

Traditionalism and Modernity: Navigating Reform in Egyptian Religious Discourse

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Abstract

This research investigates the persistent conflict between adherence to tradition and innovative thinking within Egypt's Al-Azhar institution, focusing on its role as a religious and educational authority amid calls for reform. The study traces recent and historic confrontations, such as the 2020 International Conference on the Renovation of Islamic Discourse and the notorious 1926 clash between Al-Azhar and Taha Hussein over pre-Islamic poetry. Drawing parallels with the European Reformation led by Martin Luther, the analysis highlights how challenges of religious renewal encompass questions of authority, societal readiness, and the risks of unchecked multiplicity. The paper demonstrates that while Islamic traditionalism and modernization seem competitive, reconciliation is possible for societal advancement if grounded in shared principles. Using historical references and contemporary debates, the research shows that genuine reform at Al-Azhar—with its profound influence on Egyptian and wider Muslim societies—depends on inclusiveness, cooperation, and a willingness by all stakeholders to transcend uncompromising attitudes. The findings underscore the need for balanced religious discourse to address extremism, safeguard youth, and adapt to rapid sociopolitical changes, particularly following Egypt's recent revolutions. Ultimately, the study concludes that successful modernization must be informed by historical lessons and prepare society with common values, ensuring order and unity amid diversity. The fate of reform at Al-Azhar will continue shaping the evolution of religious thought and practice in Egypt and across the Islamic world.

Key Words: Al-Azhar, Traditionalism, Innovation, Religious Reform, Taha Hussein, Egyptian Society, Martin Luther, European Reformation, Modernization

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الملخص

يتتبع البحث الصراع المستمر بين الالتزام بالتقاليد والتفكير الابتكاري داخل مؤسسة الأزهر في مصر، مع التركيز على دورها كمرجعية دينية وتعليمية في ظل الدعوات إلى الإصلاح. ويتتبع الدراسة المواجهات الحديثة والتاريخية مثل مؤتمر الأزهر الدولي لتجديد الخطاب الديني عام ٢٠٢٠ والمواجهة الشهيرة بين الأزهر وطارق حسين حول الشعر الجاهلي عام ١٩٢٦. مستعيناً بمقارنة مع حركة الإصلاح الديني الأوروبية بقيادة مارتن لوثر، يبرز التحليل كيف أن تحديات تجديد الدين تشمل قضايا السلطة، واستعداد المجتمع، ومخاطر التعددية غير المنضبطة. يبين البحث أنه رغم أن التقاليد الإسلامية والتحديث يبدوان متنافسين، إلا أن التوافق بينهما ممكن لتحقيق التقدم المجتمعي إذا تأسس على مبادئ مشتركة. وباستخدام مراجع تاريخية ونقاشات معاصرة، يوضح البحث أن الإصلاح الحقيقي في الأزهر—مع تأثيره العميق على المجتمع المصري والعالم الإسلامي الأوسع—يعتمد على الشمولية والتعاون واستعداد جميع الأطراف لتجاوز المواقف المتصلبة. وتبرز النتائج الحاجة إلى خطاب ديني متوازن لمواجهة التطرف، وحماية الشباب، ومواكبة التحولات الاجتماعية والسياسية السريعة، خاصة بعد الثورات الأخيرة في مصر. ويخلص البحث إلى أن التحديث الناجح يجب أن يستفيد من دروس التاريخ، وأن يُعد المجتمع قيمياً بشكل جيد، لضمان النظام والوحدة في ظل التنوع. وسيستمر مصير الإصلاح في الأزهر في تشكيل تطور الفكر والممارسة الدينية في مصر والعالم الإسلامي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأزهر، التقليدية، الابتكار، الإصلاح الديني، طه حسين، المجتمع المصري، مارتن لوثر، حركة الإصلاح الديني الأوروبية، الحداثة.

The Egyptian President has consistently emphasized the pressing necessity of cultivating a balanced religious discourse as a means of countering the rise of extremism and radical ideologies within Egypt and across the broader Islamic world. To address this challenge, he has turned to the venerable institution of Al-Azhar, tasking it with mediating between tradition and modernity, and reconciling long-established interpretations with the demands of renewal. The President has identified the persistence of outdated religious narratives as a central factor inhibiting Egypt's progress and providing fertile ground for extremist movements. On multiple occasions, he has expressed his expectation that Al-Azhar's religious scholars develop an approach to reform that fosters inclusivity, cooperation, accountability, and collective responsibility, thereby reshaping Islam's public image away from reductive and misrepresented stereotypes. As he asserted, *"Renewing religious discourse is needed to protect youth from wrong religious interpretations"* (Sisi, *Ahram Online*, January 27, 2020).

The reconciliation between past and present is not as unattainable as it may appear. Throughout its history, Islam has undergone numerous evolutionary movements aimed at integrating modernity into both its ideological framework and legislative structures. Scholars and intellectuals have engaged in extensive debates and discourses to advance development and modernization within the faith. The tension between traditionalist and modernist currents has experienced multiple fluctuations, with conflicts occasionally resolved through reasoned argumentation, while at other times escalating into acts of violence. Although Islam no longer functions as a theocratic authority in practice, the enduring influence of certain institutions continues to shape political systems in some Arab and Islamic countries. Al-Azhar, in particular, represents one such institution, with a long-standing history marked by the struggle between traditionalism and innovation.

The historic Muslim institution of Al-Azhar has long been entangled in political and religious conflicts and crises. At the recent Al-Azhar-led International Conference on the Renovation of Islamic Discourse, a notable verbal debate occurred between Grand Imam Ahmed Al-Tayeb, representing traditionalist perspectives, and Cairo University President Ahmed Al-Khosht, who advocated for reform and modernization. This exchange reignited the enduring debate over Al-Azhar's role as the oldest and most authoritative religious reference in Egypt and the wider Islamic world. Throughout its history, various political regimes have sought to exploit Al-Azhar to serve their distinct agendas, rendering the institution repeatedly subject to intense scrutiny and contention.

This research paper examines the tensions between adherence to tradition and innovative thinking within Al-Azhar as both a religious and educational institution. It interrogates the possibility of reconciling the often-conflicting ideologies of traditionalists and modernists, questioning whether meaningful reform can be achieved or if such efforts face challenging obstacles. Drawing on historical precedents of similar confrontations, the study seeks to identify potential pathways toward a negotiated compromise in the longstanding debate between conservatism and renewal.

The European Reformation of the sixteenth century, led by Martin Luther, exemplifies a spiritual and intellectual encounter with the possibility of transformative change. The Reformation was marked by both notable achievements and significant drawbacks, offering valuable lessons and hope for proponents of modernist interpretations within Islam. By examining this historical experience, contemporary reformers can potentially avoid the pitfalls of disunity and conflict that accompanied the pursuit of liberation in Europe. Similarly, the early twentieth-century confrontation between Al-Azhar and the Egyptian intellectual Taha Hussein demonstrates that the tension between adherence to traditionalist thought and the drive for innovation is not unique to the modern era. History is dense with such instances, highlighting the recurring struggle between established religious orthodoxy and the pursuit of reform and modernization.

Aim of the study

This paper is an attempt to prove that Islam and modernization, often perceived as competing forces, can in fact coexist in pursuit of the common good. Al-Azhar, as the most prestigious Islamic institution, alongside Egypt's committed intelligentsia, has demonstrated a sustained effort to preserve its sacred authority while embracing modernity. The changes and reforms undertaken by Al-Azhar have exerted a significant influence on Muslim societies, particularly within Egypt, shaping both religious discourse and social development in ways that reflect a careful balance between tradition and innovation.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory research method to examine the tensions between traditionalist and modernist ideologies within Al-Azhar. Given the historical, religious, and political dimensions of the institution, qualitative methods provide the depth and flexibility required to analyze complex discourses,

institutional practices, and the interaction between tradition and innovation. Such an approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the ideological conflicts and potential pathways toward reconciliation.

A qualitative methodology is particularly suited to this study because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the complex ideological conflicts and institutional dynamics within Al-Azhar. By integrating document analysis, media review, interviews, and literature review, the research can provide a holistic understanding of the challenges of reconciling traditionalism with modernist reforms and assess the feasibility of meaningful innovation within the institution.

History is repeating itself.

It is instructive to recall the European Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which emerged from a profound transformation in the intellectual currents of European culture. Central to this period was the reform of religious thought, which provided the foundation for subsequent advancements in politics, science, economics, and broader societal structures. The Renaissance thus demonstrates how shifts in ideological and intellectual paradigms can catalyze comprehensive and enduring social change.

On All Saints' Day, 1 November 1517, Martin Luther ignited the fire for a momentous challenge to established religious authority. On that day, a local church official in Wittenberg, Germany, was offering special indulgences for sale, attracting people from across the region who sought to secure forgiveness for their deceased relatives. Seizing this opportunity, Luther affixed his ninety-five theses to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral. Unexpectedly, these theses were translated from Latin into German and widely disseminated through the recently developed printing press. What began as a local act of protest quickly ignited a far-reaching revolution, profoundly transforming the religious, social, and intellectual landscape of Europe and the broader Christian world.

Luther opposed the ultimate authority of the Roman Church. The pope is taking all authorities in his hand. The pope was taking advantage of the access of God on behalf of all Christians. He controlled the destiny of them, taking fees for giving indulgences in return. Luther was just the voice of the growing oppositions of a lot of Christians of that time. Making use of the opposing mood against the Roman Church as well as the new printing press, Luther's arrow hit the target. It was the right atmosphere that had come along with the right action. He refused the absolute power of the Pope on the individuals alive and after their death. Giving

indulgences was the Pope's way to abuse power and delegated authority. Luther wanted all authorities to go back to individuals believing only in the divine power, "The true treasure of the Church is the Most Holy Gospel of the glory and the grace God (M. Luther, "Ninety-Five Theses).

By translating the Bible from Latin into the European vernaculars, Luther liberalized the divine authority hold only and solely by the Catholic Church to every individual. He gave access to ordinary people to understand the Holy Bible for themselves. He refused the authority of the church men to manipulate people through their own understanding of the Holy Bible. His faith was deep that he thinks that the Holy Bible is clear enough to any Christian to understand for himself without middlemen.

Later, fundamental issues appeared like the unlimited debate about the free will. Luther, in contrast to his liberal thought, went against the human free will which was against the principles of the Renaissance humanist views and values. Luther opened the door for theological and ideological debates and arguments. These ideological and theological conflicts seemed unsolvable.

Great intentions and high expectations accompanied the Protestant Reformation. Luther hoped that individuals would be able to find their own interpretations of their religion, but the actual outcomes were far more drastic. The rapid and unexpected changes led to severe conflicts among Christians, as individuals began to impose their own understandings of the Holy Bible onto personal experiences. This development proved dangerous, as individuality was not the intended goal of Luther's revolution. Miscommunication and the fragmentation of Christian society replaced the prior sense of unity, even if that unity had been flawed. The multiplicity of interpretations revealed its disruptive potential, with some interpretations being weak or insufficiently refined. The emergence of the Reformation coincided with the proliferation of unchecked interpretations of the Bible. As noted, "Luther expected that there would be periods of disagreement caused by the Devil and his demons inserting error into minds of individuals seeking access to this conduit of the Devine" (92). Yet, the ensuing reality far exceeded his expectations, resulting in widespread conflict and strife. The diversity intended to alleviate religious congestion instead exacerbated divisions among disputing parties.

Hence, any control or authority of the government was impossible in such conflicting atmosphere. The government sought what is called a "pluralism" (92) to avoid the dangerousness of the uncontrolled individuality of interpreting the

Bible according to personal experiences and biased agendas. Society needs a shared basis they can agree with. Communication was completely missed after the Protestant Reformation. Destabilization of religious and political system is expected to explode at any time. Shared values and beliefs are urgently needed. The philosopher John Rawls thinks that the Protestant Reformation "fragmented the religious unity of the Middle Ages and led to religious pluralism, with all its consequences for later centuries" (xxiv). The Christian society changed from the absolute authority of the Catholic Church to unlimited liberation and uncontrolled individual freedom and chaos. Religiously and politically, both situations are not accepted. The imposed belief and religion by the Catholic Church led to a silent then loud opposition. While the uncontrolled and incalculable freedom in religious beliefs and interpretations of the Bible led to conflicting confrontations between the different parties. Rawls sees that the solution is to find a "reasonable" acceptance of multiple views:

Citizens are reasonable when, viewing one another as free and equal in a system of social cooperation over generations, they are prepared to offer one another fair terms of social cooperation (defined by principles and ideals) and they agree to act on those terms, even at the cost of their own interests in particular situations, provided that others also accept those terms. (xliv)

So, the keyword here is preparation. People of any society cannot go through drastic change without enough preparation. The society needs to agree on shared terms. They need to speak one language, same "principles". Common ground of values and principles is the solid start any society needs to face the challenges of diversity and conflict. Post-Reformation government struggled to find a middle way between Luther's theology that opposes any control with its potential danger of discrepancy and pluralism.

Although multiplicity is a bliss, it can also give rise to disorder. Individual interpretations of religion often lack the shared values and collective spirit necessary to maintain social cohesion. Societies require a recognized authority to serve as a reliable point of reference, providing guidance when disagreements arise. Without such a reference, conflicting opinions can lead to confusion, loss, and unresolved disputes. People need authoritative decisions and resolutions to navigate the secular and religious challenges they encounter daily. In this context, Luther was courageous in granting individuals the freedom to interpret the texts of the Bible; however, he failed to establish a framework or guiding reference to mediate and govern these differing interpretations.

The conflicting ideas that emerged after the Reformation often led to violence, exemplified by the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) in central Europe. The unity of Europe was fragmented, with Lutherans primarily in Germany, Anglicans dominating Britain, and Catholics maintaining influence in France, Italy, and Spain. Subsequently, Calvinism sought to establish a framework of “elective affinities” alongside the emerging capitalist economic system (Weber). Over time, however, compromises developed between religious principles and the practical demands of politics, the economy, and governance. Despite the turmoil, Luther's revolution profoundly challenged the ideological foundations of Christianity in the sixteenth century and opened the door to change and liberation. It inaugurated a new way of thinking in which individuals were freed from the delusions imposed by authoritarian religious institutions, granting them direct access to God. Science and hard work became central values in the emerging liberated society, reflecting the transformative impact of Luther's ideas on both thought and social practice.

Another figure exhibiting a Lutheran-like spirit emerged in the early twentieth century in the person of Dr. Taha Hussein, the Dean of Arabic Literature. Courageously and progressively, he challenged the long-standing religious authority of Al-Azhar, and for decades, tension and conflict between Hussein and the institution persisted. According to Dr. Muhammad Emara, Hussein began his literary career by openly rebelling against Azharite sheikhs and their traditional curricula. The Azharite authorities blocked his attempt to complete the doctorate examination, ultimately resulting in his expulsion and falling into disfavor with the institution. He subsequently joined the Civil Egyptian University, where he earned the first PhD conferred by the university for his work on the renewal of Abu al-'Alaa's legacy in 1914. Beyond his biography, Hussein's intellectual and literary contributions are remarkable; he is widely regarded as the Dean of Arabic Literature par excellence and a writer and thinker whose influence has shaped multiple generations of Egyptian scholars and erudites.

Hussein's writings had a profound impact on the Egyptian Renaissance and the development of modernism in Arabic literature. For forty-six years following his death, Egypt and the broader Arab world have not produced another figure comparable to him. In short, he remains one of the most prominent thinkers without parallel across nations. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize fourteen times, though he never received the award, which might otherwise have been a fitting recognition of his contributions. The roots of the conflict between Hussein and Al-Azhar are longstanding and complex, encompassing both personal and, more significantly, intellectual dimensions. Guided by the memorable command,

“*Read, you blind,*” Hussein quickly learned to navigate the mindset of Azharite sheikhs. Known for his strategic discretion, he openly presents his beliefs, carefully managing both his confrontations and his intellectual pursuits.

The “blind” scholar diligently followed the guidance he was given, traveled extensively, attained the highest academic honors, and ultimately became the Dean of Arabic Literature. Over the course of his career, he authored dozens of books and thousands of articles. Among his most notable publications was *On Pre-Islamic Poetry*, issued in March 1926 after he had delivered his lectures to students in the Department of Arabic at the Egyptian University (now Cairo University). Upon its release, the book sparked a storm of controversy in newspapers and magazines, many of which called for the prosecution and condemnation of its author. Earlier, in 1914, while traveling to France, Dr. Hussein was reported by Islamists to be wearing his Azharite turban despite holding a PhD from Cairo University. However, during the journey, he symbolically rejected this traditional affiliation by throwing the turban into the sea while on deck, signaling a decisive shift in his intellectual and personal stance.

Intellectually, Hussein began to stir the still waters of Al-Azhar’s untouchable traditionalism. He straightforwardly posed questions akin to those raised by sociologists and other scholars of social change, interrogating the relationship between longstanding institutions and the forces of technical and scientific advancement. His writings illuminated his engagement with Islam as a religion, as a cultural system, and as a collective social force. Through Hussein’s autobiography, researchers can trace the prevailing intellectual trends in early twentieth-century Egypt, particularly those represented by the Egyptian University, which fostered a community of prominent Egyptian thinkers. At the forefront of this intellectual milieu stood Dr. Hussein, renowned for his bold and sustained engagements, including many confrontations with the formidable authority of Al-Azhar.

The clash reached its peak in 1926 with the publication of Hussein’s controversial book *On Pre-Islamic Poetry*. The work provoked a wave of accusations against Hussein’s beliefs, thoughts, and writings, marking one of the fiercest scholarly controversies in Egypt’s modern history. In composing the book, Hussein employed a method akin to Cartesian doubt, ultimately concluding that much of the pre-Islamic poetry had been fabricated, written after the advent of Islam, and wrongly attributed to pre-Islamic poets. This position drew sharp criticism from numerous scholars of philosophy and language, including Mustapha

Sadiq ar-Rafi', al-Khidr Hussein, Muhammad Lutfi Goma', Sheikh Muhammad al-Khudari, Muhammad Shakir, and others, resulting in an intense battle of ideas. Additionally, several Azharite scholars brought legal charges against Hussein, accusing him of atheism. However, the court ultimately acquitted him, ruling that his scholarly opinion did not constitute an offense against religion or the Quran.

Hussein's controversial book *On Pre-Islamic Poetry* revolved around the hypothesis that the Quran reflects the linguistic and cultural context of the pre-Islamic era rather than the pre-Islamic poetry itself, given that Arabic was fluently spoken during that period. He argued that the pre-Islamic era was so culturally and intellectually advanced that it could not be fully represented by the poetry, much of which was partially fabricated after the advent of Islam. Consequently, the surviving corpus of pre-Islamic poetry does not accurately reflect the pre-Islamic era. Hussein argued that the pre-Islamic poetry was composed after the advent of Islam. He based his claim on the observation that the life depicted in the poetry closely reflected the experiences, inclinations, and concerns of Muslim society rather than that of the true pre-Islamic era. According to Hussein, the surviving fragments of authentic pre-Islamic poetry are so scarce that they offer no reliable representation or evidence of the period, and much of the prevailing understanding of the poetry relies heavily on the interpretations of Orientalist scholars. (Source)

Hussein's conclusions not only challenged the authority of Al-Azhar sheikhs but also offended the religious sensibilities of both scholars and liberal politicians, including figures such as Saad Pasha Zaghlul, as well as the general public, revealing a society not yet prepared for such intellectual critique. Remarkably, the debate over pre-Islamic poetry sparked a storm of controversy during Hussein's prime, a period when Egypt and the Arab world were grappling with the constraints of colonization, widespread illiteracy, and social stagnation. The controversy extended into the public sphere, with numerous newspapers and magazines publishing articles to refute his arguments and dozens of books and essays exploring this literary domain, engaging both young and old readers alike. (Source)

One of the key merits of Hussein's *On Pre-Islamic Poetry* is that it stood at the forefront of works that provoked significant controversy in the history of modern Arabic thought. Published in 1926, it came just one year after Sheikh Ali Abdel Razek's *Islam and the Foundations of Political Power*, which also generated considerable debate and for which Razek was accused of atheism. Hussein's book unleashed a storm of public and scholarly reaction, as it challenged

traditional interpretations and provided evidence supporting the notion of a civil state in Islam, further intensifying the debate over religion, society, and governance in Egypt. (source)

One of the sheikhs and a post-graduate student at al-Azhar University, called Khalil Hasanin, who assumes that he is one of those guarding against infringements in society, submitted a claim to the public prosecutor against Hussein , accusing him of defaming the Noble Quran blatantly. He said that Taha attributed fallacies to this heavenly book. Imam of al-Azhar encouraged this procedure and sent a letter to the public prosecutor which included a report written by Azahrte scholars on the book which provoked devout Muslims, disrupted public systems and lead to chaos. Imam of al-Azhar asked the public prosecutor to conduct legal proceedings against the author and put him on trial. (Source)

Hussein's small but provocative book drew condemnation from multiple quarters. For instance, Abdel Hamid al-Banan, a member of the Egyptian parliament, filled a formal claim against Hussein, accusing him of atheism, and the controversy became a topic of debate within the parliament itself. The then Egyptian Minister of Education also participated in the discussion, noting that the university had restricted the circulation of the book, confiscated all existing copies, and banned the publication of new ones (Source). Hussein was subjected to a six-month investigation, and the prosecutor issued a judgment against him. Throughout this period, he endured a prolonged ordeal and mounting criticism, which eventually extended to many parts of the Arab world.

The controversy sparked by Hussein's book endured for a long time and exposed a broader underlying issue. Hussein emphasized the necessity of confronting conservative Salafist beliefs, which he argued had burdened Al-Azhar with scientific stagnation and intellectual decline. Furthermore, he called for comprehensive reform of the institution, advocating that Al-Azhar be exposed to the fundamentals of modern life, similar to other educational and social facilities. Following in the footsteps of Imam Muhammad Abdu, who also championed reform, Hussein urged that Azharite scholars be granted dignity, respect, and access to culture and knowledge. He emphasized the importance of equipping them with modern scientific education and foreign language skills, and he advocated for educational reforms that would eliminate the disparities between Azharite students and their peers in other Egyptian schools.

Hussein also advocated for the reform of several critical aspects of Al-Azhar, the most important being that the institution should remain independent of politics and devote itself solely to religious education. He argued that political interference in religious matters generates disagreement, dissent, and uncertainty, while also allowing the conservative Salafist trend to operate as a “state within a state.” This phenomenon was evident in the religious leadership of Al-Azhar, which the institution assumed for itself, an innovation that Hussein considered inconsistent with Islam’s principles. Islam, he emphasized, is a religion that encourages development and the pursuit of higher ideals. Consequently, reforming Al-Azhar is a necessary duty to ensure that its ideology aligns with the aspirations of the people and remains in harmony with both its illustrious past and its potential for a bright future.

However, many people have either forgotten or chosen to overlook the methodological strategy that Hussein developed, which involved analyzing the Quranic text and its ontological realities through the lens of Cartesian doubt. As one of the most influential and prolific writers of his time, Hussein authored the controversial book *On Pre-Islamic Poetry*, for which he was accused of atheism—a charge easily leveled by narrow-minded individuals, religious scholars, pro-regime clerics, and semi-intellectuals in any context. Despite the controversy, his work opened the door to a new mode of thought, exploring intellectual avenues that had never before been examined. Over the course of his career, he produced fifty-five creative works spanning thought, criticism, and heritage, amassing an impressive library of books that continues to serve as a vital resource for researchers and students, ensuring his intellectual legacy endures.

Although Dr. Taha Hussein has long passed, his intellectual presence continues to resonate through his writings and enduring influence. Administratively, the legal case against him was eventually closed, yet the broader issue he highlighted—the reformation of Al-Azhar—remains unresolved. The institution continues to grapple with the tension between tradition and modernity, and the debates Hussein ignited regarding educational reform, engagement with contemporary knowledge, and the separation of religion from political authority remain highly relevant. The shadows of this battle continue to shape intellectual discourse, marking the ongoing tension between advocates of heritage and proponents of modernism and enlightenment. Each time a similar confrontation arises over the limitations imposed by religious institutions on creative freedom, Hussein’s legacy is evoked, reminding society of the persistent challenge of adopting values of enlightenment and fostering meaningful reform in both Al-Azhar and Egyptian society more broadly.

Al-Azhar has undergone numerous casual reform attempts, yet much of the debate continues to focus on its educational system, which often reflects the past rather than the present. As the third decade of the twenty-first century unfolds, conservative ideology continues to resist the forces of change, innovation, and modernity. Over the previous decade, Egyptian society experienced profound ideological and economic turbulence, marked by the two revolutions of 2011 and 2013. During this period, radical Islamic trends became particularly visible, notably with the rise to power of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood in June 2012. The experience proved bitter and destabilizing, resulting in deep social, political, and economic crises. Consequently, Al-Azhar was frequently criticized as an institution that contributed to the cultivation of extremist mindsets, underscoring the pressing need for meaningful and sustained reform.

Historically, Al-Azhar was an integral part of every revolutionary activity in the Egyptian society. Al-Azhar supported the rebellious events against the British Colony in Egypt at the beginning of the twentieth century especially after 1919 Revolution. In 1952, Al-Azhar was one of the firm enthusiasts of the new-born republic. Al-Azhar never disappointed the Egyptian nationalists in their struggle against outsider dangers and foreign occupation. However, Al-Azhar has always a turning point when the Egyptian nationalist movements tend towards secularism. Al-Azhar decides to withdraw from these movements, and even more Al-Azhar disappears from the whole political scene (Crecelius 32).

Such phobia of secularism dominated the thought of the majority of Al-Azhar men. Conservatism always wins. Conservative men in Al-Azhar are very sensible for any change in the unalterable Islamic tradition. They reject any kind of modern reinterpretation of Quran and Sunna. Sheikhs of Al-Azhar resist against any reform that touches their institution. The issue of reform of Al-Azhar was and is still a crucial matter. Each time they lose the opportunity given to them to reform and change and evolve the image of Islam and consequently they lose their opportunity to impress and change the image of Muslims in the eyes of their enemies.

Egyptian society currently faces a state of imbalance and religious insecurity. The populace has rebelled against the darkness of extremist Islamic movements, which have produced an alarming sense of emptiness. The society shows little interest in the traditional and patriarchal values of earlier generations. As Sharabi notes, "The ideal which Wahhabism represented was soon shattered" (21). Political Islamic movements have entirely failed to embody balanced politics

or even a moderate expression of religion. Consequently, Al-Azhar appears as the last refuge of moderate Islam. However, it seems that the traditionalists within Al-Azhar do not fully recognize the hope they represent for Egyptian Muslims and Muslims around the world. They must overcome their fear of secularism and westernization, which has prevented them from embracing modernization as an inevitable part of life. This wave of strict adherence obstructs progress and erases the long history of reformation and revival advanced by Islamic pioneers such as Imam Muhammad Abdu (1849–1905), Mustapha Sadiq ar-Rafi' (1880–1937), and many others who believed in the power of Islam and trusted its ability to evolve with the times while preserving its essential core.

Today, the two competing ideologies of traditionalism and innovation have reached a crucial juncture, with the gap between them widening. Nevertheless, change is inevitable, and uncompromising attitudes must be adopted to accelerate the renewal and modernization of religious discourse. The new generations of youth are far less tolerant than their fathers and grandfathers, demanding decisive action. The task of reform and innovation in Islam requires courageous individuals; indecisive actors cannot undertake the bold steps necessary for renewing religious thought. The prevailing phobia of secularism and westernization must end, as Europe derives its strength from science and industry, not solely from Christianity. As Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838–1897) observed, “the nations of Christendom are able to overrun the nations of Islam by their science, the source of all power, and Islam is vulnerable because of ignorance, the origin of all weakness” (Afghani, p. 225), highlighting the urgent need for knowledge-based reform within the Islamic world.

The Salafiyya (ancestral) movement within Al-Azhar continues to act as an intellectual obstacle, restraining the Muslim intelligentsia from pursuing reforms they recognize as both necessary and inevitable. The twenty-first century leaves little room for rigid, traditionalistic thoughts, ideas, and values. Just as the Western world embraced progressive and transformative ideas as early as the sixteenth century, Islamic religious texts too must be reinterpreted and articulated in terms that resonate with modern life. Achieving this goal requires serious effort, genuine commitment, and political support, which together can enable meaningful reform to take root effectively and without undue delay.

Conclusion

President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi has repeatedly emphasized the critical role of religious institutions, particularly Al-Azhar, in renewing and modernizing religious discourse. He has warned that failure to engage in such reform risks leaving young people vulnerable to extremist ideologies, whether in the form of rigid Islamism or atheistic apostasy. By renewing religious discourse, Al-Azhar can provide a balanced, moderate, and contextually relevant interpretation of Islam that addresses contemporary social, political, and cultural challenges. The President's call underscores the urgency of aligning traditional religious teachings with the realities of modern life, ensuring that the youth are guided by reasoned, enlightened perspectives rather than falling prey to radicalization or intellectual nihilism. In this framework, the renewal of religious discourse is not merely an academic exercise but a strategic necessity for social stability, national security, and the cultivation of an informed and resilient generation.

Suggestions for Future Research

To ensure the effective renewal of religious discourse, Al-Azhar should undertake comprehensive curriculum reforms that integrate modern sciences, critical thinking, and contemporary social studies alongside traditional Islamic teachings. Encouraging interdisciplinary education will equip students to navigate the complex challenges of the twenty-first century. At the same time, the institution should promote moderate religious thought through debates, public lectures, and youth engagement programs, providing balanced interpretations of Islamic texts that counteract extremist ideologies. Digital and media strategies can further spread credible religious content, reaching younger generations and ensuring that the principles of Islam are communicated in ways that resonate with modern society.

Equally important is the separation of religion from political agendas to safeguard Al-Azhar's independence and prevent extremist trends from influencing governance. Intellectual freedom must be supported, allowing scholars to pursue reformist ideas without fear of persecution, while governmental policies provide funding, infrastructure, and political backing for modernization efforts. Collaboration with international Islamic institutions can introduce best practices and innovative educational methods, while continuous monitoring and evaluation of reform efforts ensure their relevance and effectiveness. Together, these measures can help Al-Azhar reconcile tradition with modernity, enabling it to serve as a true beacon of moderate, enlightened Islam for Egypt and the broader Muslim world.

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