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978-0-521-27423-4 - Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939

Albert Hourani

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ARABIC THOUGHT IN
THE LIBERAL AGE

1798-1939

ALBERT HOURANI



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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**TO THE PRESIDENT AND SCHOLARS
OF THE COLLEGE OF ST MARY MAGDALEN
IN THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD**

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published by Oxford University Press 1962

Reissued, with a new preface by Cambridge University Press 1983

Thirteenth printing 2003

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Library of Congress catalogue number: 83-1788

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

Hourani, Albert

Arabic thought in the liberal age, 1798-1939.

1. Arab countries—Intellectual life

I. Title

181'.9 DS36.88

ISBN 0 521 25837 5 hard covers

ISBN 0 521 27423 0 paperback

UPH

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PREFACE TO THE 1983 REISSUE

My purpose in writing this book was not to give a general history of all kinds of thought expressed by Arabs, or in the Arabic language, during the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries. I was concerned with thought about politics and society within a certain context: that created by the growth of European influence and power in the Middle East and North Africa. In the course of the period which the book covers, the Arabic-speaking peoples were drawn, in different ways, into the new world-order which sprang from the technical and industrial revolutions. It was an order which expressed itself in the growth of European trade of a new kind, the consequent changes in production and consumption, the spread of European diplomatic influence, the imposition in some places of European control or rule, the creation of schools on a new model, and the spread of new ideas about how men and women should live in society. It is to such ideas that I refer rather loosely when I use the word 'liberal' in the title; this was not the first title I chose for the book, and I am not quite satisfied with it, for the ideas which had influence were not only ideas about democratic institutions or individual rights, but also about national strength and unity and the power of governments.

As the century went on, it became more and more difficult to ignore the processes of change and not to react to them in some way. More than one kind of reaction was possible, and my book deals with only one of them: that of those who saw the growth of European power and the spread of new ideas as a challenge to which they had to respond by changing their own societies, and the systems of beliefs and values which gave them legitimacy, in a certain direction, through acceptance of some of the ideas and institutions of modern Europe. This of course raised problems of different kinds. What should they accept? If they accepted it, could they also remain true to their inherited beliefs and values? In what sense, if any, would they still remain Muslims and Arabs? A debate which began on the level of political institutions or laws might in the end raise questions about how men and women identified themselves and what they could believe about human life.

Such questions were first raised, and the debates about them were carried on most continuously and at the highest level of knowledge of the new world of Europe, in two places, Cairo and Beirut, and my main concern was therefore with what was thought, written and published

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there. It seemed to me all the more appropriate to give most attention to these two places because they were closely linked with each other, in various ways, and in particular through the migration of Lebanese and Syrian writers to Egypt, and also because in both places there were not just one or two scattered writers, but groups interacting with each other and with those who came before and after them, so that it was possible to trace continuities of thought. There was yet another reason why the links between Cairo and Beirut were important. Most of the prominent writers in Beirut belonged to the Christian communities of Lebanon and Syria, who played a part in the assimilation of European thought which was disproportionate to their numbers. As Christians they reacted to western culture in ways rather different from those of Muslim thinkers, and the interaction between the two groups helps to illustrate some of the problems facing those who tried to come to terms with the power and thought of the west.

To write a history of thought demands certain choices. It is possible to deal in a general way with 'schools' of thought, but to do so may blur the differences between individual thinkers, and impose a false unity upon their work. The other way is to lay the main emphasis on a number of individuals, chosen because they are broadly representative of certain tendencies or generations, and to explain as fully as possible the influences, the circumstances, and the traits of personality which may have led them to think about certain matters in a certain way. This method also has its dangers. Most of the writers I have discussed in the book scattered their writings in articles for newspapers and periodicals, written for a particular purpose; some wrote over a long period, during which circumstances changed and they too may have changed. There is a risk therefore of imposing an artificial unity on their thought, of making it seem more systematic and consistent than in fact it was, and also of giving the impression that they were more important and original than they really were; most of them (although not quite all) were derivative thinkers of the second or third rank of importance.

For all its dangers, I chose the second method, because it made it possible for me to do what most interested me at the time. First, I wanted to catch, by close attention to what they wrote, echoes of the European thinkers whose books they had read or heard about, and so to discover, if I could, the point at which certain ideas entered into intellectual discourse in Arabic. Secondly, I wished to try to relate different thinkers with each other, and to construct a chronological framework within which they could be placed. Scattered work, some of high quality, had been done on certain persons or movements: on 'Islamic modernism' and Arab nationalism in particular. My book, however, represents one of the first attempts to see how they were related to each other.

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The book tries therefore to trace the line of descent of four generations of writers. The first phase, which stretches roughly from 1830 to 1870, is that in which a small group of officials and writers became aware of the new Europe of industry, swift communications, and political institutions, not as a menace so much as offering a path to be followed. What they wrote was linked with the attempts being made by the governments in Istanbul, Cairo and Tunis to adopt some of the laws and institutions of modern Europe in order to increase their strength; and they wrote primarily for readers still living within an older world of thought, in order to convince them that they could adopt institutions and laws from outside without being untrue to themselves.

The second generation, stretching roughly from 1870 to 1900, faced a situation which had changed in some important ways. Europe had become the adversary as well as the model: its armies were present in Egypt, Algeria and Tunisia, and its political influence was growing throughout the Ottoman Empire; its schools were forming students whose processes of thought and view of the world were far from those of their parents; the cities were being re-made on a European model, and the familiar signs of urban life were being replaced by others. In such circumstances, change had become unavoidable, and the writers considered were not trying to persuade those rooted in their own traditions that they must accept change, but to convince those formed in a new mould that they could still hold on to something from their own past. The main task of thinkers in this generation was to reinterpret Islam so as to make it compatible with living in the modern world, and even a source of strength in it. The representative figure of this phase was Muhammad 'Abduh. His work was carried on by the periodical *al-Manar*, and this is significant, for it was during this period that newspapers and periodicals became important.

In the third period, stretching roughly from 1900 to 1939, the two strands of thought which 'Abduh and others had tried to hold together moved further apart from each other. On the one hand were those who stood fast on the Islamic bases of society, and in doing so moved closer to a kind of Muslim fundamentalism. On the other were those who continued to accept Islam as a body of principles or at the very least of sentiments, but held that life in society should be regulated by secular norms, of individual welfare or collective strength. This was a line of thought already indicated by some Lebanese Christians in the previous generation, but now carried further by some Egyptian Muslim writers, and it reached its logical end in the work of Taha Husayn, conscious as he was of the need to preserve the Islamic past in the imagination and heart, but to become part of the modern culture which had first shown itself in western Europe. For most of the writers of this generation, the secular principle for the remaking of society was that of nationalism,

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whether defined in Ottoman, Egyptian or Arab terms. With the growth of new classes of educated officials and officers, the emergence of students as a political force, and the imposition of foreign rule on more Arab countries, nationalism became a motive to action as well as a principle of thought.

A fourth phase opens with the Second World War, and in the Epilogue I tried to define some of its features. The War ended the period of European ascendancy and opened the way to that of the United States and Russia, expressing itself not in direct political control but in a final military and economic power. The unrest generated by war, the spread of education, the growth of cities and industry, and the use of the new mass media brought about a change in the scale of political life: there was a broader field of political action, and a larger public for ideas and rhetoric. I tried to indicate some of the new ways of thought and action, although when I wrote the Epilogue they could not be seen so clearly as now: the movement for a revival of Islam as the only valid basis for society, exemplified by the Muslim Brothers; the movement by which nationalism began to acquire a content of social reform, expressed often in the language of socialism; and the broadening of the idea of Arab nationalism, to include all Arabic-speaking countries. It was to make this last point that I included a brief treatment of the movement of ideas in North Africa; but the centre of gravity still lay further east, and 'Abd al-Nasir can be taken as the representative figure of this period.

2

A book can tell us something not only about its explicit subject but about the time when it was written. Reading this work for the first time after twenty years, I can see clearly that it reflects a certain way in which I and perhaps others looked at Middle Eastern history during the 1950's and 1960's. The underlying assumption of the book is that a small group of writers, who were set apart from those among whom they were living by education and experience, nevertheless could express the needs of their society, and to some extent at least their ideas served as forces in the process of change. Without making such an assumption, it would scarcely have been worthwhile to write at such lengths about thinkers some of whose ideas had a certain intrinsic interest, but none of whom were of the highest calibre.

I do not think this was a false assumption, and if I were to write a book on the same subject today I think I should write about these thinkers, and perhaps a few others, in much the same way. I would try to give it another dimension, however, by asking how and why the ideas of my writers had an influence on the minds of others. To answer such questions would involve a fuller and more precise study of changes in the

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structure of society from one generation to another, with careful distinctions between what was happening in different Arab countries, and also some attempt to study the process of communication, both direct and indirect. The ideas I was concerned with did not spread only through the writings of those whose work I studied, but were mediated to a larger public in writings of another kind, and above all in poetry.

I am aware that there might be a completely different way of looking at these writers, by regarding their ideas not as expressing what they really believed, but as half-revealing, half-hiding their pursuit of their own interests. Such a view has been expressed with force and elegance by Elie Kedourie. Writing of Afghani and 'Abduh, he describes them as men 'involved in complicated and obscure transactions' and asks whether it would not be better to 'assume that what is done has no necessary connection with what is said, and that what is said in public, may be quite different from what is believed in private'.¹

I am not convinced by this argument. About Afghani there is indeed a mystery, and I am not sure I have unravelled it, although I still think Professor Kedourie is wrong to describe his attitude as one of 'religious unbelief', and Professor Keddie is right in trying to place him somewhere within the wide spectrum of Shi'i thought.² About later thinkers, from 'Abduh onwards, there seems to me to be nothing mysterious. They were writing for the most part within a Sunni tradition where writers said what they believed, in however cautious a way; and the range of what could be published, certainly in Egypt and even in late Ottoman Syria, was fairly wide. Even if they were insincere, there was a certain consistency in what they said, and it is therefore possible to articulate the logical structure of their thought, and it is useful, because if they did have a certain influence on the readers of their own or later generations, it was not because of their 'obscure transactions' but because of their ideas. I agree on this with Hamid Enayat: 'ideas seem to have a life of their own: people, especially those of generations subsequent to the authors', often tend to perceive ideas with little or no regard for the authors' insidious designs, unless they are endowed with a capacity for mordant cynicism'.³

What really troubles me is not this, but the thought that perhaps I should have written a book of a different kind. When I wrote it I was mainly concerned to note the breaks with the past: new ways of thought, new words or old ones used in a new way. To some extent I may have distorted the thought of the writers I studied, at least those of the first

¹ E. Kedourie, *Afghani and 'Abduh: an essay on religious unbelief and political activism in modern Islam* (London, 1966), p. 2.

² N. R. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din 'al-Afghani': a political biography* (Berkeley, 1972).

³ H. Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (London, 1982), p. ix.

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and second generations: the 'modern' element in their thought may have been smaller than I implied, and it would have been possible to write about them in a way which emphasized continuity rather than a break with the past. A book by Christian Troll on Sayyid Ahmad Khan⁴ seems to me to provide the kind of analysis which I now think to be necessary; it shows the 'traditional' bases of his thought and indicates the points where he departs from them in the direction of something new.

There are also books to be written about thinkers of quite a different kind: those who still lived in their inherited world of thought, whose main aim was to preserve the continuity of its tradition, and who did so in accustomed ways, writing and teaching within the framework of the great schools, the Azhar in Cairo or the Zaytuna in Tunis, or of the Sufi brotherhoods. To quote again from Hamid Enayat's book: a special interest attaches to those whose ideas 'are articulated in the recognized terms and categories of Islamic jurisprudence, theology and related disciplines', since their 'credal, epistemological and methodological premises have ensured the continuity of Islamic thought'.⁵ In many ways it was such writers and teachers who continued to be dominant throughout the nineteenth century, since most Arabs who acquired literacy and culture still did so within schools of a traditional kind and continued to be affiliated to one or other of the Sufi orders. In the present century they have lost much of their domination, or so it seemed at the point in time when I was writing my book: it is clearer now than it was then, at least to me, that the extension of the area of political consciousness and activity, the coming of 'mass politics', would bring into the political process men and women who were still liable to be swayed by what the Azhar said or wrote, and what the shaykhs of a brotherhood might teach.

3

This book was first published in 1962, reprinted in 1967 with a number of corrections, and reprinted once more in a paperback edition in 1970. For this reissue I have been able to make a limited number of small changes where I have found errors of fact or misprints, but I have not attempted to change the text in any major way. I have however been able to add a supplement to the bibliography, in which I do not try to carry the story beyond 1962, but give references to books and articles which have appeared for the most part since that date, and which throw light on the subjects of the book.

⁴ C. W. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: a reinterpretation of Muslim theology* (New Delhi, 1978).

⁵ Enayat, *ibid.*

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As before, I should like to express my deep gratitude to the institutions and persons who helped me. My greatest debt is to the President and Fellows of Magdalen College, Oxford, who elected me to a research fellowship and so made it possible for me to start the process of thought and study which led to this book. Part of the matter of it was given in the form of lectures, at the American University of Beirut in 1956-7, at the College of Arts and Sciences in Baghdad in 1957, at Oxford in 1958-9, at the Institut des Hautes Études of Tunis in 1959; I must thank those who arranged for me to give the lectures and the students who, by questions or silence, helped me to see what was clear in them and what was not. I am grateful for encouragement and kindness to Miss Margaret Cleeve, formerly Research Secretary at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, and her successor, Mr A. S. B. Olver; I much admired the courteous suspension of disbelief with which they greeted every assurance that the book was nearly finished and would soon be in their hands. I am grateful also to those friends who read and criticized it in whole or in part: Richard Walzer, Bernard Lewis, Charles Issawi, Walid Khalidi, Malcolm Kerr, Elie Kedourie and Sylvia Haim. I owe a special debt to Miss Ursula Gibson, who typed the manuscript, and Miss Hermia Oliver of the editorial staff of Chatham House, who brought to my typescript, as to so many others,

the sharp compassion of the healer's art.

January 1983

A.H.

NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION AND REFERENCES

WHEN an Arabic name or word has a form which is generally accepted in English I have normally used it. Other Arabic names and words I have tried to transcribe in a simple yet consistent way; but in the bibliography I have given a full transliteration of the titles of Arabic works and the names of their authors, using the system adopted in the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, with slight variations. I have spelt Turkish words and names, even those of Arabic origin, according to the official Turkish orthography. The names of members of the Egyptian royal house posed a special problem: although Turkish by culture, they ruled an Arabic-speaking country. I have decided to spell their names in the Arabic way. Names of Arab authors who have written in languages other than Arabic are normally spelt as they themselves have spelt them.

With a few exceptions, the footnotes refer to works listed in the bibliography. When only one work by an author is mentioned in the bibliography, footnotes normally give his name only; otherwise, they give a brief title as well. The bibliography includes fuller titles, and the dates and places of publication of the editions I have used. Works by Arab authors will be found in section 2 (p. 374) if published in Arabic; in section 3 (p. 382) if in other languages.