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"Undoing the Mahdiyya: British Colonialism as Religious Reform in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 1898-1914" ¹

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This month, Noah Salomon of the University of Chicago Divinity School analyzes the interaction of British colonial authorities with Islam in the Sudan.



Abstract

Studies of missionization during colonial periods have generally limited their focus to the importation of foreign religious systems into local cultures. Much less attention has been paid to the ways in which colonial administrations have sought to reform local religions themselves. Drawing off theoretical contributions made by scholars working in South Asian studies, my essay will explore the ways in which such religious reform and control were asserted by the British administration in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan from the fall of Khartoum in 1898 to the beginning of the First World War.

Through an exploration of historical records from the British administration in Sudan, I will discuss how the British became patrons and advocates of a certain type of Sunni “orthodoxy,” which they hoped would curb the influence of messianic and Sufi movements among the local population. It was the Sufi orders that had been the soil for the rise of the Sudanese *mahdi*, who overthrew the previous colonial overlords of Sudan, the Turco-Egyptian regime, beginning in 1881. The British felt that these movements might pose an equal threat to their own colonial project, and therefore engaged in a campaign to reform Islam among the Sudanese away from Sufism and toward a scholastic model that served their religious sensibilities as much as their political goals. Through exploring the types of religious reform that the British administration instigated in Sudan, I will attempt to complicate our understandings of the avowed “secularizing” goals of the colonial enterprise as well as take a closer look at the interaction between movements of Islamic reform and the colonial contexts in which they arose.

While the following essay concerns British colonial practice in a very specific period of time, I truly hope that it will be of interest to the student of other historical eras and imperial endeavors. In particular, it is my hope that this essay might spark the reader to think critically about America's engagements with religion in the Muslim countries it now occupies, so that we are not doomed to repeat the mistakes of those who have gone before us.

Introduction²

It is interesting to note that colonial powers are commonly depicted as bringing their own religious systems to their subject peoples. Countless studies abound of the Spanish and British colonists bringing Christianity to the lands they conquered. Indeed, studies of colonial interaction with local religions have tended to limit their focus to the importation of European religious systems into non-European local cultures through processes of missionization. Much less attention has been paid to the ways in which colonial encounters have reformed local religions themselves. Though some writing on this phenomenon has appeared concerning the British interaction with Hinduism, in the works of scholars such as Peter van der Veer (2001) and Lata Mani (1998), much less of this critical gaze has been placed on colonial reforms of Islam. Further, little attention has been given to the way in which foreign colonial officials have become actively involved, wittingly or unwittingly, in projects of religious reform in the countries in which they are serving. In the desire to establish a stable state structure, colonial authorities often prop up certain religious organizations that they feel are compatible with their goals, while marginalizing others. Further, though colonial powers such as the British often proclaim non-interference in religious affairs, through enacting policies such as ceding jurisdiction over personal status matters to religious courts, it is important to explore the ways in which the very boundaries that these governments draw between what is religious and what is secular affect the local religious communities with which they come into contact. Is the colonial project of governmental reform necessarily also a project of religious reform?

The following essay will attempt to answer this question by looking at the case of the Sudan from its conquest by Lord Kitchener's Anglo-Egyptian forces in 1898 until the beginning of World War One.³ In these first years of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium,⁴ British officials, who may have come to the Sudan expecting merely to administer the institutions of secular governance (such as criminal courts, tax bureaus, land development agencies, etc.), found themselves instead embroiled in the work of encouraging and enabling a certain kind of Islamic reform. Citing worries that any Christian missionary activities would be perceived as a challenge to Islam and thus could stir the discontent of the Muslim public, Lord Cromer, the effective ruler of Egypt from 1883 to 1907 and the direct superior to the British Governor of the Sudan, told British Sudanese officials in 1903 that, "the time is still distant when mission work can be permitted amongst the Moslem population of the Sudan."⁵ Nevertheless, though Christian mission work was deemed impossible (at least for the time being), this did not mean that the British were unconcerned with bringing new religious forms to the Muslim areas.

The last colonial power in the Sudan before the British, the Turco-Egyptian regime, had been overthrown by a messianic religious leader who arose out of a Sufi order to proclaim himself *mahdi* (or “the divinely guided one”) and to establish a theocratic government in Sudan, which historians refer to as the *mahdiyya*.⁶ Due to this history, the British, fearing a repeat of such an episode, were greatly preoccupied with governing religion. Regulating both neo-Mahdist and Sufi organizations became a preoccupation of the British leadership and they undertook this effort in many different ways. The British tried to marginalize the influence of these groups over the Sudanese public through direct persecution as well as by more indirect means, such as trying to supplant their influence through importing and giving patronage to a class of Egyptian religious scholars and officials (Warburg 1971: 95-106; Voll 1971).⁷ It is interesting to observe that all of this interest in religion came under the mandate of reforming the Sudanese state from an Islamic theocracy into a secular republic. In the fields of law, government, and commerce the British administration aimed to replace a theological order with one based on the British secular liberal tradition of common law, representative government, and capitalism.⁸ In this secular order, the role of religion was greatly modified from its place under the state established by the Mahdi, the Mahdiya. The following paper will explore the way in which the project of establishing a secular form of government in the Sudan carried with it a very clear idea of what an Islam looked like which could coexist with this style of government.

Throughout the early years of their administration, the British mobilized the category of religion, and in particular Islam, as a central strategy of rule. Such practices greatly complicate the purported secularizing goals of colonial governance, which claim to cede the private sphere to religion and only to be concerned with the rational mechanisms of statecraft. Through exploring the ways in which the British engaged with Islam, I will demonstrate that the colonial project in the Sudan, at least in its early years, was as much about reforming religion as it was about reforming the state.

Imperial Humanism and the Defense of “True Religion”

Even before the British troops crossed the Egyptian border into Sudan the type of Islam that the Sudanese practiced was at the center of interest at the highest levels of the administration. Before commencing their bold conquest of the Sudanese capital in September of 1898, the British administration had already begun a public relations campaign that would pose the conquest of the Mahdiya not only in the name of compassion towards the Sudanese people but also in defense of what the British understood to be their true and orthodox religion. There was a certain sort of moral imperative seen in overthrowing a regime that was considered anathema to Victorian ideas of humanity and civilization (Boddy 2003). For example, slavery was widespread under the Mahdiya and the government felt great pressure from the Anti-Slavery Society and other Christian organizations to put a stop to it (Warburg 1971: 170-178). Indeed, the British public was constantly fed on a diet of carefully crafted propaganda concerning the abuses of the Mahdist regime.

The chief propagandist for the British government against the Mahdiya was Francis Reginald Wingate, who was at that time the director of military intelligence in Cairo. Wingate later became the Governor-General of the Sudan (1899-1916), and transformed many of the critiques of Mahdism that he introduced in his writings into government policy. During his appointment in

Cairo, Wingate arranged the escape of two important Austrian prisoners of Khalifa Abdullahi (the successor to the Mahdi), Father Joseph Ohrwalder, a Catholic missionary, and Rudolf von Slatin, former Khedival governor of Darfur (and future director of intelligence of the Sudan under Wingate's leadership). After debriefing them and processing their information through the proper military channels, Wingate authored their "autobiographical" accounts of captivity. Published respectively as *Ten Years Captivity in the Mahdi's Camp* and *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*, these stories, complete with gory pictures depicting the savagery and barbarism of the ansar (as the supporters of the Mahdi were known), caused a great stir in England.⁹ Slatin's book itself went through a second pressing, only one year before the advance on Khartoum, which was reduced in size to appeal to a more general audience (Slatin 1922 [1897]: viii). These two books, along with Charles Neufeld's *A Prisoner of the Khaleefa: Twelve Years Captivity at Omdurman*, published shortly after the conquest, justified the invasion to the British public. Yet the book that most definitively depicted the abuses of Mahdiya was Wingate's own *Mahdism and the Anglo Egyptian Sudan*, published in 1891. In his conclusion to the book Wingate summed up the rise of the Mahdi as follows:

The tribes and inhabitants...welcomed the expected Mahdi who was to set them free and enable them to become once more the rightful owners of their lands. For about a year, at most, the imposture flourished, and the great majority of the people believed that the true Mahdi had at length appeared. But as time went on they saw their spiritual ruler steeped in the wildest debauchery, and blindly led by his chief khalifa, Abdullah Taashi, who, with his all-powerful Baggara, ruled the land with an iron hand...Rapine, bloodshed and horrors filled the land (Wingate 1968 [1891]: 466).

While the British posed their conquest in terms of freeing the Sudanese from a violent tyrant, it is crucial to note that it was not simply abuses of power that Wingate pointed to as the justification for British military action against the Mahdiya. Wingate's book also focused on the abuse of religion undertaken by the Mahdist regime. Wingate defined Mahdism not only as the revolt against "the recognised Government authority in the Sudan," but more importantly as the "revolt against the orthodox Moslem religion" (Wingate 1968 [1891]: xxi).

The theme of the heterodoxy of Mahdism and the need for the British to defend "orthodox" Islam was carried through the occupation. Seven months after the conquest, Cromer wrote Salisbury, the Prime Minister of Great Britain, quoting a telegram he had received from Kitchener. Since there were also serious political justifications for the British invasion of Sudan, including maintaining British hegemony over East Africa and ensuring the stability of Egypt (Steele 1998: 12), we might expect that in these high circles of government a religious justification for the invasion, while it might have appealed to the British public, would be unnecessary. Nevertheless the telegram rationalizes the invasion on the terms of defending "orthodox" Islam. Kitchener assured Cromer (and in turn Cromer was assuring Salisbury) that:

None of the Kadis [Islamic Judges], Ulemas [Islamic scholars], or inhabitants here consider the Mahdi to have been other than a heretic to the Mahommedan religion. He destroyed all the mosques in the country, as well as the tomb of the descendent of the prophet at Khatmieh...He treated all the Mahommedans who did not accept the changes he introduced as heretics to be

killed. I feel sure that no Mahommedans in this country feel anything but satisfaction at the destruction of his power, together with all traces of his religion.¹⁰

The Mahdi's attacks on those who did not accept his religion are well documented, as are the destruction of mosques, which were built under, and thus seen as an emblem of, Turco-Egyptian rule (Holt 1958; O'Fahey 1999). There is no doubt that a great number of people did not support the Mahdiya, especially in its later years under Abdullahi when the country fell into great economic depression. What is remarkable about this passage though is the claim that “no Mahommedans in this country feel anything but satisfaction at the destruction of [the Mahdi's] power, together with all traces of his religion.” Kitchener knew very well that there were indeed people who called themselves Muslims in the Sudan who were still active supporters of the Mahdi, as he worked quite hard to suppress their organizations in the months following the conquest. The *ansar* represented a large sector of the population and in the years after the conquest were followers of the Mahdi's son, Sayyid ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi (Holt and Daly 2000: 111). The claim that the Mahdi was considered a heretic is equally problematic, as not only did he receive much support, but his ascension to the role of the Mahdi has a clear precedent in Sunni eschatology and several other similar movements across North Africa and the Middle East (Holt 1958: 21-3). On what basis then did Kitchener make these misleading claims? What understanding of orthodoxy and heterodoxy underlay Wingate's argument that the Mahdiya was a “revolt against orthodox Muslim religion?”

Islamic Authenticity: The Imposition of Orthodoxy

It is interesting to note that when the British entered the Sudan attempting to marginalize both Mahdist and Sufi orders they did not claim that such practices were simply incorrect in and of themselves, debased and misguided forms of religion in comparison with the Christian tradition. Rather the British argued that such practices were incorrect because they failed to live up to the norms of *their own* tradition, to what the British understood as authentic and orthodox Islam.¹¹ Though Cromer (and presumably others in the administration) saw Islam as “a religion which clashes with private and public morality,”¹² the British did not take the tactic of trying to eliminate this faith. Rather the British tried to establish a clear notion of what was orthodox Islam and how Sudanese Islam was distant from that.

In his article “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,” Talal Asad defines orthodoxy as follows: “orthodoxy is not a mere body of opinion but a discursive relationship—a relationship of power. Wherever Muslims have the power to regulate, uphold, require, or adjust *correct* practices, and to condemn, exclude, undermine, or replace *incorrect ones*, there is the domain of orthodoxy” (1986: 15). In this reading of the term orthodoxy, it is not the content of the beliefs being expressed, their rigidity or their relationship with the past, that constitutes orthodoxy, but rather a particular relationship of power between religious leaders and a community of believers. Asad's view is useful in the Sudanese case, for it allows us to focus on the way in which orthodoxy can be a mechanism of change as well as of continuity. After the fall of the Mahdiya the British tried to install an orthodoxy not to maintain any sort of Islam which was present in the Sudan, but rather to reform Islam. In Asad's reading, tradition is a site of contestation, a discourse between past and present oriented towards future concerns (Asad 1986: 14-15). Orthodoxy is an

intervention into that tradition which tries to uphold and enforce a specific religious interpretation.

In this sense though the Mahdiya arose out of Sufism—what the British might frame as popular or heterodox religiosity—it too constituted a form of orthodoxy, for it had the power to regulate religion, and imposed broad reforms on Islam as it was practiced in Sudan (O'Fahey 1999). That a movement with its roots in Sufism was able to mushroom into a state structure is indicative of Brian Turner's observation that Sufi leaders do not gain their status simply because of their inherent charisma or their role as an intermediary between man and God, but because they have a specific social function (Turner 1978: 67).¹³ Yet, for the British, orthodoxy referred to the Islam propagated by the Ottomans (through their imposition of *Hanafi Shari'a* courts in the Sudan, for example) as well as the Islam that was upheld in the Sudan during the Turco-Egyptian period through the importation of scholars from al-Azhar University.¹⁴ It was this orthodoxy that the Mahdists rose against, but we must be careful to recognize that in its place the Mahdists set up another kind of orthodoxy, though with a very different theological content. On the fall of the Mahdiya, the Sufi orders, which had been suspended by the Mahdi, arose again, and great religious pluralism emerged, creating a vacuum where no single orthodox body to regulate religious truth existed any longer (Fluehr-Lobban 1987: 25; O'Fahey 1999). Due to the recent history of the Sudan, the British recognized the revolutionary fervor that could emerge from these religious groups, not fully under state control, and thus they set about trying to create a new unified orthodoxy. In order to do this the British had to establish a clear idea of precisely what was orthodox and what was heterodox.

There were many ways in which the British tried to instill a particular notion of Islamic orthodoxy in the Sudan. We will discuss in detail below the manner in which this was undertaken through the establishment of various new religious institutions in Sudan. But in order for us to get an idea of precisely what the British understood as authentic and orthodox Islam, it will be helpful to examine how they defined it.

In 1905 Sudan began to make the transition from full military rule to a civilian administration (Warburg 1971: 81-4). The colonial strategy was not simple military occupation, but rather the reformation of Sudanese state and civil society to meet the requirements of modern governance. Secular state institutions (courts, tax bureaus, and eventually, a parliament) had to be implanted to replace the theocracy of the Mahdiya.¹⁵ To do this, the British reasoned, they needed to encourage their best and brightest to go to the Sudan and to help run an enlightened administration. Thus training courses were established at Oxford, Cambridge, and other top universities to give students a crash-course in the tools they would need to know in order to function in the Sudan. While language was the primary focus of the instruction, Wingate encouraged some training in religion. In order to help us to answer what the British understood as “orthodox Islam” it will be helpful to explore exactly what these students were being taught.

One day, during a holiday from his duties in Sudan, Sir Wingate sat before the Committee on Oriental Studies at the University of London. It was the 9th of July 1906 and Wingate was trying to convince the reluctant professors to establish a program to train civilians for service in the Sudan, like those of Oxford and Cambridge. Discussing these programs, as well as the curricula for civilian officers that were in place in the Sudan to supplement them, Wingate says, “All these

young civilians now come out with a good knowledge of reading and writing, and know something of the history of the country, they have some acquaintance with the religious law, the Koran, the Shariah Mohammedieh and so on. They all have a smattering anyway of it...Of course, the religion of the bulk of the Sudan, certainly half of it, is Muslim. It is very important that they should know something of the religion of the country, and more especially the religious law of the country; that is to say the Shariah Mohammediah.”¹⁶ The Qur'an and the Shari'a are indeed central to Islam in the Sudan. Yet, Islam in Sudan is a great deal more than this as well. As we will see in the following exploration, it is precisely those aspects of Islam that the British understand as outside of the Shari'a and the Qur'an, i.e. Sufi practices and messianic traditions, that they condemn as heterodox and set out to eliminate through the imposition of an orthodoxy whose focus is law and scripture.¹⁷

J. Spencer Trimingham, a missionary and scholar of Sudanese Islam,¹⁸ commented, perhaps referring to a training course such as that outlined by Wingate, that

A new-comer to the Sudan, having read some standard text-book on Islam, tends to take for granted that the religion of the people is that of the Qur'an and the law. The mosque is usually the most prominent object he sees and this makes him fail to understand that this is not the only, nor the most important, centre and symbol of their religion. A far more significant symbol of faith scattered about the Sudan in greater profusion than the mosque is the whitewashed domed tomb of a saint. The one may be regarded as a system and the other of a living faith (Trimingham 1965: 105).

While I would complicate Trimingham's strict dichotomy between the Islam of the “Qur'an and the law” and the Sufi Islam he refers to when he mentions the “whitewashed tomb of a saint,”¹⁹ Trimingham does recognize the point that Islam in the Sudan includes much besides the Qur'an and Shari'a. Islam in the Sudan, excluding the time of the Mahdist interruption, consisted of a variety of Sufi orders, that, while all having clear internal hierarchy, had no uniform hierarchy that was above them all.²⁰ Muslims circled around individual leaders who had either inherited their status as members of what P.M. Holt refers to as “Holy Families” (Holt 1967) or who had gone through apprenticeship under a recognized Sufi leader. One of the main ceremonies of these groups is the *dhikr* (“rememberance”) ritual, a group performance in which a litany is repeated in song or chant in order to adduce a mystical state of consciousness and closeness to God (Gardet 2001). Further, in the Sufi orders veneration is commonly given to a deceased leader in one of the *tariqas*, known as a *wali*, a holy man who contains and is able to bestow God's blessings both in life and death (“*baraka*”). Over and against this Sufi tradition, the British tried to establish a form of Islam with a leadership of clerics, prayer that occurs in mosques, and a very different relationship to the Islamic scripture than was practiced in the Sufi orders. In exploring both their fears of Sufism and their desires for a new Islamic order we will come to a clearer understanding of precisely why the British preferred such a version of the Islamic tradition over that of Sufism.

“An Admixture of Cruelty and Sensuality”: Sudanese Islam Through the Eyes of the Colonist

When the British arrived in the Sudan, they immediately took on administrative roles all across the country. As *mudirs* (provincial governors), inspectors, police officers and military generals, British men found themselves in the thick of village life, from very early on in the Condominium. If we are to understand some of the reasons behind the British attempt to install an Islamic orthodoxy in the Sudan (which I will describe in detail below) it is important that we also grasp some of the more visceral impressions of the popular Islam that they were trying to replace. Sudanese messianic and Sufi Islam were seen not merely as threats to British rule in the Sudan, but also as deeply offensive to the Victorian sensibilities of British officials and what was seen to be the proper relationship between the colonizer and colonized (Boddy 2003).

When British officials came into contact with this form of Islam, so different from the Islam they had read about and so radically other – especially from the Christian faiths of their home – the reaction was often extreme. C.P. Browne, governor of Berber province in the 1920's and a member of the Sudan Political Service from 1902 onwards, jotted down some stories about his time in the Sudan, during his early years there in the Blue Nile and Sennar provinces.²¹ Writing in the first person, Browne describes a Sufi *dhikr* that he observes. “The ceremony, called ‘zīkr’, is, I believe, unorthodox, but in this country it is the favored means of exciting joint religious enthusiasm; an evil and debased sight, with the admixture of cruelty and sensuality so often found in emotional religion, whereby a bestial, dehumanized excitement confounds itself with absorption in the deity, with that surrendering of the soul that gives its name to Islam.” It is interesting to note that Browne begins by representing the *dhikr* using the paradigm of heterodoxy that we recall from our discussion of British officials' view of Mahdism. Thus he attempts to show to his presumed readers that the Islam of the Sudan was no ordinary (and ordered) Sunni tradition, but rather represented “evil and debased” heresy. It is this “emotional” form of religion that brings such feelings of horror to the young British official. In his mind, Islam, which he understands as a religion of surrender, becomes particularly dangerous when the Muslim submits to what Browne saw as a wild emotional order. It is very important, as we delimit the more official reasons for the British imposition of orthodoxy in the following pages, that we do not forget the very real motivation of fear. Though British officials had read about the quiet and reserved Islam of the mosque, they most likely knew very little about the *dhikr* and thus it must have seemed to them strange and unpredictable. As British officials like Browne were ruling over great masses of Sudanese people, unpredictability seemed especially threatening to their rule. This view, coupled with the memory of the Mahdiya (which we must recall sprang from Sufi orders), caused the British officials to see the Sufi orders as particularly dangerous.

Browne continues his narrative, describing the local sheikh of an unnamed tribe. He writes of him, “Meanwhile he rules his tribe and grows rich, while from his village far and wide are scattered the seeds of fanaticism, of treacherous plotting, of hatred that will one day fan a blaze. But the future does not trouble him.”²² When he sees an old man in the village whose “features [are] lightened only with obscure dislike and distrust,” he realizes “the difficulty of any truce with Islam, the Islam that is, and to all appearance that is to be.”²³ Whether or not these stories happened is of less importance to us than the view of Sufi Islam that they belie. For C.P. Browne, Sufism is naturally violent and fanatical, filled with hatred. *Sheikhs* are only con men, hostile not only to British rule but to their own people as well.

Another reaction to a Sufi *dhikr* is contained in S.S Butler's²⁴ memoirs from his time as a Camel Corps officer in Kordofan.²⁵ He writes:

On all their faces is a sort of 'far away,' wrapt expression, not a pleasant dreamy peaceful look, but a look that makes one picture them waving blood stained swords, as they hack their way through forces of 'unbelievers' to the cry of 'Allah Akbar...' One almost begins to wonder if one is in the 20th century, an officer in the Hagana, in a well ordered little station and if that wild looking Arab swaying from side to side and chanting Islamic dirges is really your cook, who, an hour or so before, you had to tick off because the soup was cold! It made one feel in those far off days that one was sitting on the edge of a volcano.²⁶

Here, in the opposition between the "well ordered" government station and that "wild Arab swaying from side to side chanting Islamic dirges," we clearly see some of the threats that Sufi Islam represented which are merely implied in the passage from Browne. Butler tells the reader that he can hardly believe that this "wild Arab" is the same man who dutifully fulfills his orders about the mundane matters of daily existence, such as heating up his soup. By dreaming of the violence that these Sufis could commit, the fear and possibly guilty feelings towards those who serve him rises to the surface. The metaphor of "sitting on the edge of a volcano" should not be taken lightly. One must realize that it was this very type of fear of mystical Islam that contributed to the strong-armed British policy to stamp out its more threatening manifestations and to put in its place a new orthodox Islam with a leadership who would be more easily accountable to British rule.²⁷

Islam in the Sudan

Before we turn to an examination of the way in which the British attempted to reform Sudanese Islam, it will be helpful to outline the historical context in which we may understand the Islam that the British confronted. It is important to recognize that the British did not come in and reform a religion that had been sitting peacefully and happily unchanged for centuries. Rather, Sudanese Islam had been in a constant state of flux from the time of its appearance in Sudan through the Turco-Egyptian and Mahdist reforms.

Though Islam spread gradually into Sudan from very early in the Middle Ages, the full Islamicization of Northern Sudan did not occur until the 16th and 17th centuries under the Funj Dynasty at Sennar and the Fur Dynasty in the Western Sudan (Trimingham 1965: 81-91). Islam was brought to the Sudan in this period by religious teachers from the Hejaz and Egypt as well as by West Africans crossing the Sudan to make the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. It is during the Funj period when these figures (known to the Sudanese as the *fakis*²⁸) spread teachings such as the science of *fiqh* [jurisprudence], *tajwid* [Qu'ranic recitation], as well as the rites of Sufi orders (Trimingham: 115-6). The Islamicization of Sudan continued throughout the 18th and early 19th centuries with the nativization of *fakis* as well as the founding of new Sufi orders by Sudanese who had returned to Sudan from periods of learning in the Hejaz (Daly 1986: 121-2).

When Muhammad 'Ali's forces entered Sudan in 1821, Islam was the realm of the *fakis*. Under the Turco-Egyptian regime, a new system of *hanafi shari'a* courts was established to replace the courts that had existed before which combined *maliki* and customary law.²⁹ The Egyptian *'ulama*

were imported to run these courts and in doing so they displaced some of the *fuqara's* functions. Eminent historian of the Sudan P.M. Holt writes, "Under the Turco-Egyptian regime, the status of the *fakis* as a whole declined. Although the authorities were generally conciliatory towards them and subsidized their *khalwas* [religious schools], the establishment of an official hierarchy of '*ulama* diminished both their prestige and their political functions" (Holt 1967: 8-9). Further, a line of communication was established between al-Azhar university in Cairo and the Sudan and many students traveled to Egypt for study. During the Turco-Egyptian period three Sudanese *riwaqs* [lodges] for students were founded at Azhar (Warburg 1978: 9; Trimmingham 1965: 116). Finally, perhaps the most important innovation of the Turco-Egyptian period was the adoption of the Ottoman *tanzimat* reforms in 1850. These reforms adopted European secular legal codes to deal with all commercial and criminal law while restricting Islamic law's jurisdiction to family and personal status matters. In order to conform with these changes an entire secular apparatus of courts were set up next to the *hanafi shari'a* courts (Fluehr-Lobban 1987: 30).

Holt argues that it was the Turco-Egyptian regimes' marginalization of the traditional leadership of the Sudan that, at least in part, led to the *mahdist* revolt. He writes of the Mahdist revolution, "it was the revolt of the *fakis* and very appropriately its leader was a holy man who had undergone the traditional education of the Sudan (Holt 1967: 10)." The *fakis* greatly resented the imposition of new Islamic leaders under the Turco-Egyptian regime, and the majority, at least at the outset, supported the Mahdi (Daly 1986: 122).

Yet, it is important not to characterize the Mahdiyya as a return to the "traditional" Islamic order in the Sudan. The rise of the Mahdi introduced an entirely new system of Islamic rule in Sudan. During this period, the Azhar '*ulama*, whom the Mahdi referred to as "'*ulama al-su*" (the evil '*ulama*), nearly vanished. Many of them fled to Egypt, while others fell in battle and still others converted to the Mahdist creed (Warburg 1978: 11). The Mahdi was at odds not only with the representatives of Turco-Egyptian Islamic institutions, but also with many Sufi groups. Trimmingham writes of the period, "Devotion to the Mahdi naturally dissolved all tribal and religious allegiances. The dervish orders were abolished because loyalty to the sheikh conflicted with loyalty to him. The four *madhhabs* [schools of Islamic jurisprudence] also could have no further significance and one universal ritual was adopted (Trimingham 1965: 153)." The Mahdi demanded allegiance to him only, abolished the visiting of tombs of *walis*, as well as the *hajj* pilgrimage. O'Fahey argues that "During the crisis of the Mahdist revolution and state (1881-98), many, perhaps the majority of, Sudanese Muslims 'suspended' one set of beliefs, practices, and allegiances—their Sufi identity—for another, a belief in the Mahdi. The excitement of the Mahdiyya being dashed to the ground by Kitchener and his war machine, they quietly reverted to being as before, although they could never quite be the same as before" (1999: 267).

The British reawakened many policies of the Turco-Egyptian regime, including the bifurcation of the legal system into secular and religious law, the establishment of *hanafi* courts and the importation of scholars from al-Azhar to teach Islam. Yet their engagement with Islam was quite different from that of the Turco-Egyptian regime as well. The British goal of creating a secular and modern Sudanese state necessitated patronage of a certain type of Islam, that of the reformist movement of Muhammad 'Abdu known as the *salafi*. While 'Abdu's goals did not always dovetail with those of the British (in particular around the notion of secularism), the British viewed the *salafi* focus on the principle of *ijtihad* (jurisprudential interpretation based on

independent legal reasoning) as precisely what was needed to reform an Islam that was, in their minds, woefully stuck in the past into a force compatible with modernity (Hourani 1983: 134; Skovgaard-Peterson 1997: 65-68). Yet before exploring the British engagement with the *salafi*, it will be helpful to explore the mechanisms through which the British tried to reform Sudanese Islam and their reasons for preferring the Islam of the courts and al-Azhar over that of the Sufi and messianic orders.

Undoing the Mahdiya: Indirect Islah

From the very first months of the occupation, a concerted effort took place to cleanse the Sudan of any trace of Mahdism. Shortly after the occupation of Khartoum, Kitchener telegraphed Lord Cromer to inform him as to what had become of the Mahdi's tomb. Kitchener wrote:

I thought it was politically advisable, considering the state of the country, that the Mahdi's tomb, which was the center of pilgrimage and fanatical feeling, should be destroyed... When I left Omdurman for Fashoda I ordered its destruction. This was done in my absence, the Mahdi's bones being thrown into the Nile. The skull only was preserved and handed over to me for disposal. No other bones were kept, and there was no coffin.”³⁰

The tomb of the Mahdi was a major pilgrimage site in the Sudan, as the Mahdi, like other founders of *tariqas*, was revered in a manner similar to a *wali*. Kitchener's brutal disregard for the cult that surrounded the Mahdi can be read as the inaugurating step in a 16-year campaign to stamp out Mahdism and encourage a new type of Sunni orthodoxy. The program used many different tactics, from physically crushing the active supporters of the Mahdi, neo-Mahdis, or other suspect Sufi groups (Ibrahim 1979; Warburg 1971: 100-106), to trying to install Islamic institutions that the British felt represented a “truer” and, not coincidentally, more governable form of Islam (Warburg 1971: 95-106, 129-133; Voll 1971). In addition to destroying the tomb of the Mahdi, the British banned the Mahdist outfit, the patched *jibba* (a sign of ascetic poverty), and sent those whom it caught wearing them into work gangs. Further, they disallowed Mahdist prayer meetings and public recitations from the *ratib*, the Mahdist prayer book (Daly 1986: 121).

Yet the British oppression of religious groups was not limited to the Mahdists alone. Sufi groups (except the Khatmiya which had directly opposed the Mahdi) were also considered a danger, and the British did everything in their power to discourage their re-emergence. Upon conquering the Sudan, Lord Kitchener, the head of the British led Egyptian army, and the first Governor-General of the Sudan, delivered a memorandum to the *mudirs* (the new British directors of the provinces) on the proper method of rule concerning religion. Here Kitchener lays out the policy towards Islam that his successor, Governor-General Wingate, to varying degrees enacted until the beginning of World War One. He wrote:

Be careful to see that religious feelings are not in any way interfered with, and that, the Mahomedan religion is respected. At the same time, Fikis [fakis] teaching different Tariks [tariqas], and dealing in amulets, &c., should not be allowed to resume their former trade. In old days, these Fikis, who lived on the superstitious ignorance of the people, were one of the curses of the Soudan, and were responsible in great measure for the rebellion. Those among the people who desire to study religion should do so at the capital, where a school will be established under

proper supervision... Mosques in the principal towns will be rebuilt; but private mosques, takias, zawiyas, Sheiks' tombs, &c., cannot be allowed to be re-established, as they generally formed the centers of unorthodox fanaticism. Any request for permission on such subjects must be referred to the central authority.³¹

In this memorandum Kitchener calls for respect of the “Mahommedan religion” but then instructs his subordinates to suppress the *fakis* and ban the reconstruction of damaged saints' tombs and places of Sufi worship, which were the heart of Sudanese Islam. Kitchener instead advocates the establishment of a religious center in the soon to be rebuilt capital of the Turco-Egyptian period, Khartoum. An Islam whose seats of authority and learning were spread out through the villages and towns, and whose teachers were individual sheikhs of Sufi orders, was to be replaced, in the British ideal, by one central authority, one official seat of learning, in the capital, under the watchful gaze (and indirect administration) of the British authorities. In an interesting reversal of the common secularization thesis,³² wherein secular government is supposed to encourage the privatization of religion, Kitchener argues that it is “private” religious institutions that pose the deepest threat to the Sudan. Private religious institutions were not only difficult for the state to monitor, but also represented a “fanatical” system of belief which, in the British estimation, the Arabs were naturally prone to if untethered from the discipline of ordered prayer at the mosque under the leadership of centrally appointed *imam*. One British official wrote about the establishment of a council of religious scholars, which we will discuss below, “The Arab Population is inclined to be fanatical; and to enable the Government to keep itself informed of the religious feelings of the people, a consultory board of Ulema (learned men) has been established at Omdurman” (Gleichen 1905: 11). It is important to note that this body not only *observed* religious matters, but also, by giving a religious stamp to British persecutions of Sufi and messianic orders, aided in directly reforming Sudanese Islam. Quite the opposite of what we might expect from a government that wanted to make the transition from the theocracy of the Mahdiya to a secular republic, the British administration became actively involved in a sort of “indirect rule” of religion. By examining this form of indirect *islah* (Islamic reform), we will come to an understanding that for secular government to exist only a certain type of religion is possible along side it.³³ Though secularism is often defined as the privatization of religion, in the Sudanese case we find that removing religion from law and government was less a relegation of religion to the private sphere than a formation of a new religious public, one that was more compatible with secular British ethics.

Given the chaotic nature of the new occupation, it is surprising to note how many of Kitchener's early requirements for British religious policy were actually implemented when Wingate took over his position as Governor-General of the Sudan in 1899. The administration established three main institutions to implement their policy: a council of *ulema*, a system of *shari'a* courts, and a *qadi* (or, “judge,” in this case in Islamic law) training course at the newly established Gordon College in Khartoum. The British government also built mosques, paid for their staff, financed Islamic primary schools to teach the Qur'an, and also paid for the *hajj*, which had been outlawed by the Mahdi (Daly 1986: 123; Warburg 1971: 88).

In order for any of these institutions to be established, the British needed a stable authoritative structure in the Sudan. The tactics the British employed will be quite familiar to students of the British Empire, as they represent a common British strategy, utilized in other colonial endeavors,

of building up an elite class who could act as a (co-opted) intermediary between the British officials and the general masses. Kitchener proclaimed, “the task before us all...is to acquire the confidence of the people, to develop their resources and to raise them to a higher level. This can only be effected by the District Officers being thoroughly in touch with the better class of native, through whom we may hope gradually to influence the whole population.”³⁴ Yet on matters concerning religion at least, the British soon found out that very few of this “better class of native” existed. The Mahdi had run out of the country or killed most of the Turco-Egyptian religious officials, and there were few people left in the Sudan who represented the type of Islam that the British wanted to establish. Therefore, in order to set up the desired Islamic orthodoxy, the British began a lengthy campaign of importing Egyptian scholars from al-Azhar University in Cairo to administer religious matters in the Sudan as well as to train Sudanese in the proper functioning of “orthodox” Islam.³⁵

The Cairene Islam of al-Azhar appealed to the British for many reasons. First and foremost, it represented a form of Islam where the leadership was based upon scholastic qualifications. A person could only become a leader through a lengthy course of university learning. The British, who misunderstood Sufism as a tradition with no clear order in which a man became a leader simply by the fact of his charisma, felt more confident that someone who had gone through scholastic training would be amenable to the principles of rational state and civil society that they were trying to instill. Thus, Azhar Islam, that had such a clear path to positions of status, would be much more easy to administer than the decentralized system of rule that characterized Sufi Islam in the Sudan. Like the European university degree, the al-Azhar diploma gave a single measure of status. The British hoped that no longer would they have to deal with dangerous competing claims to “Islamic truth,” but rather could establish a unified body, made up of Azhar graduates, that could enforce the distinction they wanted to uphold between orthodoxy and heterodoxy.

The rationale behind the establishment of the *‘ulema* council was clear. This council would not only inform the government of the religious feelings of the people, but by appointing imams to mosques and sealing government crackdowns on various messianic and Sufi orders with a religious stamp, it would attempt to shape religion in Sudan as well. The government needed a mechanism through which they could justify the many intrusions they would make into the religious sphere. Wingate wrote to Cromer on the 13th of June, 1901:

In order to deal with certain religious questions I have appointed a council of seven ulemas who have been more or less elected—governmental decisions in matters of religion will therefore in future have the [illegible word] of the council and I hope the experiment will prove successful. *Tarikas* (religious sects) have been rather on the increase but I hope with the aid of the council to quietly but firmly deal with them. Nothing [illegible word] will be done, but unless some steps are taken these sects are likely to become troublesome in the future.³⁶

What emerges in this paragraph is that the primary function of the *‘ulema* council was not only to ensure a certain kind of Islamic orthodoxy, but also to counteract the popular Islam of the *tariqas*. Thus, the British reasoned, if the *Azhar ‘ulema* could point their fingers at Sudanese popular Islam and call it heresy, the British might have a chance of stamping it out. In the absence of a single coordinating structure, no version of Islam could be deemed orthodox and

none heterodox (Knysh 1999:52). The desire to create these categories in Sudan forced the British to set up such a council.

In addition to the council of *'ulema*, the other major mechanism the British established for spreading “orthodox” Islam was the courts. The British legal secretary, Bonham Carter, appointed a Grand *Qadi* and a Grand *Mufti* (or, “jurisconsult”) to administer, under proper supervision of course, the system of courts. While the British did allow customary law to rule in the more rural areas, *shari'a* courts, mostly with imported Egyptian judges, sprung up in every major city and town (Warburg 1971: 124-136). While the British were in control of all criminal and commercial law, they ceded jurisdiction over personal status law (marriage, custody, inheritance and religious foundations) to these courts. It is crucial not to fall into the trap here of thinking that simply because the British created a space for *shari'a* law they had removed themselves from involvement in matters of religion as it affected personal status. The arm of the British state extended well into this “religious sphere” as well. Wingate and the legal secretary were in charge of appointing all judges and could over-rule any decisions made by the *shari'a* courts. Further, as we will see below, the British officials were in fact very much concerned over questions of *ijtihad* and based administrative decisions on their own understanding and interpretation of the *shari'a*.

While the British imported Islamic scholars from Egypt, it must be noted that as the 20th century rolled in, Wingate became increasingly nervous of Egyptian influence in the Sudan (Warburg 1971: 19-22). The first stirrings of nationalism and pan-Islamism were blossoming in Cairo and Wingate feared that Egyptian officials could spread these ideas to the Sudanese. Therefore, early on in his administration, Wingate tried to establish a mechanism by which the native Sudanese could take on the role of *'alim*, *mufti*, or *qadi* and established a *qadi* training course at Gordon college.³⁷ Despite Christian opposition to “Muslim theology” being taught at a college with Gordon's name,³⁸ the program was highly successful and by the end of Wingate's term in 1916, many of the Egyptians had been replaced (Warburg 1971: 88-93).³⁹

Finally, in addition to establishing these institutions, the British engaged in a lengthy campaign of mosque building. On September 17, 1900, the acting Governor-General (replacing Wingate who was on summer leave), wrote to the Khedive in Egypt concerning the celebration of the laying of the foundation stone of the Khartoum Mosque. Khartoum, which had been more or less abandoned and destroyed during the Mahdist uprising, was to be rebuilt as the capital of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and the British wanted to show in their capital that they were sensitive to Islam. The acting Governor-General gathered together the Grand *Qadi* of the Sudan as well as the Grand *Mufti* and all the lesser *qadis* from the cities and towns. The mosque was dedicated to the Khedive. The acting Governor-General wrote to the Khedive (the nominal representative of the Ottoman Sultan in Egypt, now dislocated by the British occupation), “Alms were distributed to thousands of the poor people, who all prayed for the prolongation of your Highness's life, and in honour of the day all Offices of the Government are closed.”⁴⁰ In addition to attempting to ground the Sudanese back under the spiritual leadership of the Khedive, from whom they had revolted only 19 years prior, the British tried to supplant the influence of the Sufi *zawiyas* [places of Sufi worship] though the reconstruction of the quintessential structure of what they understood to be orthodox Islam, the mosque.

‘Alim Inglizi (An English ‘Alim)

It is important to note that it is not simply any type of orthodoxy that the British aimed to establish, but that the British were concerned that a particular interpretation of Islam was encouraged in the Sudan. The British were concerned that Islamic scholars in the Sudan were taught “flexible” interpretations on their religious texts that they felt would help them meet the challenges of the modern age.

It is crucial to note that the British did not simply choose from any type of Azhar scholar, but rather were particularly interested in those who subscribed to the modernist ideas of the great Muslim reformer, and Grand *Mufti* of Egypt, Muhammad ‘Abdu. Throughout the early years of the Condominium, ‘Abdu advised the legal secretary on appointments to the *shari’a* courts, and even visited the Sudan on official government business in 1905 (Voll 1971: 214; Warburg: 131). Since it was quite difficult to effect change in an old established bureaucracy such as that of Cairo, the Sudan was one of the first places where many of ‘Abdu's proposed reforms were played out. In many senses Cromer was a patron of ‘Abdu. He enjoyed ‘Abdu's thought because he believed that it reformed Islam to fulfill the very duties of the modern world that the British were trying to instill. ‘Abdu argued for, “a systematic comparison of all four [schools of legal thought], *and even the doctrines of independent jurists who accepted none of them*, with a view to producing a synthesis which would combine the good points of all.” ‘Abdu called for the modernization of Islamic law, in which no single school of jurisprudence would be slavishly adhered to, but rather all schools of thought and even new opinion could be combined to meet modern challenges.

In subscribing to ‘Abdu's theories, Cromer began to act in a manner more befitting of an *‘alim* (Islamic Scholar) than a secular colonial administrator. Quite apart from ceding personal status to the *shari’a* courts, the grand statesmen, weighed in his own opinion on *ijtihad*, directly challenging the traditionalist interpretations of the Grand *Qadi* who was currently in power in the Sudan (due, he tells us, to the lack of any other suitable candidates). On the 11th of February 1907, Lord Cromer wrote Wingate concerning this “aberrant” Grand *Qadi*:

I do not altogether like the tone of the kadi's report. He is evidently...very much opposed to the students learning anything but purely Mohamedan law. He wants them to ‘clearly apprehend that Mohamedan law is founded on equity on all ages and all places, and does not require at any time any alteration or amendment, when it is accurately understood and properly acted on and applied to events and circumstances.’ It is very natural that a conservative Mohamedan should hold these opinions. They are the views generally entertained by the class to which the Grand Kadi belongs. But, of course, they are sheer nonsense. Mohamedan law requires a great deal of alteration or amendment; and what, more than anything else, is keeping Mohamedans back, is the impossibility of altering or amending it. Some of the more enlightened among them see this. Mohamed Abdou saw it, or at all events pretended to see it.⁴²

Cromer's letter to Wingate is extremely revealing of a number of facets of the British understanding of Islam. Cromer tells Wingate that it is precisely the Muslim's stubborn adherence to tradition that “is keeping Mohamedans back.” In order to modernize and civilize the Sudan, Cromer reasoned that religious law had to be reformed as well. Thus the concept of

orthodoxy that we discussed above which relies on a certain discursive dynamism, rather than a continuity was precisely the type of orthodoxy that the British were trying to establish. ‘Abdu and his *salafi* movement were directly opposed to those who said the gate of *ijtihad* was closed, and were in favor of creating a Islamic order in Egypt and Sudan based on a real engagement with the requirements of the European modernity (Skovagaard-Peterson 1997: 65-8). From Cromer's letter, we clearly see the manner in which British officials involved themselves in attempting to reform every aspect of religious life in the Sudan. For Cromer, it was not enough that the British should do away with popular Islam, but he also required that the orthodox Islam that he helped to impose should subscribe to his view of *ijtihad*. The irony of it all was that in the last year of his lengthy Eastern career, the stern and forceful advocate of secular modernity had truly gone native. Instead of leaving the religious sphere to religious scholars, Cromer, and the rest of the British administration in the Sudan jumped into the debate themselves, adding to their lengthy duties as British administrators the role of the *‘alim* as well.

Violations of the “Secular”: Understanding British Colonialism as a Project of Religious Reform

On January 4, 1899, shortly after the conquest of the Sudan, Lord Cromer gave a speech to the “sheikhs and notables” in the former *mahdist* capital, Omdurman. He assured his listeners that, “Her majesty the Queen and her Christian subjects are devotedly attached to their religion, but they also know how to respect the religion of others. The Queen rules over a larger number of Moslem subjects than any Sovereign in the world. They live contentedly under her Majesty's beneficent rule. Their religious customs are strictly respected. You may feel sure that the same principle will be adopted in the Soudan. There will be no interference whatever in your religion.”⁴³ Indeed, at first glance this might seem to be the case. For example, the British heavily (though not completely) restricted Christian missionaries from setting up offices and schools in the Muslim parts of the country and allowed for the establishment of Islamic law courts to adjudicate personal status matters (Warburg 1971: 108-118). Yet such measures are by no means evidence of a lack of concern with religion. Rather, the Sudanese case clearly shows us that not only were the British actively involved in choosing who would govern the sphere that they were ceding to Islam, but, even more significantly, by drawing the boundaries between what was the proper domain of religion and what belonged to the State, the British necessarily passed judgment on what kind of Islam could exist under their rule.

It seems that the Sudanese themselves were equally skeptical about what this “non-interference” actually meant. While in most of these administrative records the reaction of the Sudanese to their occupiers is entirely ignored, the scribe of this particular speech parenthetically adds the following interesting reaction to Cromer's words that are quoted above: “One of the Sheikhs present here asked whether this engagement included the application of the Mohamedan Sacred Law. Lord Cromer replied in the affirmative, which evidently caused great satisfaction.” Yet what does the application of “Mohamedan Sacred Law” truly entail? In the 13 years prior to the British conquest, during the time of the Mahdist state, Shari'a extended over all aspects of public life, from criminal to commercial to family law. The British had in mind something far different. Basing themselves on the practices of the Turco-Egyptian colonists before them, the British attempted to restrict Islamic law to the realm of the family (inheritance, marriage, child custody), while devising a civil law system to administer over criminal and commercial matters. It is

important to note here that the British establishment of a secular state necessitates a type of religious reform regardless of whether or not it includes an active component of consolidation of orthodoxy like we saw in the foundation of the council of *'ulama*. The definition of Shari'a as family law and of criminal and commercial matters as "secular" concern only radically reforms the potential for religion as a comprehensive ethic in the life of a believer.

In his book *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*, Peter van der Veer questions the applicability of what has come to be known as the "secularization thesis" to the situation of British colonialism in India. This thesis makes the claim that across cultures, modernization goes hand-in-hand with secularization. Van der Veer questions whether we may really call the British project of modernization in India "secular." Van der Veer takes the common secularization thesis and sees how it applies to the Indian context. The secularization thesis assumes: "1) the separation of religion from politics, economy and science 2) the privatization of religion within its own sphere 3) the declining social significance of religious beliefs."⁴⁴ Yet, is it possible to understand the colonial project of modernization within this context? While the British were trying to bring a secular form of government to the Sudan in order to replace the Islamic regime, we have seen that this entailed a certain commitment to specific types of religious forms and a rejection of others. All three of the above criteria van der Veer provides prove false when we look at the British example in the Sudan. If the goal of secular modernism is tolerance for religious diversity, the rule of reason over public affairs, and the relegation of religion to the private, then, based on the evidence we have explored above, we must seriously question the relationship between this modernization and the secularization that it claims to carry with it. As we recognized above, the distinction between private and public that the British were drawing is far more complex than it seems at first glance. In the Sudanese case, secularization did not amount to a privatization of religion. The establishment of a secular state necessitated not that religion retreat into a private sphere, but that religion enter the public sphere in a very different manner than it had previously. Though religion was not the foundation of law and government any longer, as it was in the Mahdist theocracy, religion was made into an important arm of disciplinary governance. It was precisely the privatization of religion that the British feared, for that meant an Islam beyond their control. Instead, the British attempted to create a new Islamic public to supplant that of the Sufi and Messianic orders popular in the Sudan.⁴⁵

In his "Memorandum to the Mudirs," which I mentioned above, Lord Kitchener tells his subordinates that, "it is to the individual action of British officers...that we must look for the *moral* and industrial regeneration of the Sudan."⁴⁶ A year and a half later, after Wingate had taken over the reins of the Governor-Generalship, Lord Cromer concluded a speech to the "sheikhs and notables" of the Sudan with a similar sentiment, proclaiming, "I trust that you will endeavor by every means in your power to second the effort which sir Reginald Wingate...and the able officers serving under him, are making to improve the moral and material condition of the country."⁴⁷ It is clear from these two quotes that the British understood the occupation of the Sudan not only as a means to improve the material conditions of the country (while, of course, advancing their colonial interests in Africa) but also as an explicitly moral project (Boddy 2003). That moral reform was played out not through the explicit introduction of a European religious system into the Muslim areas of the Sudan, as the widespread allowance of missionary schools in

the North would have occasioned, but by actively encouraging the establishment of a certain trend within Islam.

The British advance into the Sudan, as we have already noted, was to bring a certain kind of modern secular form of government to theocratic Sudan. But we must be careful to recognize that despite the secularizing project, there was at every level a very real engagement with religion. In the early years of their occupation of the Sudan, as part of their larger project of secularizing the state, the British attempted to redraw the boundaries of local religious communities and reshape Islam in the Sudan.

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Footnotes for

Undoing the Mahdiyya: British Colonialism as Religious Reform in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 1898-1914"

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² Please note that, due to a problem with fonts, as well as a desire to render this paper more readable for non-specialists, throughout this essay Arabic terms are not correctly transliterated. Instead, I have reproduced their nearest equivalents using the basic characters of the English alphabet.

³ On the outbreak of the war, the British moved away from a direct attempt to reform Islam from above and toward the strategy of "favors-for-patronage," in which they seemed much less concerned with the religious content of the groups and leaders whom they supported, their only

requirement now being loyalty to the Crown. The reasons for the shift are many, but mostly it is due to the fact that when the Ottomans joined the Central Powers in World War One, the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed V called for unity of all Muslims against the Allies. The British felt that they could not afford uprisings amongst Muslim populations in the colonies and thus made allies with anyone whom they thought might have influence or power over the general public (Holt and Daly 2000: 111).

⁴ On arriving in Khartoum, Kitchener raised both the British and Egyptian flags over the destroyed former palace of the Turco-Egyptian leadership. With that, he inaugurated a 58-year era of "joint rule," known as the "Condominium Period," where, at least in theory, the British and the Egyptians would share dominion over the Sudan. Yet, in practice, since the British also occupied and ruled Egypt, the British actually represented both parties in the joint leadership. As Egyptian nationalists would soon recognize, the only "privilege" that the Egyptians got out of the "Condominium Agreement" was that they had to subsidize the Sudanese economy out of their coffers. British officials made all the administrative decisions in the Sudan, and reaped all the political benefits (Daly 1986:1-39).

⁵ FO 633/25, "Speech Delivered at Khartoum, 28 January, 1903."

⁶ Sunni eschatology states that near the end of time God will send a *mahdi*, or chosen one, to earth to lead the entire Muslim community in installing justice and destroying tyranny. Following this *mahdi* will come *al-dajjal*, or the anti-Christ, and then the second coming of the Muslim prophet *Isa* (or, Jesus). Many Sudanese saw the British as an embodiment of *al-dajjal*. Therefore, in the years following the occupation many Sudanese arose proclaiming to be the prophet *Isa*, thus fulfilling the eschatological plan. (Ibrahim 1979). Many purported *mahdis* have appeared throughout Islamic history, mostly in North Africa and Yemen.

⁷ I am certainly not the first person to recognize this phenomenon. Voll (1971) and Warburg (1971: 95-106) have also written about the British interest in encouraging the establishment of an Islamic scholarly class on an Egyptian model and the simultaneous attack on the Sufi orders which characterized the early years of the Anglo-Egyptian occupation. My paper is an attempt to return to some of the material that they discuss, while adding new data that I uncovered in my own search through the archives, in order to ask some broader questions about the implications of the British interest in religious reform on our understanding of the colonial project and its relationship to the secular principles it claims to champion.

⁸ See (Gleichen 1905) for a fascinating account from a member of the administration of the British program for the "modernization" of the Sudan in the fields of commerce, military, government and law.

⁹ See Holt's introduction to Wingate 1968 [1891] for details.

¹⁰ PRO 30/57/14. NB: I will leave letters, speeches, journals and other primary source materials in their original form, without noting or changing spelling or grammatical errors or alternate Arabic transliterations.

¹¹ See (Lata Mani 1998: 96) where she makes a similar point about British missionaries reacting to the Hindu practice of Sati.

¹² Quoted in (Steele 1998:23).

¹³ This becomes quite obvious when parliamentary political parties are formed in Sudan and the powerful ones that emerge are led by heads of Sufi *tariqas*, a state of affairs which has dominated the Sudanese political scene until the present day (Warburg 1978).

¹⁴ See below for an outline of the Turco-Egyptian reforms of Islam and the way in which the British mimicked many of them.

¹⁵ See (Warburg 1978: 22-79) for an interesting discussion about the formation of political parties and representative bodies in the Sudan.

¹⁶ (SAD 283/1/30&35). It is interesting to note that Wingate also advised that the students be trained in anthropology. This, he remarked, was important for those administrators who would be dealing with the south, which at this point was not pacified and was difficult to govern without a clear knowledge of the culture and leadership structures of the tribes. It is also interesting to note that in this same document, Wingate argues for the utility of anthropology to the colonial project. He writes of the African South of the Sudan “You see, it is all more or less unknown, and a great deal of light can be thrown on these questions by the study of anthropology, so I was very anxious to get that subject taken up [in the universities]” (283/1/34). He writes of the anthropologist of Sudan, C.G Seligman, “For the next years we have secured the services of Professor Seligman, who is a very well known anthropologist. He is coming out and means to do all he can to help us...I expect that the knowledge he obtains will all be put into syllabus form, and will form a sort of text book for the instruction of our selected young administrators at Oxford and Cambridge” (SAD 283/1/34-5). Thus the pursuit of anthropological knowledge in the Sudan had a direct administrative function.

¹⁷ It should be noted that the British notion of a split between the Sufi orders and legal and scriptural Islam was somewhat of a fiction. Though certain practices of Sufism were deemed reprehensible by *Salafi* reformers and traditionalists alike, most of these scholars, including the great reformer Muhammad ‘Abdu himself, were active in Sufi movements (De Jong 1999: 310). This was especially true in Sudan where, as Trimingham noted, practically all Muslims belonged to a Sufi order of some sort (Trimingham 1965: 205). Further, there is no contradiction between Sufism and a Shari'a-based Islam, as for all Sufis Shari'a is the “starting point of the Sufi path” (Trimingham 207).

As Alexander Knysh notes in his article about medieval Islam, it has always been possible for one to be very much “orthodox” in his opinions on law, but also belong to a *tariqa* (Knysh 1993:52-3). Knysh uses the figures of Ibn ‘Arabi and al-Shahrastani to show that when one looks at the Islamic tradition in its own terms, it is very difficult to uphold this distinction between orthodoxy and heresy. He writes, “Eurocentric interpretive categories, when uncritically superimposed on Islamic realities, may produce serious distortions. Thus such distinctly Christian concepts as ‘orthodoxy’ and ‘heresy’ foster a tendency to disregard the intrinsic

pluralism and complexity characteristic of the religious life of the Muslim community, leaving aside significant and sometimes critical ‘nuances’” (Knysh 1999: 62). Yet the British found this distinction productive. The British hoped that by marginalizing Sufi Islam and establishing new religious institutions they could create a central orthodoxy in a pluralistic religious scene where there was none.

¹⁸ Despite Trimingham's missionary bias he remains the only comprehensive source for the study of Islam under the Condominium. His book is extremely learned and reveals a deep knowledge of not only of the Islamic practices he observed, but also the Arabic contemporary literatures and historical sources concerning Islam in Sudan. While, like any text, I will subject his work to a critical reading, I join the group of scholars from John Voll to Janice Boddy who rely on his observations to paint a picture of Islam in this period.

¹⁹ See footnote 14.

²⁰ It is interesting to note that the Muhammad ‘Ali tried to establish such a unified Sufi umbrella organization to regulate the practices of the orders in 1812, under a *Shaykh al-Mashayikh* (Grand Sheikh) (Skovgaard-Peterson: 43). De Jong notes that this office was used by the late 19th century Egyptian reformers to make great modifications in the permissibility of various Sufi practices which they saw as abhorrent (de Jong 1999: 310). On conquering Sudan Muhammad ‘Ali extended the rule of this Grand Shiekh to the Sudan, but Trimingham notes that his rule in Sudan was formal only and that in reality he had little power (Trimingham: 200-1).

²¹ Warburg also discusses the writings of Browne (1971: 99).

²² SAD 422/14/15.

²³ SAD 422/14/13.

²⁴ Warburg also discusses the writings of Butler (1971: 99).

²⁵ Butler spent most of his time in military intelligence in Khartoum but spent part of his early years as a military officer in the Camel Corps in Kordofan (Warburg 1971: 198).

²⁶ SAD 422/12/31.

²⁷ It is interesting to compare these accounts with how Browne characterizes the Islamic leaders appointed by the state. In his journal from October 12, 1911, he describes the representative of orthodox Islam in a very different light: “I’ve been in the intelligence department now about a month and have met quite an interesting lot of people. 1) The grand Mufti, by name [sic] Sheikh al Tayyib Hashimi—a most pleasant man—middle age, well [illegible word] + I believe broad minded Arab. He is [illegible word] quite loyal to the government + of assistance to us. He is the brother of 2) Sheikh Abdul Qasim, cadí of Wad Medani—a great friend of mine... a broad minded pleasant man” (SAD 400/10/3).

²⁸ “*Faki*” is a Sudanese colloquial term derived (in meaning and spelling) from the standard Arabic word *faqih* (“jurist,” in Islamic law). The term refers to a man of religion who may play the role of teacher in an Islamic school, a Sufi official, or a religious healer (Warburg 1978: 217). NB: For the purposes of this paper I will use the English plural, an unitalicized “s,” instead of the Arabic plural for ease of English reading. Thus, for example, the plural of *faki*, *fuqara*, becomes *fakis* and the plural of *tariqa*, *turuq*, becomes *tariqas*.

²⁹ *Hanafi* law was the law of the Ottoman Empire which they brought to many of their colonies. *Maliki* law is the Islamic law shared by most Islamic countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (Fluehr-Lobban 1987:29-31).

³⁰ PRO 30/57/14.

³¹ FO 78/5022.

³² See (Van der Veer 2001: 14) and (McLeod 2000: 3) for a explanation and critique of this thesis.

³³ In his insightful article “Reconfigurations of Law and Ethics in Colonial Egypt,” Talal Asad tries to account for the changes in the concept of law, religious authority, and ethics in colonial Egypt that opened up a space for Egyptians to conceptualize the idea of secularism. He argues that a certain type of transmogrification of religion was necessary in order to “clear a space within the state for modern ethics” (Asad 2003: 255). British reforms of religion in Sudan were equally to allow for the emergence of a new secular ethic.

³⁴ FO 78/5022.

³⁵ There were perhaps other reasons why the British imported Egyptians to be their underlings. After listing all of the deficiencies in the Egyptian character (among them a lack of curiosity and initiative, a lack of rational facility, fatalism and submissiveness), Cromer comments on the advantages of these deficiencies for the British. Cromer argues that while the radical difference in character between the “Oriental” and the European leads to a lack of ability of the two races to understand one another, “Nevertheless there is one saving clause, which serves in some respect as a bond of union between the two races. Once explain to an Egyptian what he is to do, and he will assimilate the idea rapidly. He is a good imitator, and will make a faithful, even sometimes a too servile copy of the work of his European teacher. His civilization may be a veneer, yet he will readily adopt the letter, the catchwords and jargon, if not the spirit of the European administrative systems. His movements will, it is true, be not unfrequently, those of an automaton, but a skillfully constructed automaton may do a great deal of useful work....No necessity will, therefore, arise for employing any large number of English subordinates. On the other hand, inasmuch as the Egyptian has but little power of initiation, and often does not thoroughly grasp the reasons why his teachers have impelled him in certain directions, a relapse will ensue if English supervision is to be withdrawn” (1916: 155, v.2).

³⁶ SAD 271/6/12.

³⁷ The name of General Charles George Gordon comes up often in histories of 19th century Sudan as well as popular literature on the period (for example in the famous book by A.E.W. Mason entitled *The Four Feathers*, which has been made into a film five times, most recently in 2002). Not surprisingly, the British named their first academic institution in Sudan after General Gordon, the “Gordon College” which I mention here. Due to the importance of Gordon in the history of Sudan as well as the British historical imaginary, I offer here a brief outline of the role he played in the backdrop to the situation I discuss in this paper. When Lord Kitchener conquered the Sudan in 1898, he claimed to have come to restore Egyptian control over the Sudan. Egyptian rule in the Sudan had a 60-year history. In the mid-19th century, British influence was very strong in Egypt and, with the British government's encouragement, the ruler of Egypt (the Khedive Ismail) appointed a British man by the name of Charles George Gordon to be Governor-General of the Sudan. Gordon took his governor-generalship as much more than a mere bureaucratic position. Spurred on by the British Anti-Slavery Society, Gordon engaged in a vigorous campaign of repressing the extensive Sudanese slave trade. The slave trade in the Sudan was an ancient network run by northern Arab tribes who captured black Africans in the South of the Sudan and enslaved them in agricultural work in the North, as well as sending many of them to Arabia. The slave trade had become essential to the economic well being of these northern tribes and thus Gordon's vocal opposition, though it didn't entirely stamp the practice out, was seen as a major irritant. Gordon's repression of the slave trade, which he often (and probably not wisely) justified under the banner of his Christianity, along with the declining economic fortunes of the Sudan in this period, led the indigenous northern leadership to argue that the Ottoman state was being run by Christians who did not have the best interests of the Sudan in mind. This declining situation came to a head in 1881, when a man by the name of Mohammad Ahmed declared himself the Mahdi, and led a successful revolt to overthrow the Turco-Egyptian rule over the Sudan. This revolt culminated in early 1885 with the fall of Khartoum. During this battle, General Gordon, who had left Sudan for roughly five years and returned as governor of Khartoum shortly before its fall, was killed. There was a great sense of guilt on the part of the British following Gordon's death over the circumstances in which it occurred. Gordon had called for reinforcement from Great Britain, as he knew he would be no match for the Mahdi's forces. After much debate in Parliament, the British government finally sent out a fleet of ships to the besieged Gordon, which arrived down the Nile only a few days too late, learning at port that Gordon was already dead. The horror of Gordon's death would haunt the British for a long time to come, and many have speculated that the conquest of the Sudan in 1898 was undertaken to a great degree to avenge Gordon's death. The last line of Wingate's *Mahdism and the Egyptian Sudan* spells out the interesting justification for the conquering of Sudan, “That a new and better Sudan will be raised up over the ashes of Gordon, and all those brave officers and men who have perished in the loyal performance of their duty, is the fervent hope of every well wisher for the prosperity of Egypt” (491). (Note also here that Wingate sees the British conquer of Sudan as returning Sudan to its rightful owners: the Egyptians). (NB: The above biography of Gordon was gathered in piecemeal from all of the histories of Sudan I mention in my bibliography as well as from helpful email exchanges with Prof. MW Daly; for a more complete history of Gordon see: *Gordon and the Sudan: Prologue to the Mahdiyya* by Alice Moore-Harell (London: Frank Cass) 2001.

³⁸ This establishment of Muslim religious training at Gordon College was not accepted by the Christian public back home. Charles Watson, the corresponding secretary of The Board of

Foreign Missions of the United Presbyterian Church of North America, whose group was doing missionary work amongst the animists in the south of the Sudan, wrote Wingate on the 20th of May 1912, of “and extremely widespread and deep desire of the Christian public that the memorial to Gordon's name should bear a closer relation to his religious practices and convictions” (SAD 181/2/191).

³⁹ The curriculum of this college is deserving of further study, but all documents associated with it are in the National Archives in Khartoum, which I have not been able to access yet.

⁴⁰ “Celebration on the Laying of the Foundation Stone of the Khartoum Mosque,” in *The Sudan Gazette*, #15, pgs. 1-2.

⁴¹ Quoted in, Hourani 1983: 152. My emphasis.

⁴² SAD 280/2/83.

⁴³ FO 633/25, “Terms of Viscount Cromer's Speech to the Sheikhs and Notables of the Soudan, at Omdurman, on January 4th, 1899.”

⁴⁴ Van der Veer 2001: 14. Van der Veer is using Jose Casanova's definition as found in *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) 1994.

⁴⁵ Talal Asad makes a related point about the way in which secular states make religion public, by focusing on the creation of the idea of human rights: “the individual's ability to believe what he or she chooses is translated onto a legal right to express one's beliefs freely and to exercise one's religion without hinderance—so ‘religion’ is brought back into the public domain” (2003: 205).

⁴⁶ FO 78/5022, “Memorandum to Mudirs,” enclosure in “Lord Cromer to the Marquess of Salisbury, March 17, 1899.”

⁴⁷ FO 633/25 “Speech delivered to the Sheikhs and Notables of the Soudan, at Khartoum, 24th December 1900.”

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