In the summer of 1903, the British traveler, essayist, and activist Wilfrid Scawen Blunt introduced the eighty-three-year-old Herbert Spencer to an Egyptian admirer of his, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Muhammad 'Abduh. 'Abduh was just one of Spencer’s many worldwide followers who similarly went to the ageing English philosopher’s home to pay homage to him. Indian sociologists, Confucian thinkers, and Japanese reformers had similarly made the pilgrimage, and most of them had been also drawn to his vision of a unified science of the cosmos, the state, and society. The Mufti had been a fan of Spencer’s *Education: Intellectual, Moral and Physical* in particular, his most widely translated book; ‘Abduh himself tried his hand at translating it. He also referred to Spencer repeatedly in his lectures on the exegesis of the Qur’an (*tafsir*). Indeed, on one occasion he described Spencer as “the greatest living philosopher.”

At the meeting between Spencer and ‘Abduh, Blunt was to “act as interpreter.” Without one, he feared “much exchange of ideas is impossible” since Spencer “understood little more French than is needed for traveling purposes.” Spencer would die just three months later, and no mention of the encounter is to be found in his writings. Blunt, however, wrote vividly about it in his diaries. The aging Spencer was in a frail condition. Nevertheless, during their morning meeting, the bedridden Spencer offered Blunt and the Mufti his views on politics and prophesied the future decline of Europe. Their host lamented the disappearance of “right,” denounced the Transvaal war as “an outrage on humanity,” and spoke of a coming “reign of force in the world” when “there will be again a general war for mastery, when every kind of brutality will be practiced.”

After lunch, Spencer turned to matters of philosophy and asked the Mufti “whether it was true that thought in the East was developing on the same lines as the thought of Europe.” ‘Abduh replied (according to Blunt) that “what the East was learning from the West was the evil rather than the good, but that still the best and most enlightened of thought was the same.” This opaque answer left Spencer dissatisfied:
“To go to the bottom of things,” said Spencer, “I suppose that the conception of the underlying force of the world, what you call Allah and we call God, is not very different?” In his reply the Mufti made a distinction that struck Spencer as new. “We believe,” said Abdu, “that God is a Being, not a Person.” Spencer was pleased at this, but said the distinction was rather difficult to grasp. “At any rate,” he said, “it is clear that you are Agnostics of the same kind as our agnosticism in Europe.”

We can only surmise what Egypt’s Grand Mufti would have made of being called an agnostic, for the meeting seems to have ended there. Spencer, who had recently had a stroke, would consent only to brief conversations lasting a few minutes.

Blunt, however, pursued the matter with ‘Abduh as they walked back to the station:

I questioned the Mufti more closely on the point. I. “Do you believe that God has consciousness, that he knows that you exist and I exist, and is not such knowledge personality?” The Mufti. “He knows.” I. “If he knows, he knows that you are good and I am bad.” He agreed. I. “And he is pleased with you and displeased with me?” The Mufti. “He approves and disapproves.” I. “And he approves to-day because your actions are good, and he disapproves to-morrow because your actions have become bad. Is not this change from approval to disapproval characteristic of personality? How then has God no person?” The Mufti. “God knows all things at all times; to him there is no to-day and no to-morrow, and therefore in him is no change; His is an eternal unchanging consciousness of all things. This I call Being, not Personality.” I. “And Matter? Is not Matter eternal, too, or did God create it? If he created it he made a change?” The Mufti. “Matter, too, is eternal as God is eternal.” Here evidently is the foundation of Abdu’s thought, and we agreed that our ideas are the same.

In translation, however, the rendition was perhaps less startling. In Arabic, the statement “in al-madda aazaliya kama aydan Allah aazali” (matter is eternal as God is eternal), for instance, might have struck Muslim readers at the time as a rather familiar, even if not universally held, formulation. But it did not hold the specific materialistic implications that it might have had for the likes of Blunt or even Spencer. The debate over the eternity of God and of matter was a

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1 Blunt’s recollections were later published in Arabic and the dialogue was excerpted and republished as part of a biography of ‘Abduh in the 1930s by Muhammad Rashid Rida, whom