



ISLAM AND MODERNITY: THE CONTRIBUTION
OF KHAYR AL-DĪN AL-TŪNISĪ

BY

AFIZ OLADIMEJI MUSA

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International Islamic University
Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The need to reconcile Islam and modernity assumed its prime in the discourse of the scholars and intellectuals throughout the 19th century. This issue was said to be addressed solely through the reform of the Islamic political, economic and administrative system along the Western pattern. While some scholars arguably condemned this view as a lavish infidel imitation, others justified it substantially from an Islamic standpoint, not only as a necessity but also as having been entrenched in Islam. Khayr al-Dīn al-Tūnisī had a pioneering effort in conceptualizing as well as Islamizing the whole reform project through his masterpiece entitled, *Aqwām al-Masālik fī Maʿrifat Aḥwāl al-Mamālik*. The approach he espoused to implement his reform ideas, and the indelible impact that they have left, particularly, on Tunisia, his adoptive country, and, generally, on the Muslim world are the major focus of this research.

ملخص البحث

بلغت الحاجة إلى إيجاد التوافق بين الإسلام و الحداثة ذروتها في خطاب العلماء والمفكرين طوال القرن التاسع عشر الميلادي. و كان ذلك من خلال إصلاح الأنظمة الإسلامية السياسية والاقتصادية والإدارية على نمط الغرب. ينكر معظم العلماء مبدأ هذا التوجه بناء على أنه تبعية محضة للكفار، بينما يسوّغ الباقيون الأخذ به من منطلق شرعي، ليس لضرورته فقط ، وإنما لأصالته الإسلامية. وإن لخير الدين التونسي الدر الريادي في وضع مفاهيم المشروع الإصلاحية وأسلمته من خلال باكورة إنتاجه المعنون، أقوم المسالك في معرفة أحول الممالك. لذا ، ينصبُّ تركيز الباحث في المنهج الذي اتخذه خير الدين التونسي في تنفيذ آرائه الإصلاحية، والآثار التي خلّدتها هذه الآراء، خاصة في تونس، بلده بالتبني، وعامة في العالم الإسلامي.

APPROVAL PAGE

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.....
Hassan Ahmad Ibrahim
Supervisor

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Human Sciences (History and Civilization).

.....
Ahmad Ibrahim Abu Shouk
Examiner

This dissertation was submitted to the Department of History and Civilization and is accepted as a partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Human Science (History and Civilization).

.....
Wan Suhana Wan Sulong
Head, Department of
History and Civilization

This dissertation was submitted to the Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences and is accepted as a partial fulfilment of the requirement of the degree of Master of Human Science (History and Civilization)

.....
Badri Najib Zubir
Dean, Kulliyyah of
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CHAPTER ONE

INRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Islamic reformism, or in Islamic jargon, Islāh/Tajdīd, is the idea of attempting to forge changes in religion and society. It is well entrenched in Islam and grounded in many verses in the Qurān as well as the authentic Ḥadīth. It re-emerged in modern times as a direct result of the influence of the Western ideologies, often wed to the political and military power of colonialism. It was a far reaching voice that echoed a wholesale borrowing from the western political institutions and its application to the Islamic system. The need to reconcile Islam and modernity to make the former more relevant to the demands of contemporary societies was part of Islāh/Tajdīd's Package. However, this trend took a new dimension in the 19th century C.E. to focus on the plight of the Muslim in all ramifications of life.

It is true that Islam had previously lived through many military challenges coming from outside, as it is true that it suffered defeat and had many of its land dominated by external forces, though it had often been able to rise from the ashes of many military devastations. Nevertheless, no perception of decline, or the need to borrow from the enemy, was ever a touching or pressing issue. It became pressing after the collapse of the state of authority in the Muslim countries around the second half of the 18th century C.E. Hence the view of some Muslim leaders tended to bend on modern reform on the Western pattern in order to check the European penetration. This background directed the attention of the proposed reform to the plight of Muslims who have been lagging behind in the military, political, administrative and technological fields.

Here comes the idea of Modernity which has always been the bone of contention in any discourse regarding reformism. It refers to a world-view, with a whole body of ideas and their resultant institutions, that emerged in Europe as a result of the Renaissance in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and which revolted against religion in all the various areas of life, and replaced it with humanism, rationalism, and secularism. As a result of these ideas, the Western world transformed itself from the deeply Christian civilization of the Middle Ages to the largely secular-humanistic civilization it has become in modern times.¹

The advent of technologies instigated by the modern science, the modern superior weaponry, and the new war techniques aroused in the Muslim leaders an interest to revamp their society and transform it in the manner of Europe. They have also realized that the causes of their backwardness are due to the fact that Muslims have deviated from the true teaching of Islam and neglected its invitation to think and contemplate, whereas, the West had made scientific and other progress only when they were able to set the faculty of reason free from the ecclesiastic bondage. The Muslim leaders thus deemed it necessary to convince the ‘Ulamā’ of the genuineness of their proposal and its conformity with the true teaching of Islam. It is not, whatsoever, an act of defiance- which some believe to have been the case- having imitated the West. Thenceforth, they began to stress the areas of agreement between Islam on one side, and modern science on the other side, by freshly interpreting the holy text in such a way that creates a positive linkage between the dictates of the Qu’rān and modern thought at certain key points, resulting in the integration of modern institutions with the moral-social orientation of the Qu’rān. The message

¹ Naeem, Fuad S., "A traditional Islamic response to the rise of Modernism." In *Islam, fundamentalism, and the betrayal of tradition*, edited by Joseph E.B lumbar (U.S.A: pentagon press, 2005), 79.

deduced from these efforts is simply that Islam as a universal message is relevant to the dynamic nature of human beings and their societies. Therefore, the Muslims must not be reluctant to be in tune with modern science, as they are duty-bound to seek knowledge wherever it might come from. Moreover, science is a discipline that they well knew and played a major role in development during their prime day.

While Islamized modernity, so to speak, stands out as a goal of reform, westernization comes as an offshoot of modernity; a process whereby one compromises his idea and culture in favour of the ideas and cultures that are typical of the West. A historical overview will throw more light on the issue under question.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Fourteen hundred years have elapsed since the advent of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula through everyone's image of a typical Prophet, the divinely inspired Muḥammad bin 'AbdAllāh, (Pbuh). Islam as preached by the Prophet Muḥammad (Pbuh) is not only a religion but also a total way of life, which is concerned with every fabric of human life. It is a system of rules and values, which were instrumental in the establishment of the first politically organized body of the people, once warring and disintegrated. Those values worked a lasting effect in uniting the fragmented being of the Arab society, the people who were to play vital roles in changing the course of history. The foundation laid by the Prophet Muḥammad during his life became the basis upon which his successors built their religious, social-political and economic affairs.

Following the death of the Prophet Muḥammad (Pbuh), Islam spread quickly in all directions to encompass a far-flung empire, extending from China to Spain, and presented itself as a comprehensive faith and a political and legal system with inherent

order, justice and freedom, unity and equity, fostering peace and tolerance. The rise of Islam not only brought the caliphate into being, but also fostered the flowering of a major civilization and the development of centres of learning. A melding of a new thought with ancient ideas from East and West took place, producing great contributions in medicine, mathematics, physics, astronomy, geography, architecture, art, etc.

From the seventh to the eleventh centuries, the Muslim community was economically and militarily strong, towering well above its counterparts. However, the element of weakness began to creep into the life of the Muslims when those fundamental values were marginalized. This development culminated in the disintegration of the great sultanate-empires and a general sense of decline.

During this long period of full decay and difficulties, Uthmān al-Ghāzī, known to the West as Ottoman, appeared on the surface in the 13th century with the mission of reunification of the war-torn Muslim *Ummah*, and to rescue them from extinction. The successors of Ottoman clung to the legacy of their father, and carried on his mission of building a strong and formidable empire of faith that later toppled the Byzantine, the eastern part of the Roman Empire, which survived after the breakup of the Western Empire in the 5th century C.E.

However, the Muslims did not celebrate this victory any longer than four centuries before history repeated itself. Gradually, they began to loose ground to the emerging Western civilization. It can be argued that the latter part of the seventeenth century was that which revealed the extent of the Sultanate's weakness, having failed to capture Vienna in 1683.² This failure exposed the Ottoman weakness to the view of

²Voll, John Obert, *Islam Continuity and Change in the Modern World*, (U.S.A: Westview press, inc, 1982), 39.

the Europeans, and, in subsequent campaigns, the Ottoman army had virtually collapsed.

Under these circumstances, widespread dissatisfaction over the existing conditions could be perceived in all Ottoman provinces. This critical situation awakened the Muslim statesmen from their slumbers to shake off their folly and force the way through to rescue their waning society. In the first half of the 19th century there emerged some prominent intellectuals, who were remarkably similar in their basic outlook, to embark on the reform project. One of them was Khayr al-Dīn al-Tūnisī, the man whose career, strategy and reform programme are the primary focus of this thesis.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The cry of reforms had been all-heard throughout the Muslim world during the 19th century. It was an initiative masterminded by those Muslim leaders and scholars who were greatly influenced by their first hand experience with the European system and lifestyle. This exposure was that which ignited their thinking and directed it towards revamping their seemingly stagnant society. Usually, those who took this pain are referred to as either reformers or modernists. They all came forth with their own design for the type of reform they wanted to introduce into their societies. However, no matter how they differ in methodology, they still hold on to the same body of belief that; (a) their society is in dire need of reform, (b) this reform was not only a legitimate but a necessary implication of the social teaching of Islam,³ (c) and that the West- who had also passed through a similar stage of decline but managed not only to

³ Hourani, Albert, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1798-1939*, (New York: Cambridge university press, 1988), p. 68.

regenerate itself but also transform itself completely- is worthy to be consciously and carefully emulated, as a civilization, but not as an imperial force.

Which aspect of the West can serve the purpose, is the question that was addressed from three perspectives:

1. Anything that comes from the West is worth-adopting without being subjected to any further scrutiny. With this view of total assimilation, the door was made widely open to some ideologies which are in conflict with the principles and teachings of Islam, viz. jingoistic nationalism, total gender equality, secularism, etc. The advocates of this view may be called Westernizers, and their approach, according to Abu Sulayman, is appropriately called "alien or foreign approach."⁴
2. Borrowing western organized structures and imbuing it with Islamic values, in more modern sense, Islamization of selective western institutional models such as parliament, educational structures, economic and judicial system. The view represents the stance of whom we may refer to as Adaptationists, those who attempted to strike balance between some western and Islamic values, while their approach can aptly be called the "*Asāla*" or "*wasatiyyah*" approach.⁵
3. Reassertion of classical Islamic ways, particularly the restoration of *sharī'a*, while totally purging the western cultural and political influence. The advocates of this view are known to be the

⁴AbuSulayman AbdulHameed, A, *Azmat al-'Aql al-Muslim*, (USA: International institute of Islamic thought, 1993), 30.

⁵ Ibid., p. 41.

‘Traditionalists or the ultra-Salafis, while their approach may best be called the “imitative historical approach”.⁶

Khayr al-Dīn al-Tūnisī was a notable champion of the second view by the virtue of his God-given ability and talent, which enabled him to combine between scholarship and statesmanship. He was not blindfolded by the blooming success of the West to carelessly accept everything that comes from Europe, nor was he hostile to it; but rather attempted to seek a harmonious blend between the two seemingly conflicting values.

Against this background, this research will be tailored to grapple with a number of questions such as:

1. What is the reality of reformism and revivalism in the light of the *Qu’rān* and *Sunnah*, and why was it held to be the only solution to the plight of the Muslims in the 19th century?
2. How did Khayr al-Dīn al-Tūnisī understand reform, and why did he feel the need for it.
3. Would the Ottoman Sultanate-Caliphate have been rescued from certain demise had Khayr al-Dīn’s programme been wisely tried? What would thus have been the profound effects of his reform thoughts?
4. How do we resolve the problem of maintaining the legacy of the past in our religious tradition and integrate change into society and our lives.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Islamic Reformism is a discourse which is crucial to an understanding of the modern status of Muslim societies. Probing into it will certainly give an insight into the general situation of the Muslim *Ummah* during the 19th century, and the series of crises within which it had lived and through which it had survived, as well as the factors that evoked the reform thoughts in the first place. The thread of the argument therein will extend to the twentieth century to cover recent developments in the socio-political arena in the Muslim world. This is to see the extent to which Khayr al-Dīn al-Tūnisī's thought can stand the modern challenges instigated by modern 'quasi-development,' the gravity of which did not occur to the reformers while propounding their theories.

Nowadays that many aspects of modernity have come to the Muslims as the bright gleam of the dawn, and they have all realized the direction to which their societies are bending, the end of which lies a new moral bankruptcy, a political degeneration, and economic stagnation (in spite of all naturally endowed resources). Going back in time to re-explore the thoughts of those behind the Muslim modernity might probably help find a way out from this 'modern mayhem.'

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Khayr al-Dīn al-Tūnisī as recorded by history was a great all round advocate of change. He brought forth his timely reform programme at a well calculated period when the situation in the Muslim nations had engendered a widespread malaise and left them in dire need of almighty salvation. Although Khayr al-Dīn was an adopted Tunisian statesman, he, however, sought with his programme the attention of the Muslim's audience, including statesmen and the 'Ulamā'. For the fact that he

consented to the Turkish and French translation of his prolegomena,⁷ one can assume that he was not only intent to gain the audience of the Ottoman Sultan and the Muslim populace at large, but also aiming at reaching European readership with a view of drawing them to his course, and to persuade them that, contrary to their popularly held view, Islam is not against modernity.

Against this background, Khayr al-Dīn's reform programme, which he incorporated into his major work, *Aqwam al-Masālik fi Ma'rifat Aḥwāl al-Mamālik* (The Surest Path to Knowledge Concerning the Conditions of Countries), most especially in his *muqaddimah*, can be held to have been a channel through which he communicated his ideas of reform to three quite different resistant groups from different perspectives:

1. He appealed to the 'Ulamā' to accept a reformist policy, not only inspired by the Western experience but also presented as a return to the purer faith of early Islam. With this, he countered the jibes that he was slavishly imitating the infidel.
2. He suggested to the Muslim statesmen the creation of a new administrative system based on liberty, justice and equity that would put an end to the abuses, arbitrary actions and detestable administration. This altogether will restore the government to its Quranic role as the protector of the people, and the state will thus be prepared to be *en route* to prosperity.

⁷ Originally, Khayr al-Dīn's treatise, *Aqwam al-Masālik*, was written in Arabic. Its French translation appeared within a year after the Arabic under his supervision, since he also has a good command of the language. The Turkish translation came as a proof that his reform programme was not confined to Tunisia only but also aimed at reaching al-Bāb al-'Ālī, the Ottoman caliph and his caliphate, where Turkish is the official language.

3. The European statesmen and diplomats were also targeted for being scornful of the ability of the Islamic society to cope with the modern world.

These are the three areas into which Khayr al-Dīn al-Tūnisī meant to infuse his reform thoughts. The thesis is therefore an attempt to explore these areas from three perspectives: the religious as representing the first area, and the socio-political perspective as representing the two other areas. These three perspectives will provide the framework around which the inquiry will revolve.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This thesis is set to employ critical and analytical research methodology. It browsed through various sources relevant to the subject matter of Islāh/Tajdīd whether primary or secondary sources. However, an in-depth examination was carried on Khayr al-Dīn's masterpiece, *Aqwam al-Masālik*, particularly his introduction as encompassing his main idea of reform. The thesis also attempted to draw a parallel between Khayr al-Dīn and Ibn Khaldūn, so as to explore the degree of the former's influence on the latter. Finally, the reform programme of Khayr al-Dīn was also subjected to criticism, to see if at all it was a story of success or failure.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Islam in the nineteenth century was more of pragmatism and dynamism full of challenges and responses than presumably static and stagnant. The very factor that made this possible was nothing but the ability of a handful of Muslim leaders and some intellectuals to identify what went amiss in the running of the system. The ever

growing power and influence of the western states were yet another factor that had impacted the sweeping intellectual and socio-political transformation in the Muslim world, particularly the Near East.

Islam, being both a religion and a comprehensive way of life, was destined to guide mankind aright and redirect their cause towards the divine will. It brought forth a divine blueprint to setup the earth and make it worth-living, and to pave the way to the perpetual life in the hereafter. With these inherent characteristics, Islam cannot be scapegoated for the backwardness of the Muslims and their society, but rather their misunderstanding, misappropriation and misapplication of its principles in such a way that will thwart its ability to function as it was destined. This is the problem that was not fully realized until virtually all the Muslim world fell prey to the West and was thus brought under its control. Unwittingly, none of those powers which are now under the domination of the West had ever seemed to have thought of the West being such powerful and sophisticated.

Having acknowledged this fate, some Muslim leaders, statesmen and ‘ulamā’ deemed it incumbent upon them to force their way through the liberation of their society from the yoke of the Western subjugation. This is said to be realized either through the restoration of sharī‘ah to the society to enable them to follow the dictates of Islam and live up to its inspirations, or through the process of reformation. The former represents the stance of the conservative ‘‘Ulamā’ (traditionalist), while the latter is of some Muslim leaders and intellectuals. However, the question remains on how these opinions were to be carried off. Those leaders who saw the necessity of reformation on the pattern of the West deemed it necessary to pass through the process of modernization as was also the case in the West. Thus, they enlisted the support of a handful of the loyal ‘‘Ulamā’ to rally around them by redefining Islam in such a way

that will meet the modern challenges. This very move will eventually justify their introduction of western techniques in the creation of more effective state structures. Whereas, those who opposed this view believe, from a strict Islamic standpoint, that adaptation in this context gives the appearance of surrender. In this case, it is the reintroduction of shari'ah to the society that can be of any remedy to the problem.

Among the modern intellectuals who probed into this issue is Dr. AbdalḤamīd AbūSulayman in his *Azmat al-'Aql al-Muslim* (crisis in the Muslim mind), published by the International Institute of Islamic Thought in 1991 in Virginia, U.S.A. While admitting the very unfortunate situation of the Muslim Ummah, he attempted to trace the genesis of the problem to the formative period of Islam that followed the demise of the Prophet. He opined that the newly converted Arab and non-Arab tribes who did not go through the process of *tarbiyah* as did the *ṣaḥābah* were the architect of the later crisis, beginning with the apostate war and the eventual killing of the third and fourth rightly guided caliph (May Allah be pleased with them). This dispiriting and demoralizing attitude, as engendered by the spirit of racism, tribalism and nationalism, is the factor that culminated in the collapse of the best regime ever witnessed by mankind. Similarly, it is the underlying factor that precipitated the downfall of the Ottoman Empire. As for the reform of the society, he holds that whoever endeavours to partake in it must firstly identify the type of malady suffered by his society to ensure that it is not healed with the wrong remedy. Unfortunately, the Muslim scholars have never been fortunate to rid the Muslim mind of this crisis despite a number of solutions suggested, viz. western imitation, historical approach, and the *al-Asalah al-Islāmiyah*. However, doing away with these suggestions is never the proper way of handling the Muslim crisis. Therefore, it must be evaluated to see how it can help solve the situation.

Another work that grapples with the question of the Muslim decline is *al-Dawlah al-Islāmiyyah: 'Awāmil al-Nuhūd wa al-Suqūt* (Islamic nation: factors for rise and fall) written by Dr. 'Alī Muḥammad al-Ṣullābī, and published in 2004 by Dār al-Ma'rifah in Beirūt. In his argument, he stressed from religious perspective that the Ottoman collapse was due to its religious laxity, as manifested in its socio-political and economical affairs. This development caused the *Ummah* to lose its identity which in turn weakened its spiritual being, the source of its power. He also believed that the sin for which Allah destroyed the past generations are of two types; disbelief and ungratefulness to Allah and abuse of His bounties, by oppressing the weak and favouring the strong, likewise immorality and lavishness, which were the daily routines in the Ottoman royal court. The series of concessions granted to the enemy as well as alliance and agreements concluded are yet other factors that hastened their decadence.

It is far beyond any doubt that the plight of the Muslims must not be treated in isolation from religion. In fact, in any country which derives its values from religion, religion is no doubt a key variable in explaining the rise or decline of its civilization. Therefore, for any meaningful analysis about the decline of the Muslim state, such as Turkey, Egypt and Tunisia, an examination of what role religion plays in these countries is of vital importance. On this basis, both methodologies are judged relevant; while Abū Sulaymān is holistic in his approach, al-Sullābī's can aptly be regarded as purely traditional.

Another scholar that contributed his part in the discourse of the Ottoman decline is Robert F. Zeidner, in his book entitled *The Army of the Tanzimat, The Evolution of a New Ottoman Martial Tradition Under the Stimuli of European Diplomatic and Military Pressure*. It was published in 1960 by the American University in

Washington. The author argued that among the chief factors which contributed to the decline of the Ottoman Sultanate during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was the corruption of the imperial military system. Eventually, this situation exposed the Sultanate's weakness and rendered it vulnerable to encroachment by the emergent Christian power of Europe. It also encouraged separatist ambitions among the various provincial governors and Christian national groups. Also, the intellectual ferment born of the French Revolution played its part in instigating the military, economic and the political crisis in the Ottoman remote areas. The author, while holding on to this fact, endeavoured to trace the development of the new military tradition, the army of *Tanzimat*, as well as the genesis of western ideals of nationalism and the role of the Ottoman officers in its activation.

Interestingly, this treatise is a very good reference for the thesis because of its focus on the military aspect of the Ottoman Sultanate. The reason for this is the general perception that the western development was due to their military supremacy. Therefore, the military reform on the western pattern should be deemed the first prerequisite if the Muslim's dream of development should come true.

The literatures that touched upon the issue of reformism are as many as the popularity of the discourse could attract. However, what these literatures provide of information are not more than the personal views of its authors which are not necessarily the case. This is indicative of what such authorships are likely to be fraught with.

Among the literatures that trace the origin of the Islamic reform movement is *Muslim Reformist Action in Nineteenth Century Tunisia*, an article written by Dr.

Muḥammad al-Mesāwī.⁸ This article attempts to revisit the origin of the Islamic reformist movement that rose in response to the challenges of modern Western civilization to the Muslim world in the nineteenth century. The case study for his research was Tunisia for having been the place where the spirit of reform manifested in both intellectual and socio-political form. This reference is relevant especially in highlighting the role of Khayr al-Dīn al-Tūnisī as a special agent who gave the reform project its religious justification, as well as for his relentless effort in winning over the mind of the ‘Ulamā’ to rally around him towards the accomplishment of his reform programme.

Another piece of work that probes into the subject matter of reformism is *Islamic fundamentalism* penned by prof. Youssef Choueiri.⁹ The book was published in 1990 by Pinter A Cassell . The general argument therein centered on Islamic revivalism, which author believes to have been a reactive challenge to modern civilization and political structure. He attempts to present a striking analysis of how and why Islamic values have become such a potent contemporary political force, as he sheds new light on a much-misunderstood situation. While arguing the concept of reformism, he highlighted some Islamic concepts that went through the process of reinterpretation and representation as a result of the ‘Ulamā’s consent and contribution to the reform programme. For instance, the concept of *shūra*, which means mutual consultation, was harmonized with parliamentary democracy. *Ijmā’*, which denotes the consensus of the companions or the jurists, was held to be compatible with public opinion. *Bay’a*, the act of allegiance performed by the member of the community to

⁸ This article was published by *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, vol. 1, no. 2: 62

⁹ Youssef M Choueiri is a Reader in Islamic Studies, School of Arts, Histories and Cultures, University of Manchester.