



MODERNIST ISLAM 1840-1940

A Sourcebook

Edited by

CHARLES KURZMAN

Islam Is a Religion That Respects Reason

Muhammad Abdul Khader Maulavi (Malabar, 1873–1932), commonly known as Wakkom Maulavi, was the seminal modernist reformer of the Mappila Muslims of south India. Educated at home in a strong intellectual environment maintained by his merchant father, he inherited the latter's wealth in 1902 but not his business acumen, and was poor at his death. During his lifetime he launched four journals. The first, *Swadeshabhimani* (*The Patriot*, 1905–1910), was closed down because of its daring attacks on the ruling political structures of the region. His other journals—*Muslim* (1906–1917); the short-lived *al-Islam* (1918, in Arabic-Malayalam); and *Deepika* (*The Torch*, 1931–1932)—centered on educational and theological reform. In addition, he was indefatigable in organizing local Muslim associations dedicated to secular education, including women's education. Influenced by Muhammad 'Abduh (see chapter 3), Muhammad Rashid Rida's journal *al-Manar* (*The Beacon*) (see chapter 6), and reformers of earlier centuries, Wakkom Maulavi launched his own call for return to what he considered genuine Islam, which included the centrality of the Qur'an and *tawhid* (unity), reinterpreted in the light of modern needs. This return involved the overcoming of ignorance, *taqlid* (imitation of past scholars), the veneration of saints, and other popular religious practices. He passed on his reformist vision to Mappila political and educational leaders of the following generation, and to progressive movements such as the Aikhya Sankam Society and the Mujahids. Criticized by some as a modernist "strayer," Wakkom Maulavi is praised by many as the father of the Mappila renaissance.¹

Islam is a religion that is compatible with reason; that is, it has no principles that contradict reason. The detailed matters of a bygone era that are improbable and difficult to interpret rationally will be judged by reason to be invalid. The basic approach of the religion is this: If one perceives in the Qur'an and the *hadith* [narratives of the Prophet] some words with an apparent meaning that seems unlikely, one must conclude that another interpretation is intended, an interpretation that does not contradict reason. There are two opinions among the '*ulama*' [religious scholars] regarding such passages. The first holds that while such words must have a meaning that does not

conflict with reason, it may be hard for us to grasp their real significance, and we should leave the matter to God. That is the view of the early '*ulama*' (*salafiya* [pious early Muslims]). The opinion of later '*ulama*', however, is this: Having first expounded the passage on the basis of correct linguistic principles, one must then determine a meaning that is not contrary to reason. In short, if one senses that there is a contradiction between reason and the customary view, in choosing between the alternatives stated above, one must allow reason to decide the issue.

As we have stated earlier, Islam establishes beliefs that have the quality of being fitting for a goal.

Wakkom Muhammad Abdul Khader Maulavi, "Islam Budhiye Acarikkunna Matumakunnu" (Islam Is a Religion that Respects Reason), in *Wakkam Maulaviyute Tiranyneyetutta Krtikul* (*Selected Writings of Wakkom Maulavi*) (Wakkom, India: Wakkom Maulavi Publications, 1979), pp. 133–135. First published in 1915. Translation from Malayalam and introduction by Roland E. Miller.

1. M. Muhammadkunnu, *Wakkom Maulavi* (Kottayam, India: National Book Stall, 1981); S. Sharafuddeen, *Wakkom Maulavi, A Study* (Trivandrum, India: Samkramana Pusthaka Chakram, 1983); M. Abdul Samad, *Islam in Kerala* (Kollam, India: Laurel Publications, 1998); Roland E. Miller, *The Mappila Muslims of Kerala*, rev. ed. (Madras, India: Orient Longman, 1992).

A faith that is based either on a guess or without an appropriate purpose is one that insults both the faith itself and the believers. [The Qur'an says:] "They have no certainty about that. They only follow a guess. Guesswork has no value for knowing the truth." (Sura 53, Verse 28)² Islam strongly criticizes the words and the actions of past ancestors who closed their eyes and believed and practiced without discriminating between good and evil. "And when it is said to them, 'Come and believe God and God's Messenger,' they say, 'We will follow only the religion of our forefathers.' What! Will they only follow that even if their forefathers knew nothing and had not found the way of truth?" [Sura 2, Verse 170] With great intentionality Islam teaches that we should both examine and consider this universe and its

principles. Moreover, it praises those who think in this way. "Tell me what is in the heavens and the earth." (Qur'an) [Sura 2, Verse 33] "Do they not look and consider all the realities that God has created in the heavens and the earth?" (Sura 7, Verse 185) "For those who remember God, whether standing, sitting, or lying, in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and in the alternation of night and day, there are many signs." (Sura 3, Verse 190) [conflated with Verse 191] Islam sharply condemns ignorant people who do not use their reason to know the essential meaning of things. "They have hearts, but no knowledge; they have eyes but do not see. They have ears, but they do not hear. They are like animals. Worse than that, they have erred and gone astray." [Sura 7, Verse 179]

Modernist Islam was a major intellectual current in the Muslim world during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Proponents of this movement typically believed that it was not only possible but imperative to show how “modern” values and institutions could be reconciled with Islamic ideals. While the movement declined after the 1930s, replaced by secular projects such as nationalism and socialism, on one hand, and revivalist religious movements on the other, recent years have seen a resurgence of modernist Islamic ideals among Muslim authors and activists.

This sourcebook brings together 52 key texts of the modernist Islamic movement, from the Ottoman and Russian Empires to South Africa and Southeast Asia. Charles Kurzman and a team of section editors, each specializing in a different region of the Islamic world, have selected and annotated the writings, most of which are presented in English for the first time. Some of the texts pioneer modern discursive formats such as newspaper columns, public lectures, essays, short stories, and theater, while others engage in traditional forms of Islamic exegesis. The writings cover as broad an intellectual landscape as their geographical scope, including reformers in the areas of religion, culture, politics, women’s rights, science, and education.

With the publication of this volume, an English-speaking audience can read more widely in the literature of modernist Islam than even the makers of the movement could.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

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