The Role of Islam in the Political Thought of Muhammad Abduh

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Abstract : Muhammad Abduh stands as a founding thinker of Islamic revivalism and modernism, the political phenomenon which began with him and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani in the 19th century which sought to address the perceived regression of Islamic societies in the face of western colonialism and the onslaught of modernity. The scholarship on Abduh and al-Afghani, and Islamic modernism in general, is vast. This paper, however, provides a critical approach to some of this scholarship and attempts to re-think the epistemic framework of Abduh's political thought and the place of Islam therein. Much of the current work on Abduh falls into the trap of seeing his task as one of "compromising" Islam for the values of European modernity. This paper argues that for Abduh, Islam was not just a compartmentalised theological framework: it was at the nexus of societal emancipation, intellectual and cultural rejuvenation, and political progress. Far from "modernising" and diluting Islam to the extent that it became irrelevant in the face of rationality as defined by European modernity, Islam remained central to Abduh's political framework.