In 1903, Duncan Black Macdonald (1863–1943), a prominent early scholar of Islam in the United States, wrote that Islam does not allow constitutionalism because the caliph ‘cannot set up beside himself a constitutional assembly and give it rights against himself. He is the successor of Muhammad and must rule, within [divine] limitations, as an absolute monarch.’ Yet within a few years of that statement, some of the leading scholars of the Islamic world were arguing exactly the contrary. Muhammad ‘Abduh (Egypt, 1849–1905) – the highest-ranking religious official in Egypt – wrote privately in 1904 that he supported a parliamentary democracy. In 1908, Mehmed Cemaleddin Efendi (Turkey, 1848–1917) – the chief religious authority of the Ottoman Empire, appointed directly by the caliph – said that he too supported constitutionalism. Also in 1908, two senior scholars of Shi’i Islam telegraphed their support at a crucial moment in Iran’s Constitutional Revolution: ‘We would like to know if it would be possible to execute Islamic provisions without a constitutional regime!’

Macdonald’s blanket statement about the incompatibility of Islam and constitutionalism also ignored, or dismissed, the previous half-century’s crescendo of proposals for Islamic constitutionalism. These proposals formed part of a movement that generated tremendous intellectual ferment throughout the Islamic world in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This movement sought to reconcile Islamic faith and modern values such as constitutionalism, as well as cultural revival, nationalism, freedom of religious interpretation, scientific investigation, modern-style education, women’s rights, and a bundle of other themes that these authors and activists associated with modernity. The Muslims engaged in this movement saw the tension between Islamic faith and modern values as a historical accident, not an inherent feature of Islam. The modern period both required and permitted this accident to be repaired – the threat of European domination made repair necessary, and the modern values associated with European domination made repair possible. The modernist Islamic movement pioneered the formation or reformation of educational institutions; agitation for political liberalization or decolonization; and the establishment of a periodical press throughout the Islamic world.

Defining modernism

One defining characteristic of this movement was the self-conscious adoption of ‘modern’ values – that is, values that authors explicitly associated with the modern world, especially rationality, science, constitutionalism, and certain forms of human equality. Thus this movement was not simply ‘modern’ (a feature of modernity) but also ‘modernist’ (a proponent of modernity). Activists described themselves and their goals by the Arabic terms ḟadaḍ (new) and muʿāṣir (contemporary), the Turkish terms yeni (new) and genç (young), and similar words in other languages. (By contrast, muda, Malay for ‘young’, was initially a pejorative term applied by opponents to the modernist Islamic movement.) A second characteristic involved the usage of a self-consciously Islamic discourse. Activists were not simply Muslims, but also wished to preserve and improve Islamic faith in the modern world. This combination of characteristics emerged in the first part of the nineteenth century, as several Islamic states adopted European military and technical organization, and various Muslim travellers to Europe brought back influential tales of progress and enlightenment.

Modernism distinguished the modernist Islamic movement, beginning in the nineteenth century, from previous Islamic reform movements, which did not identify their values as modern, and from contemporaneous competitors, such as traditionalists who rejected modern values. Finally, it distinguished the movement from two of its successors, which supplanted modernist Islam in many regions in the middle of the twentieth century: on the one hand, secularists who downplayed the importance of Islam in the modern world, privileging nationalism, socialism, or other ideologies; and, on the other hand, religious revivalists who espoused modern values (such as social equality, codified law, and mass education) but downplayed their modernity, privileging authenticity and divine mandates. Late in the twentieth century, the combination of modernist and Islamic discourses was revived in a subset of modernist Islam that I have labelled ‘liberal Islam’, which sought to re-suscitate the reputation and accomplishments of earlier modernists.

The boundaries of the modernist Islamic movement could be imprecise, but its core was clear: a set of key figures who served as lode-stones for Muslim intellectuals of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Three figures in particular were famed throughout the Islamic world: Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (Iran, 1838–1897), his student and collaborator ‘Abdul, and ‘Abdul’s student and collaborator Muhammad Rashid Rida (Syria-Egypt, 1865–1935), plus regional pioneers Sayyid Ahmad Khan (North India, 1817–1898), Namik Kemal (Turkey, 1840–1888), and Ismail Bey Gasprinskii (Crimea, 1851–1914). Supporters cited and debated the statements of these figures, especially the periodicals they edited: Afghani and ‘Abdul’s al-Urwa al-Wuthqa (The Strongest Link), published in Paris, 1884; Rida’s al-Manar
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The modernist Islamic movement was never monolithic, and varia-
tion, even deep disagreement, existed on virtually all subjects. Modern
values included both state-building and limits on state power; elitism
and egalitarianism; discipline and liberty; Europhilism and anti-imperi-
alisms remain vivid today for Muslims who wish to espouse modern values
discourse, such as newspaper essays and theatrical performances; and,
I propose, was freedom of speech: the right to say novel things in an Is-
amic discourse. The modernist Islamic movement weighed in on this theme, as did others, including
Wakkom Maulavi, who published Malayalam-language newspapers in-
spired by al-Manar. The Russian Empire produced numerous pioneer-
ing Islamic modernists during the same period, including Abdullah
Bubi (Tatarstan, 1871Ð1922), whose activism on behalf of Russian
democracy and Islamic reform led tsarists and Muslim traditionalists to
abet in his repression. In eastern China, Ya’qub Wang Jingzhai
(China, 1879–1949) urged his fellow Hui Muslims to adopt both an Is-
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Century-long debates

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Freedom of speech

The central intellectual issue of the modernist Islamic movement,
I propose, was freedom of speech: the right to say novel things in an Is-
lamic discourse. In order to defend modern values, modernists had to
defend the right to defend modern values. This they did by referring to
the particular challenges and opportunities posed by the onslaught of
modernity; by arguing that their own, often non-traditional educations
qualified them to speak on Islamic issues; by pioneering new forms of
discourse, such as newspaper essays and theatrical performances; and,
finally, by laying out their modernist vision of Islam. These problematic
issues remained topical for Muslims who wish to espouse modern values
in an Islamic discourse.
The freedom of speech was often associated with the defence of jiihi-
had, whose original meaning of ‘intellectual effort’ was extended to
encompass rational interpretation more generally, and with denuncia-
tion of taqlid, a term that modernists took to mean blind, irrational
imitation of tradition. All of the lodestone figures in the modernist Islamic
movement weighed in on this theme, as did others, including Muhammad Husayn Na’ini (Iran, 1860–1936); ‘taqlid of religious lead-
ers who pretend to present true religion is no different from obedience
to political tyrants. Either one is a form of idolatry.’ Both Na’ini and
Khayr al-Din (Tunisia, 1822–1890) – Shi’i and Sunni, respectively –
defended the right of all Muslims to make independent religious
judgements, citing the precedent of the second caliph, ‘Umar ibn al-
Khattab (634–644), who invited all Muslims to judge the propriety of
his actions.
Yet many Islamic modernists, like other modernist intellectuals, re-
mained elitist. Ali Suavi (Turkey, 1838–1878) rejected a definition of
freedom that permitted ‘saying whatever comes to one’s mind’, giving
the example of a French newspaper that denied the existence of God.
‘Abduh offered a warning from the early centuries of Islamic history,
when ‘every opinion-monger took his stand upon the liberty of
thought the Qur’an enjoined’, leading to dangerous schisms. Ahmad
Khan – while favouring freedom of speech on the pragmatic grounds
that open debate advanced the search for truth – was dismissive of
the ‘opinion or independent judgement of every Tom, Dick, and Harry’.
Other modernists limited jihad to those who agreed with them. Ri-
’af Ali Raja’ al-Tahtawi (Egypt, 1801–1873) supported religious freedom
‘on condition that it adheres to the principles of religion’ – meaning
the principles that he emphasized. Rida supported ‘freedom of reli-
gion, opinion, speech, writing, dress, and work’, but not the ‘horde
of heretics’ who engage in ‘chatter, sophistry, audacity in mixing right
with wrong, and insolence in criticizing their opponents or critics’. Sev-
eral authors – though not all – contributed to the polemic between the
Sunnis and Shii sects, considering the other to be disqualified from jiihi-
had by their imperfect faith. And competition within the movement
led to other polemics – for example, Rida’s resentment at Gasprinski’s
leadership of pan-Islamic conference planning in Cairo, or the Calcut-
ta-based challenge to Ahmad Khan’s North Indian leadership of the
modernist Islamic movement in South Asia.
In sum, the modernists sought to breach the monopoly of traditional
religious scholars over Islamic interpretation, and to limit the relativis-
tic damage of this breach, through a single manoeuvre. They ex-
pressed confidence in their own qualifications – seminary training,
modern education, or personal virtuosity – as compared both with
scholarly traditionalists and the ‘masses’.

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The Azeri Turkish caption of the original cartoon (Mulla Nasruddin, 22 September 1906, pp. 4–5) was entirely different: ‘I cure the ill by writing down verses [from the Qur’an].’ The cartoon said nothing about constitutionalism, but rather mocked an old-fashioned religious practice. Europeans saw an image lampooning an Islamic scholar and inverted its meaning, from anti-traditionalism to anti-
modernism.