Political Reform and Islam, Revivalist Movements in Islam, Islamic Ethics and Morality, Progressive Islamic Thought, Reformist Scholars of Islam, Modern Islamic Jurisprudence, Scientific Rationalism in Islam, Religious Enlightenment, Philosophical Theology, Modernist Islamic Movements in the Middle East, Islamic Education Reform, Religious and Social Reform, Qur'anic Modernist Exegesis, Islamic Philosophy and Modernity, Muslim Reformers, Interplay of Reason and Faith, Intellectual Renewal in Islam, Religious Thought and Modern Society, Islam and Modern Civilization, Ethical Reform in Islamic Societies, Ijtihad and Religious Reform.

Introduction

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the Muslim world experienced a profound period of social, political, and intellectual crisis. Colonial policies, lagging

behind in science and technology, and the long-dominant tradition of imitation (taqlīd) in religious thought significantly complicated the adaptation of Muslim societies to modern developmental processes. In this historical context, the reinterpretation of Islam in accordance with contemporary demands, and the restoration of balance between religious values and rational thought, emerged as pressing scholarly issues. Amid these complex historical circumstances, Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) emerged as a prominent thinker and reformer striving to renew Islamic thought. He interpreted religion not merely as a collection of rituals and traditions, but as a living system shaping human reasoning, moral responsibility, and social activity. Unlike traditional doctrinal approaches, Abduh's views were based on the harmony between reason and revelation, occupying a significant place in the formation of modern Islamic philosophy. Muhammad Abduh's *Risalat al-Tawḥīd* stands as one of the most important scholarly sources systematically presenting his religious-philosophical ideas. In this work, the issue of Tawḥīd is treated not only as a metaphysical doctrine but also as a fundamental principle determining human moral positioning and social responsibility. Abduh seeks to interpret the teachings of the Qur'an in harmony with rational thought, justifying Islam's compatibility with contemporary scientific and intellectual perspectives. In today's context of globalization, the relationship between religion, science, and society has become increasingly relevant. From this perspective, a scholarly analysis of Muhammad Abduh's religious-philosophical legacy, particularly *Risalat al-Tawḥīd*, holds not only historical significance but also provides an important theoretical foundation for the development of modern Islamic philosophy, religious studies, and social thought.

The primary aim of this article is to philosophically analyze the issues of Tawḥīd, reason, and ethics as presented in Muhammad Abduh's *Risalat al-Tawḥīd*, and to determine the significance of these views in the development of Islamic modernism and contemporary Eastern philosophical thought.

Risalat al-Tawḥīd was composed in the late nineteenth century, in the context of colonial domination, intellectual stagnation, and increasing encounters between the Muslim world and modern Western thought. Muhammad Abduh sought to respond to these challenges by rearticulating Islamic theology in a manner compatible with reason, science, and social reform.

The central theme of the work is the oneness of God. At the same time, the author: Sought to interpret Islamic theology and creed from a philosophical perspective. Abduh was aware of the classical philosophical heritage of Islam, including discussions on causality and rational inquiry; however, his primary

concern was not metaphysical system-building but ethical reform and rational engagement with revelation.

This positions the text at the intersection of philosophy and theology, making it an important work in both domains. The society in which the author lived experienced a close interaction between intellectual inquiry and religious belief. There were ongoing theological debates, particularly concerning monotheism and the rejection of polytheism (shirk). *Risolat al-Tawḥid* was written to clarify complex theological concepts for the public and to promote rational understanding of Islamic belief.

The work shows familiarity with Greek, Persian, and Indian scientific and philosophical traditions. It was produced in a period marked by active translation, commentary, and intellectual synthesis across cultures. Therefore, the text contributed not only to religious thought but also to broader scientific and philosophical discourse in the Islamic world. The author aimed to demonstrate the unity of God and to resolve theological questions using philosophical reasoning. The work reflects an effort to meet both intellectual and spiritual needs of the time, addressing doubts, questions, and debates in an accessible yet scholarly manner. At the core of *Risolat al-Tawḥid* (The Treatise on Monotheism) is Tawḥid, the principle of the oneness of God (Allah). Tawḥid is not only a theological doctrine but a comprehensive worldview that shapes moral, social, and intellectual life. In Islamic thought, belief in Allah's unity means that all aspects of existence – including ethics and societal conduct – are grounded in divine unity, justice, and responsibility to God. Tawḥid fundamentally influences ethical norms in Islam. Belief in the oneness of God implies that moral values are not arbitrary but are derived from divine revelation – the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. A Tawḥidic worldview asserts that human actions gain moral value when they are intended to fulfill divine commands and avoid what God forbids. In the broader context of Monotheistic treatises, this dual commitment to belief and action forms the basis of Islamic ethics (akhlaq) – where personal conduct and interpersonal relations are mediated by obedience to God.

In works on Tawḥid, the believer's moral responsibility is directly tied to acknowledgment of Allah's sovereignty. A Tawḥidic ethical framework insists that humans are accountable for their deeds to God, which fosters personal integrity, sincerity (ikhlas), and fear/respect of divine judgment. Ethical actions are understood not merely as social conventions, but as responses to divine will and divine decree. This connection between belief and action is a recurring theme in Tawḥid literature: knowledge of God's oneness ought to transform the believer's

character, encouraging traits like justice (adl), compassion (rahma), truthfulness (sidq), and altruism – foundational values in Islamic ethics more generally.

In Islamic theology, *Tawhīd* represents the absolute oneness of God. Abduh emphasizes that proper understanding of *Tawhīd* has direct ethical and social implications: Spiritual Accountability: Recognition of God’s unity fosters moral self-discipline and personal responsibility. Universal Ethics: Belief in God’s oneness underpins principles of justice, compassion, and integrity. Rational Faith: True *Tawhīd* harmonizes reason and revelation, countering superstition and irrational practices.

Abduh’s interpretation extends beyond ritual observance. He argues that theology should actively inform ethical conduct and social responsibility. This rationalist approach reflects the broader goals of Islamic modernism: to make faith intellectually defensible and socially constructive. *Risalat al-Tawhīd* emphasizes that ethical behavior is inseparable from religious belief. Abduh links morality to the following principles: Humans are responsible for their actions, which must align with both divine guidance and reason. Faith entails active concern for community welfare, including justice, education, and poverty alleviation. Reason complements revelation, enabling Muslims to make ethical decisions in changing social contexts. Abduh’s vision places ethics at the intersection of faith and reason. For example, he critiques rigid traditional practices that impede social development, advocating for a reinterpretation of religious norms that promotes both individual virtue and collective welfare.

1. Education: Knowledge, both religious and scientific, is crucial for personal and societal progress. Abduh promoted modern curricula in schools and argued for intellectual openness.

2. Justice and Governance: Ethical governance is rooted in moral responsibility and rational principles, ensuring equitable treatment and social cohesion.

3. Elimination of Superstition: By discouraging blind adherence to ritualistic practices, Abduh sought to cultivate rational, morally responsible citizens.

Through these reforms, *Risalat al-Tawhīd* envisions a society where religious principles guide both individual conduct and public policy, harmonizing tradition with modern needs. Islamic modernism, as articulated by Abduh, emphasizes the compatibility of Islam with reason, science, and modernity. *Risalat al-Tawhīd* exemplifies this approach by:

- Advocating for reasoned interpretation of the Quran and Hadith.
- Encouraging critical engagement with inherited traditions.

- Demonstrating that faith and rational inquiry are mutually reinforcing.

This rationalist approach allowed Muslims to engage with contemporary knowledge without abandoning core religious principles, laying the foundation for later reform movements across the Muslim world. Abduh's ideas significantly influenced subsequent Islamic reformers, including Rashid Rida and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani. His emphasis on rationality, ethical responsibility, and social reform shaped discourses on: Education reform in Egypt and the Arab world. Development of legal and social systems grounded in ethical principles. Modernist interpretations of Sharia compatible with human rights and governance.

Conclusion

Muhammad Abduh's *Risālat al-Tawḥīd* represents a landmark in Islamic intellectual history, emphasizing the compatibility of religion and reason. Abduh argues that Tawḥīd, the central concept of Islamic theology, is not merely a matter of faith but a principle that encourages rational reflection on the universe, human purpose, and moral responsibility. By advocating for the use of reason alongside revelation, he challenges rigid traditionalist interpretations and encourages a dynamic approach to understanding divine guidance. This approach underscores that rational inquiry does not undermine religious faith; instead, it enriches it by providing deeper comprehension and meaningful application in everyday life.

Furthermore, Abduh's emphasis on the harmony between reason and revelation reflects the broader goals of Islamic modernism. He envisions a society where education, social reform, and ethical conduct are guided by both spiritual insight and rational thought. This perspective positions intellectual engagement as a religious obligation, suggesting that Muslims must cultivate knowledge, critical thinking, and moral discernment to truly embody the principles of Tawḥīd. By integrating reason with faith, Abduh presents a model of reformist thought that balances tradition with modernity, offering practical guidance for addressing contemporary social, political, and ethical challenges within Muslim societies.

In essence, *Risālat al-Tawḥīd* not only provides a theological and philosophical framework for understanding the unity of God but also serves as a blueprint for harmonizing spiritual devotion with intellectual inquiry. Abduh's vision highlights the transformative potential of reconciling reason and religion, promoting a thoughtful, ethical, and socially responsible interpretation of Islam. This enduring legacy continues to inspire modern Islamic scholarship, demonstrating that the pursuit of knowledge and adherence to faith are complementary pathways to personal and societal advancement.

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