June 4, 2015

Dreams of Islamic Liberalism
Christopher de Bellaigue

Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860–1950
by Marwa Elshakry, University of Chicago Press, 439 pp., $45.00

During the spring of 1910 a young Ira- nian whose name was Muhammad Shumayyil, a mullah who would climb to the roof of his house to observe a mysterious projectile as it moved across the night sky. Ahmad Kasravi did not know what he was see- ing but he was so impressed by the spectacle of the belief, prevalent in his poor, back- ward province, that this “tailed star” was somehow connected with Iran’s political tur- bulence, and that it au- gured the destruction of the earth.

On the contrary, Kasravi’s noctur- nal observations filled him with happiness, and he was even happier when he came across an Arabic journal, al-Muqtataf (“The Digest”), that told him that the ob- ject was not an augury but a comet whose mysteries had been explained by an earlier English astronomer, Edmund Halley. Kasravi was al- ready known in the seminary for his scurrilous manner; his discovery of the comet confirmed in his mind the stupidity of his teachers and the backwardness of their methods.

“It was this star,” he would recall, “that set me on the road of Euro- pean learning.”

The story of Kasravi’s epiphany is perhaps too small and anecdotal to be included by Marwa Elshakry in her dense, scholarly, and rewarding book on the diffusion of Western scientific knowledge in Arabic, but it shows the human consequences of what she describes. Descended from a line of provincial mullahs, Kasravi had grown up in an environment that was distrustful of modern ideas. Four centuries after Copernicus, the astronomy taught at the seminary was stubbornly Ptolemaic, while the medical care Kasravi received after catching ty- phus consisted of an almost fatal course of bleeding. But he knew that the West had discarded long before, together with democrats, including Kasravi, who were inspired by Western forms of expansion education and health care, that point of scientific knowledge in the Arabic world was far from the West’s.

Now and assimilating technology from Eu- rope. There were some successes, such as the eradication of the plague and a slow improvement in university education. The Ottoman Empire soon had railway and telegraph lines. For many tradi- tionally, however, reform was a finan- cially unpalatable exercise. In the wake of the declaration of the ruler of Egypt, Khedive Ismail, in 1878 (before an in- ternational bankruptcy commission) that “my country is no longer in Africa; we are now part of Europe.”

By then, tatāwur, a neologism popularized by al-Muqtataf and mean- ing “evolution,” was increasingly used in the Ottoman Muslim world. Of Darwin, On the Origin of Species

Mhammad Aboul, Egypt’s senior judicial authority at the start of the twentieth century and an admirer of Darwin. He is now recognized, according to Christopher de Bellaigue, as “one of the most influential liberal Islamic thinkers.”

mation on virtually anything that it interested them. Between 1880 and 1908, Elshakry tells us, a total of more than six hundred newspapers and periodi- cals were founded in Egypt alone.

The most prominent among them was al-Muqtataf, whose readership greatly exceeded its circulation of three thou- sand. A group of enthusiasts in Bagh- dad, for example, banded together to buy a single subscription. Al-Muqtataf was the popular expression of a transla- tion movement that had begun earlier in the century with military and medi- cal manuals and highlights from the Enlightenment canon. (Montesquieu’s Considerations on the Romans and Fé- nelon’s Telemaechus had been favorites.) Al-Muqtataf supplied its readers with articles, many of them lifted without attribution from journals like Popular Science, on subjects as diverse as glass- making, microscopes, and maintaining a thick head of hair, and it introduced them to scientists like Thomas Huxley, Ernst Haeckel, and Louis Pasteur.

This literary and journalistic output was partly an offshoot of official reform efforts, encouraged by the Ottoman sultan in Istanbul and his rebellious vassal the Egyptian khedive, and aimed at modernizing their respective armies, expanding education and health care, at Omdurman and annexed which the Egyptians regarded as their natural hinterland; it was a particularly bloody demonstration of imperial might, with the British losing forty- seven dead and an estimated 10,000 Muslims killed.

“The driving natural selection,” ob- served a demoralized Egyptian na- tionalist, Qasim Amin, had impelled the Europeans, “powered by steam and electricity,” to seize the wealth of any country resisting them. “For Amin,” Elshakry writes, “like so many other Arab thinkers at that time, the encounter with the Western world was itself an example of the ‘struggle for life’ between nations.”

Japanese, which had industrialized rap- idly, unexpectedly defeating tsarist Russia in the war of 1904–1905, pro- vida e evidence that Eastern countries were not excluded from modern tech- nology and progress. The editors of al-Muqtataf regretted that while the Japanese had adopted an advanc- ing science, “most of our [clerics] are still saying a thousand times over what they have been saying for the last thousand years, like cattle chewing their cud; it makes the heart sick.”

By this time, Elshakry tells us, fewer people were listening to Sarruf and Nimr; their good relations with Egypt’s British rulers were anathema to the new breed of Egyptian nationalist. “Look out for your slaughter, oh son of a she- ass,” ran a letter to the editors; “soon you will see yourself smitten and the printing office of your vile paper lying in ruins.”

But now it may be apparent that Reading Darwin in Arabic is about more than its title suggests. It describes the intellectual ferment in Egypt as the country grappled both with Dar- winism and colonial rule, and an Is- lamic liberalism shone briefer before being all but extinguished by the brutal ideologies of the twentieth century.

Notwithstanding al-Muqtataf’s gloomy view of the future, Elshakry writes, there had been a huge expansion in the secular knowledge to which educated Egyp- tians (including many sheikhs) were exposed. No longer was legitimate knowledge defined by texts in the religi- ous schools, interpreted for the most part with stultifying literalness. It had begun to include virtually any intel- lectual production anywhere in the world.

At the time of the French invasion, in 1798, Egypt’s leading divines had reacted to the scientific endeavors of Napoleon’s savants with a mixture of scorn and incomprehension. One of them had disapproved of the French naturalists’ practice of preserving un- known species for further study. The Prophet was reported to have declared that there were 10,000 kinds of beast above the water and 20,000 kinds of fish below. There seemed to be no point in studying the human species.

A century later, the country had changed. Napoleon’s influence had stoked the fire of secularism, and the Muslim Brotherhood, with its call to “Rise up! The Prophet is rising!” We do not know what was already known, and on far better authority.

In 1989 General Herbert Kitch- ener defeated the Sudanese Mahdist
much as he could of infidel learning. The mufti, Muhammad Abduh, is now recognized as one of the most influential liberal Islamic thinkers. Elshakry deals with him at length. Abduh's reformist instincts had been sharpened while he was a student at Al-Azhar, Cairo's ancient school of Islamic learning, which was then known for being squallid, disorganized, and fiercely hostile to modern science. (Abduh said later that whatever small knowledge he had possessed had come “through ten years of sweeping the dirt of Al-Azhar from my brain.”) One of his early mentors was the maverick pan-Islamist Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, whom he followed to Paris during the latter's exile there; but Abduh also learned much from Western thinkers, including the British philosopher and educator Herbert Spencer. Spencer’s view of society as an organism with its own laws of evolution and his rejection of pure materialism paralleled Abduh’s own ideas.

In 1903, during one of the European trips that led critics to accuse him of being more interested in Western civilization than his own, Abduh visited Spencer at his home in Brighton. The Englishman listened to Abduh’s comments on God (“a Being, not a Person”), before observing that the mufti and his allies were “agnosticists of the same kind as our agnosticism.” Twenty years earlier Abduh had advised al-Afghani to conceal his criticism of the intellectual torpor of Islamic society, admonishing him that “we do not cut off the head of religion except with the sword of religion.” Abduh’s religious sincerity was constantly questioned by his opponents, some of them accusing him and his allies of trying to “turn the mosque into a school of philosophy and literature to put out Islam’s light.”

In fact, he was both a puritan and an innovator. Abduh deplored what he saw as popular deviations from the pure Islam of the Prophet’s time. He objected to worship at Sufi shrines, which he saw as a later, sectarian heresy. He put him in surprising company, for his point of view was shared by the Wahhabis of Arabia, whose doctrines are nowadays associated with the bleak, legalist Islam of the modern Saudi state. At the same time, he boldly opposed centuries of religious literalism by interpreting religious texts allegorically. An example was the Koranic reference to the creation of all people “of one soul.” The soul in question did not refer solely to Adam, Abduh argued, but to human beings as a whole. This interpretation—starting with a scientific understanding of life’s origin in nature—as uncovered in modern science and anticipated in the Qur’an. Overt anti-Darwinism is a feature of fanatical groups like the Taliban and Boko Haram.

After decades of Western support for militarist rulers in the Middle East, the Arab Spring of 2011 seemed to mark a return to liberal ideas that had been elaborated by men like Muhammad Abduh. From Tunisia’s Ennahda movement to moderates like the Muslim Brotherhood (and even reformists in Shia Iran), the vision of Islam at harmony with science and modern values has broad support. But militarism and Islamism have also strengthened themselves in Syria and Egypt, while Turkey, formerly a source of hope for an Abduh-style accommodation, has veered toward the Muslim Brotherhood. Darwinina is not only a scientific system, but also a shorthand for intellectual curiosity and a progressive view of the human condition. The reverses it has suffered over the past few years are less bad than they look, not only because modern values are espoused by a great number of Muslims, but because the ideological questions provide mounting support for the region’s dictators. The Middle East’s short-term future looks bleak, but liberalism within an Islamic framework will survive.