

narrowly focused maps and diagrams, indicates that the *Atlas* will be useful especially for university level students and teachers. It is expressly not intended to replace, but to supplement and set alongside, existing atlases such as Hugh Kennedy's *Historical Atlas of Islam* and the *Atlas of Islamic History* by Peter Sluglett and Andrew Currie. In sum, this attractive and accessible atlas is a welcome addition to those already available, and its range of topics with guides for further reading will make it a valuable resource both for casual browsing and serious study.

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Oliver Scharbrodt: *Muhammad 'Abduh: Modern Islam and the Culture of Ambiguity*

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I did not believe that more could be said about Muhammad 'Abduh, the influential nineteenth-century Egyptian religious scholar, but Oliver Scharbrodt does just that in *Muhammad 'Abduh: Modern Islam and the Culture of Ambiguity*. 'Abduh is an historical figure familiar to anyone who works on modern Middle Eastern history or Islamic political thought. He is frequently portrayed as an Azhar-trained scholar who reconciled modernity and Islam, especially in the era of European imperialism. He is seen also as a lenient Salafi, who downplayed the importance of the 1,400-year-old corpus of Islamic scholarly tradition in favour of returning to and making relevant the foundational Islamic texts and the teachings of the first three generations of Muslims after Prophet Muhammad. Scholars who believe either portrayal tend to ignore 'Abduh's earlier works, which seemingly contradict the impressions we have of 'Abduh, the "Modernist Salafi".

Scharbrodt problematizes these assumptions on several fronts. The author insists that the mystical, philosophical thought in 'Abduh's earlier writing did not disappear in his later works; 'Abduh had to conceal some of his convictions due to the shifting political and institutional climates in which he found himself. Scharbrodt urges us to learn to live with ambiguity. 'Abduh was influenced by and in turn influenced people of various religious, political and ethnic backgrounds throughout his life, but the most influential, Scharbrodt seems to say, was 'Abduh's Shii Iranian mentor Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī.

The book is a clear synthesis of modern Middle Eastern history, Islamic and Greek philosophy, and Islamic legal theory and theology. To show the richness of 'Abduh's life and thought, Scharbrodt draws on several sources: the oft-cited biography penned by 'Abduh's student Rashid Riḍā (which he reads with some scepticism); correspondence between 'Abduh and al-Afghānī and intellectuals in the Levant and Europe, which reflected the nascent *nahda* (Renaissance) movement and budding nationalist sentiments; and journal articles, some of which were written by 'Abduh and others which were attributed to him by Riḍā.

The book consists of an introduction, conclusion, and five body chapters. Chapter 2 gives an overview of ‘Abduh’s childhood and early adult years. ‘Abduh was disenchanted with traditionalist Islamic education, and his uncle introduced him to Sufism (Islamic mysticism), which he carried with him during his time as a student at al-Azhar in Cairo. ‘Abduh was introduced to al-Afghānī, who became ‘Abduh’s Sufi mentor, and received private instruction from him on mystical philosophy and Shii Sufi thought. These “non-mainstream” ideas informed ‘Abduh’s thought throughout his lifetime, even when he held official religious positions in Egypt. Chapter 3 places us in the turbulent historical moment ‘Abduh witnessed, and illustrates how al-Afghānī inspired ‘Abduh’s political activism. ‘Abduh supported the ‘Urābi revolt’s (1879–82) call for constitutional reform during his stint as a journalist. He was disappointed by the failed outcome of the movement, which resulted in a firm entrenchment of authoritarianism in Egypt backed by British occupiers. His political journalistic work was not rooted in Islamic jurisprudence but drew on the political philosophy of Ibn Khaldun. He was adept at addressing popular audiences, as well as more specialized readers, through his journalism and later theological works. Chapter 4 covers ‘Abduh’s activities and work after he was exiled for his political activism. Al-Afghānī and ‘Abduh worked on the journal *Al-‘Urwa al-wuthqā* (The Firmest Bond), in which they expressed strong anti-imperialist sentiment, and called on Muslims to unite against colonialism. Chapters 5 and 6 bring us back to Egypt, as ‘Abduh returns from exile and becomes Grand Mufti of Egypt in 1899 under British tutelage. For pragmatic reasons, ‘Abduh gave up activism and broke ties with al-Afghānī over his anti-imperialist agitation and sought reform rather than usurpation. For ‘Abduh, colonialism became a temporary yet necessary evil to be endured until Muslims could progress and break free. Scharbrodt challenges the notion that ‘Abduh was Salafī in chapter 6. Because of ‘Abduh’s institutional commitments, he was not free to vocalize freely his eclectic (Scharbrodt uses the word *irenic*) ideas, which draw on various Islamic philosophical, theological and jurisprudential schools. He was bound by the Hanafī legal and Ash‘arī theological schools by virtue of his position as Grand Mufti. And although ‘Abduh urged Muslims to revisit the foundational Islamic texts and make sense of them in the present rather than follow the interpretations of scholars from the past, it was Ridā, who penned pieces in ‘Abduh’s name or added his interjections in ‘Abduh’s work, who sought to undermine the irenic strains of thought in ‘Abduh’s writing. Any shifts in tone that we observe in ‘Abduh’s writing over time, Scharbrodt argues, should be viewed as ‘Abduh’s addressing different audiences and not a volte-face on his earlier, more eclectic, Islamic views.

In the conclusion, Scharbrodt critiques Orientalist scholarship that views the contradictions in the works of ‘Abduh and other thinkers of his time as inferior, especially for their perceived inability to reconcile Islam and modernity. Scharbrodt convincingly challenges the teleological narrative of ‘Abduh’s Salafī trajectory. Ambiguity, informed by rich Islamic thought in all its diversity, was not a problem for ‘Abduh and certainly should not be for us. ‘Abduh reflected the human condition, especially during a moment of political and social upheaval. Scharbrodt encourages scholars to unlearn the binaries we employ to reify historical and religious phenomena, dichotomies which “reveal modern conceptions of religion and are based on reductionist definitions of orthodoxy in Islam” (p. 231).

I thoroughly enjoyed this excellent, thought-provoking book, but one question I had is about the absence of women from its pages. The only woman mentioned is Egyptian Princess Zaynab Nazli Hanem, who advocated for ‘Abduh’s return from exile. As Scharbrodt shows, ‘Abduh met with people with diverse interests, but he also frequented women-led literary salons, like those hosted by Nazli. Did ‘Abduh mention these encounters as influential?

Overall, I really appreciated the more nuanced understanding of ‘Abduh’s life and legacy. This book is a needed corrective in our understanding of colonial and postcolonial thought in the Muslim-majority world.

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Maryam Nourzaei, Carina Jahani and Agnes Korn (eds): Oral Narration in Iranian Cultures

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For millennia, the act of storytelling has played a crucial role in human communication, helping to mould our comprehension of history, culture, and personal identity. Different cultures have employed oral narration in various ways. Indigenous communities worldwide use storytelling to preserve their cultural heritage, while African cultures use it to teach children moral lessons and about their history. Western societies use storytelling for entertainment, education, and literature. In Iranian culture, oral narration has played a significant role in transmitting cultural heritage and values, with a wide range of stories including religious tales, myths, legends, and historical accounts. The unique blend of Persian, Arabic, and regional languages in Iranian storytelling reflects the country’s rich cultural diversity. Music and poetry are often integrated into the storytelling experience, adding an aesthetic dimension. Iranian oral narration serves to preserve cultural heritage, share knowledge, and promote a deeper connection to cultural identity. There are several books on the topic of oral narration, which offer a range of perspectives on the role of oral narration in Iranian culture, for example: Kumiko Yamamoto, *The Oral Background of Persian Epics. Storytelling and Poetry*, Leiden: Brill, 2003; Julia Rubanovich, *Orality and Textuality in the Iranian World*, Leiden: Brill, 2015; and Khanna Omarkhali and Philip G. Kreyenbroek, *Oral Tradition among Religious Communities in the Iranian-Speaking World*, Special issue of *Oral Tradition*, 35/2, Cambridge: Harvard University, 2022.

Oral Narration in Iranian Cultures offers a unique contribution to the literature on Iranian oral traditions. While previous works have focused on specific genres or periods of Iranian oral culture, this volume brings together a diverse range of perspectives on oral narration in different Iranian cultures and languages.

The book is organized into three parts, each examining different aspects of oral traditions, from the interplay between oral and written texts to the transmission of folk tales and heroic epics in lesser-studied Iranian languages.

The initial section includes two articles that serve as an introduction to the topic. In his article “Functional multilingualism and the use of standard languages”, Bo Utas compares Iran’s linguistic situation to his father’s Estonian-Swedish village in Ukraine, emphasizing the functional use of multilingualism and diverse registers. He also examines the pros and