



Ethics, Authority and Individualism in Early Twentieth-Century Egypt

Junaid QUADRI
University of Illinois at Chicago

In April of 1925, the Egyptian Muslim scholar and judge ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Raziq published a book that turned out to be something of a bombshell. Titled *Islam and the Foundations of Political Power*, ‘Abd al-Raziq’s book advanced a forthright argument for the separation between religion and state in Islam. The contemporary Egyptian writer Muhammad ‘Imara has characterized it as “the first attempt to Islamicize secularism, to claim that Islam is secular.”¹ For the views he expressed in this work, ‘Abd al-Raziq met with strong opposition from his colleagues at the famed Azhar University, and in a matter of months, he had been expelled from the community of ‘ulama by the Council of Senior Scholars. Writing some thirty-five years later, Nadav Safran commented in his study of Liberal Nationalist thinkers that the timing of ‘Abd al-Raziq’s publication, coming as it did in the wake of the abolition of the Ottoman caliphate served to focus attention on the relevance of the institution of the caliphate. But, Safran suggested, ‘Abd al-Raziq was advancing a more fundamental thesis: “that Islam is, on the one hand, an exclusively spiritual community and, on the other, a code of disciplinary and religious precepts binding upon the individual conscience without any relation to power and politics.”² It is in the

¹ Muhammad ‘Imara, *Ma‘rikat al-Islam wa-Usul al-Hukm* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, [1989] 1997), p. 8.

² Nadav Safran, *Egypt in Search of Political Community: An Analysis of the Intellectual and Political Evolution of Egypt, 1840-1952* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), p. 141.

second of these understandings of secularism that I am most interested in my own work. In particular, I am interested in probing the histories and genealogies of the notions of “religion” and “individual conscience,” and the distance from power and politics they are thought to imply.

I have previously investigated the former concept in the thought of Muhammad Bakhit al-Muti‘i (d. 1935), Azharite scholar and for a time the Mufti of Egypt. Although Bakhit was one of the most vocal critics of the hard political secularism advocated by ‘Abd al-Raziq – not only serving on the Council that revoked the latter’s credentials to scholarly officialdom, but also penning a lengthy rejoinder to the arguments advanced in the offending book – the way he handles the term *din* is indicative of a conception of “religion” that is itself indebted to a certain kind of secularity, i.e., religion as abstract and independent of external authority.³

In this paper, I wish to turn to the famed Egyptian writer Ahmad Amin (1886-1954). Taking together these two rather disparate figures in the early twentieth century allows us to think through, in a preliminary sort of way, the kinds of questions that were occupying Muslim Egyptian thinkers of this period. In particular, it allows us to track what I argue is an increasing emphasis in the period on a notion of the human person as a self-governing individual, capable of independent ethical evaluation.⁴

Some five years before the ‘Abd al-Raziq affair, Amin published the *Kitab al-Akhlaq*, a book on ethics that was incorporated into the curriculum of secondary schools and was also taught to teachers of primary schools.⁵ This was part of a flowering interest in ethics in Egypt, that started at about the turn of the century, and included publishing old Islamic classics,

³ See Junaid Quadri, “Religion as Transcendence in Modern Islam: Tracking ‘Religious Matters’ into a Secular(izing) Age” in *Working with A Secular Age: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Charles Taylor’s Master Narrative* (ed. F. Zemmin, C. Jager, and G. Vanheeswijck).

⁴ Importantly, because both Bakhit’s *Irshad ahl al-milla* and Amin’s *Kitab al-Akhlaq* were written before the 1925 watershed moment, it also suggests that the kinds of questions that came to a rather controversial head with the ‘Abd al-Raziq affair were areas of concern and thinking well before he published his book, pushing us to consider a re-periodization of secularism in Egypt.

⁵ Ahmad Amin, *Kitab al-Akhlaq* (Cairo: Matba‘at Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyya, [1920] 1929).

translations of contemporary European writers and a re-translation of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics by Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid. Amin had been educated at the Azhar and the College for Sharia Judges, and taught at both the College and the Egyptian University. He is identified most strongly with his affinity for liberal circles, best known for a work examining the history of Islam, which stressed its rationalist side. In the *Kitab al-Akhlaq* too, Amin's liberal side is on rather clear display.

The book is centered, as one might expect of a book of ethics, on the twin concepts of good and evil. But, says Amin, determining what is good, and what is evil, requires a standard by which we make these judgements. Just as when we say something is tall or short, we use the unit of the metre as a yardstick; or when we say something is heavy or light, we use – or at least Egyptians did – the unit of the *'uqqa* or the *ratl*; so must we have some sort of measure against which the valuations that “truthfulness is good” or “lying is evil” can make sense.⁶ Amin lays out three rather general schools (*madhahib*) that give different answers to this question: personal happiness – this is the egoism, or what he calls the egoistic hedonism, in which he pulls together Epicurus from the ancients and Hobbes from the moderns; general happiness – by which he means the utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill; and what he calls intuition – in which things are good or evil for intrinsic reasons (or for attaining virtue). Here he has in mind the Stoics (especially Epictetus) among the ancients, and Kant from among the moderns.⁷

After providing an overview of each, Amin sides with a version of the last school.⁸ He cannot accept the notion that ethics can be reduced to pleasure and pain, or a ledger that balances positive and negative consequences, deeming this “the behavior of merchants.” Rather, he says, it is the case that “man was born such that contained in his depths is a faculty that shows

⁶ Ibid., p. 32

⁷ Ibid., p. 33-55

⁸ Ibid., p. 55-60

him that some actions are good and others are bad, not by virtue of their effects in producing pleasure or pain but rather in and of themselves.”⁹ This is the conscience, and Amin devotes a stand-alone chapter to explaining to his young Egyptian audience what this conscience is.¹⁰

Rather than provide a detailed account of this chapter, I want to instead bring to your attention a few salient themes that will help us understand his project better. The first theme is his discussion's relative autonomy from religion and tradition. Islam and Christianity enter into the picture as part of Amin's justification for why he cannot accept consequentialist accounts of ethics – because the charity (*ihsan*), altruism (*ithar*) and sacrifice spoken about plainly by the two religions cannot be properly understood as virtues on consequentialist readings. But for a thinker who was preoccupied throughout much of his life with providing a re-reading of early Islamic history, especially in a work meant to educate young students, it is remarkable that references to religious tradition are vanishingly few. Amin's progressivism, in the form of a suspicion of tradition and custom as ethical guides is on full display. (Interestingly he uses the word *'urf* here which today has been mobilized in the field of Islamic law to afford some ethical distance from the textuality of scripture). Oddbjorn Leirvik from the University of Oslo has commented on how the notion of a supreme ideal (*al-mathal al-a'la*), used by later writers to insert what he calls “Qur'anic God-talk” into their philosophical idealism, is not used for that purpose by Amin, who instead “rather speaks empirically of the different supreme ideals that guide the peoples of the earth.”¹¹ As Safran has also mentioned, Amin is one of a group of progressivist scholars who “rejected any notion of ethics as founded on positive-divine revelation... [and] any idea of superhuman or other-worldly sanction and relied rather on the

⁹ Ibid., p. 58

¹⁰ Chapter 2, pp. 10-17. In the rewritten and restructured 1944 version of the book, it is chapter 11 that treats the conscience.

¹¹ Oddbjorn Leirvik, *Human Conscience and Muslim-Christian Relations: Modern Egyptian Thinkers on al-Damir* (New York & Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2006), p. 86.

individual conscience, social responsibility, or the sanction of society to provide the necessary support for ethical norms.”¹²

There is also Amin's choice of references and terms. So, whereas it would be quite possible to think about ethics by turning to classical Islamic schools of theology, these make no appearance in Amin's work. Rather than *husn* and *qubh*, the terms for good and evil that would have been an obvious point of reference given that they dominated the extensive and detailed jurisprudential discussions of moral philosophy for centuries, Amin uses the alternative Arabic terms *khayr* and *sharr*. Even more remarkably, the loaded terms *ta'a* and *'isyan* (obedience and disobedience) which are used throughout the Qur'an to talk about one's relationship to God (when Adam disobeys God, he does *'isyan*, for example) are reserved for talking about the moral agent's relationship to his conscience and to the laws of civilized society.

The second theme that I'd like to address is Amin's sources for thinking about conscience. This is not to belabor his debt to European thinkers, but rather to understand better his rather eclectic understanding of conscience when viewed from the perspective of Europe. Leirvik has commented on Egyptian writers' extensive engagement with Rousseau, going back as far as Rifa'a al-Tahtawi in the first half of the nineteenth century. And indeed, in Amin's understanding of conscience, there are echoes of Rousseau who thought of conscience as a moral guide and restraint. Amin explains how a conscience functions temporally, before a moral act, during it, and after it. In the before phase, he uses the words *hadi* and *murshid* (both meaning “guide”) explicitly to refer to the element of a conscience that warns the moral agent from doing evil and tries to restrain him; or commands the performance of obligations, and encourages him to continue it.

¹² Safran, *Egypt in Search of Political Community*, p. 161

But conscience is also a judge (*qadi*) and an enforcer of that judgement, a formulation that fits better with Kant's understanding of conscience as an inner court present within humans. This takes us away from Rousseau's focus on sentiment and feeling, and towards a Kantian focus on judgement. Amin uses the Arabic for judgement, *hukm*, that is applied also to court rulings.

Finally, though Amin thinks of conscience as a natural faculty that exists in young children (and even in animals), it is not an innate source of goodness imperiled by the danger of a corrupt society that will obscure it, as suggested by Rousseau. Though Amin shares Rousseau's interest in moral education, he does not share the French philosopher's suspicion of society. For him, a good conscience is not one that uncovers that original pristine state despite societal influences, but neither is it merely a reflection of society's prejudices as maintained by Montaigne and Hobbes. Rather, conscience is a natural faculty that grows and becomes more refined when proper attention is paid to it. It is in need of *tarbiyya* (education or moral development). It can err (not infallible a la Rousseau), especially when it is immature, and it can become weak or sick, or even die. But when it is properly developed through repeatedly following its imperatives, keeping the company of good people and reading books that enjoin virtue it can also be strengthened. Along with education and a strong will then, societal experience is an essential element of a healthy conscience. To think in terms of sources, then, this is reminiscent more of the virtue ethics that was an integral part of Islamic ethical thought, which stresses repetition and habituating oneself towards the demands of virtue, rather than as Amin says, "accustoming oneself to evil by repeatedly placing it before the soul."

The third theme I want to point out, very quickly, is the important link between conscience and nation-building, especially as it applies to what we may call civilization talk. Just as the conscience varies within the life of an individual, it can vary by time and place. There is a

hint of Amin's progressivism on display when he suggests that one of the accomplishments of the modern period has been to minimize interreligious disputes between Muslims and Christians, thanks to a new, more correct understanding of what conscience demands. More obvious, however is his claim that the imperatives of conscience are rather simple in primitive states, but in civilized states, in which people follow laws of society that in turn help him live a life of conscience and increase its authority, the conscience may be refined to such a point that individuals give entirely of themselves in defence of their opinions and in the path of the reform of his nation.

The final point I want to bring to your attention is Amin's very strong defence of freedom of conscience. Even though conscience differs from place to place and time to time, and even though conscience is not infallible, every person is bound to obey his or her conscience. He is bound to obey what he believes to be right, not what is correct in reality. If he is proven to be wrong, he bears no ethical responsibility, because his obligation is to follow his conscience. This, needless to say, is a remarkably individualist notion of the human person.

Very briefly, by way of conclusion, let me draw your attention once more to the two very different figures that I've gathered together in this paper. Despite the divergence in their intellectual training, genres of writing, and scholarly agendas, both were confronting an intellectual and political context which brought to the fore shared concerns around authority and human personhood. Turning our attention away from the famous controversies surrounding secularism, such as the outcry over 'Abd al-Raziq's bombshell work, and towards these intellectual developments helps us better understand the deep societal significance of these questions in a changing world. By juxtaposing these two very different figures, I've tried to

outline in a rather preliminary way a noticeable shift in Egyptian Muslim thinking towards a more thorough-going notion of the human as an individual, capable of independent ethical evaluation and with more tenuous relations to external powers.