

Jamal Ad-Din Afghani: A Pioneer of Islamic Modernism

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Abstract

The increasingly menacing encroachments by Western powers against the peripheral Muslim states for a century and more, the feeling of Islamic solidarity was certainly in the air during the closing decades of nineteenth century.¹ The person who accomplished and transformed into a dynamic force in the world of the Islam was Sayyid Jamal ad-Din Afghani. Afghani is considered to be the founding father and originator of Islamic Modernism. He was one of the first important leaders to try to reinterpret traditional Islamic ideas so as to meet the agonizing problems brought by the increasing incursions by the West into the Middle East. Rejecting either pure traditionalism or uncritical imitation of the West, he began what has become a continuing trend among Muslim modernists emphasizing pragmatic values needed for life in modern world. These included political activism, the freer use of reason, and efforts to build up the political and military power of Islamic states.² He was one of the early Muslim political reformers during the latter half of the 19th century, and has undoubtedly been one of the most influential Muslim political thinkers.³ He was a religious leader, philosopher, reformist, writer, journalist and on top of all a politician and liberator of Muslim world and the East.

Keywords: Jamal ad-Din Afghani, Islamic Modernism, Muslim Ummah

Jamal al-Din Al-Afghani as-Sayyid Mohammad Ibn Safdar Al-Husayn (b. 1838, Asadabad, Persia (now Iran) – d. March 9, 1897, Istanbul), Muslim politician, political campaigner and journalist whose belief in the potency of revived Islamic civilization in the face of European domination significantly influenced the development of the Muslim thought in the 19th and early 20th century.⁴ Actually the political activism made Jamal al-Din a great hero of the east and an enemy of colonialism, whose influence and effects spread outside the borders of his own country Afghanistan, and spread Bengal to the Atlantic shores of

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Africa. Afghani's basic concern was revitalizing the Islamic world. Addressing the Indian *Ulama*, he says:

*“Why do you not raise your eyes from those defective books and why do you not cast your glance on this wide world? Why do you not employ your reflection and thought on events and their causes without the veils of those works? Why do you always utilize those exalted minds on trifling problems?. Yet you spend no thought on this question of great importance, incumbent on every intelligent man, which is: What is the cause of poverty, indigence, helplessness, and distress of the Muslims, and is there a cure for this important phenomenon and great misfortune or not?...”*⁵

In general, Afghani's primary goal was to rebuild a strong Islamic state capable of withstanding Western encroachments. Undoubtedly, Afghani was an ideologist of pan-Islam and Islamic reform, and it was his vision and determination that Islamic history shall again be splendid. Afghani said at the opening ceremony of new University in Istanbul, which reveals him as a man, dedicated to Westernization for self-strengthening ends, he went on:

*“My brothers: Open the eyes of perception, and look in order to learn a lesson. Arise from sleep of neglect. Know that the Islamic people (milla) were (once) the strongest in rank, the most valuable in worth. They were very high in intelligence, comprehension, and prudence. They faced up to the most difficult things with respect to work and endeavor. Later this people sank into ease and laziness.”*⁶

*My brothers, are we not going to take an example from the civilized nations? Let us cast a glance at the achievements of others. By efforts they have achieved the final degree of knowledge and peak of elevation. For us too all the means are ready, and there remains no obstacle to our progress. Only laziness, stupidity, and ignorance are obstacles to advance. Theses things I say openly.*⁷

Jamal ad-Din Afghani was “the advocate of Muslim unity and was less interested in theology than in organizing a Muslim response of Western pressure.”⁸ Afghani was one of the most noteworthy and outstanding

personality in the Muslim world, he stirred the soul of Islam as no one else did, and the developments that had disturbed violently the Islamic world during the next four decades are unthinkable without him. Jamal ad-Din was the most dedicated and unselfish politician and the leader of the East- that while the whole Asia and the Muslim world were in a deep sleep of ignorance during the 19th century he was fighting with a power of his pen and the strength of his spirit to emancipate his people from the European yoke. He continued his fight by every means, in every city and country, even in the heart of colonial centers such as London, Paris, Berlin, and Petersburg until he died.

Since Jamal ad-Din said that Islam should be based on the Qur'an alone, and also said that the Qur'an could not be in contradiction with modern science, economics, and political theory, it seems clear that Jamal ad-Din's famous and externally traditionalist principle of a return to the Qur'an and to the ways of the early Muslims meant in fact radically modernist interpretation of Islam. Essentially Jamal ad-Din was calling for an end to all traditional religious theories and interpretations that might stand in the way of Muslim unity and self-strengthening and for a modern interpretation of Islam that would inculcate the virtues of national cohesion, anti-imperialism, and modern science and technology.⁹

In the twentieth century, as the defensive and anti-imperialist mood of the Muslim world grew and as more and more Muslim intellectuals, particularly in the Arab world, began to build up an Islamic modernist system based on special interpretations of the Koran and early Islam, the words of Jamal ad-Din began to enjoy a new popularity. His anti-British and nationalist pronouncements and his reported words to his followers favoring popular or constitutional government also met certain twentieth-century needs. Thus it was that Jamal ad-Din, who had few political successes and only a sporadic influence in his own lifetime became, like many other men whose ideas are in some ways ahead of their times, the inspiration for many later movements.¹⁰

Geographically, his activities encompassed the major portion of the Muslim world – Afghanistan, Iran, India, the Arab world, and Turkey – as well as Western Europe and Russia. He founded the famous *Urwal-ul-Wathq* (1884),¹¹ and wrote in others to propagate his cause. Afghani was primarily a religious reformer, deeply concerned with setting the house of Islam in order. In a word, he stood for a liberal Islam.¹² Afghani taught the need of reconsidering the whole Islamic position and called for a reconciliation of the historic, theological and philosophical positions of Islam with the attainments of modern scientific thought, through interpretation and reformulation of Islamic doctrines. "Religious

reform, he thought, had been the key to subsequent European progress and power, and such a reformation was also needed for the Islamic world to achieve the same goals.”¹³ He denounced *taqlid bila kayf* in unmitigated terms, and advocated a revival of the spirit of Islam. In favour of *Ijtihad*, Jamal ad-Din said that the great legists and scholars of the past broadened their understanding of the Qur’an’s meaning, but they could not fully grasp all Qur’an’s secrets. With all their brilliant knowledge, scholarship, and effort what these scholars understood of the Qur’an was like a drop in the ocean compared with all the wisdom in the Qur’an. In one of his Persian article, Jamal ad-Din here adapted the Sufi idea of infinity of meanings in the Qur’an to the modern need for a free reinterpretation of the Qur’an in order to prove its consonance with modern values.¹⁴

Afghani called for the enthronement of the philosophic spirit i.e., a spirit of research and inquiry. “Whilst expounding the virtues and indispensability of science, Afghani was also at pains to stress that science needed another ‘science’ which is more comprehensive which would enable man to know how to apply each field in its proper place. This field of knowledge is *falsifa* (philosophy) or *hikam* (wisdom) and only it can show man the human prerequisites (values such as what is more important, fairer, more just etc.) He believed that the decline of Islamic civilization was caused by the death of philosophical spirit and the absence of knowledge in the Muslim community.”¹⁵ He felt that the study of philosophy should be made compulsory in the Muslim societies as it was the spirit behind all the empirical sciences. It was likewise necessary that Muslim societies should be re-established on the foundations of constitutional democracy and rule of law.¹⁶ He says:

“Philosophy is the escape from the narrow sensations of animality into the wide arena of human feelings. It is the removal of the darkness of bestial superstitions with the light of natural intelligence; the transformation of blindness and lack of insight into clear-sightedness and insight. It is salvation from savagery and barbarism, ignorance and foolishness, by entry into the virtuous city of knowledge and skillfulness. In general, it is man’s becoming man and living the life of sacred rationality. Its aim is human perfection in reason, mind, soul, and way of life. Perfection in one’s way of life and welfare in livelihood are the chief preconditions for the perfection of mind and soul. [Philosophy] is the first cause of man’s intellectual activity and emergence from the sphere of animals, and it is the greatest reason for the

*transfer of tribes and peoples from a state of nomadism and savagery to culture and civilization. It is the foremost cause of the production of knowledge, the creation of sciences, the invention of industries, and initiation of crafts.*¹⁷

According to Afghani it is philosophy that shows the man the proper road and makes man understandable to man. The highest crafts are those of the prophet, philosopher, caliph, doctor, and juriconsultant. Not all epochs have needed of a prophet, for a single religion and law can nourish many ages and peoples. But each age has need of an especially experienced and learned man, without whom human order and survival will be deranged. This learned man could dominate his period. The philosopher's mission is equal to that of prophet,¹⁸ such as follows:

*"Firstly, whereas for the prophet, the truth of things is attained by the paths of inspiration and revelation, for the philosopher it is attained by means of arguments and proofs. Secondly, whereas the prophet cannot commit errors, the philosopher can. Thirdly, the teaching of philosopher are universal and do not take into account the particularities of a given epoch, whereas those of a prophet are conditioned by latter. That is why the prescriptions of prophets vary: they prescribe one order for one time and establish another in a different circumstance in conformity with what circumstances permit, whereas the teachings promulgated by the philosopher do not change in situations or of men, because of passage of time".*¹⁹

Afghani, unlike many of the revivalist thinkers of his generation, was well versed in traditional Islamic philosophy (*hikmah*), and considered philosophy essential for the revival of Islamic civilization. This is clearly reflected in his various lectures and particularly in *The Refutation of the Materialists*. In fact, Afghani's philosophical arguments against the naturalists and materialists derive their force from his philosophical training. As we see in his lecture "The Benefits of Philosophy", Afghani's vision of a 'modern Islamic philosophy' was closely tied to his confidence in the recent advancements made in the fields of science and technology. Unlike traditional theology (*kalam*), philosophy should articulate a cosmology based on the findings of modern science. These and similar ideas expressed by Afghani have been used by his critics and enemies to label him as a heretic. His role in the revival of the study of

Islamic philosophy in the Arab and Indian worlds, however, remains unmistakable.

How very strange is that the Muslims study those sciences that are ascribed to Aristotle with the greatest delight, as if Aristotle were one of the pillars of the Muslims. However, if the discussion relates to Galileo, Newton, and Kepler, they consider them infidels. The father and mother of science is proof, and proof is neither Aristotle nor Galileo. The truth is where there is proof, and those who forbid science and knowledge in the belief that they are safeguarding the Islamic religion are really the enemies of that religion. The Islamic religion is the closest of religions to science and knowledge, and there is no incompatibility between science and knowledge and foundation of the Islamic faith.²⁰

Looking at Afghani's activities and carrier as a thinker, there had a great impact on Muslim world and great source of inspiration, however, some people disagree with him. Afghani's plan for the development of Islamic Modernism was based on the idea to make an arrangement or compromise between traditional culture and the philosophical and scientific challenges of the modern Western world. The method and way opted by Afghani was not complete rejection of traditional *Ulama* nor to follow the West blindly. He took the middle path. He stresses the need of modern science and technology of the West which the Islamic world should acquire without unavoidably accepting the philosophical and theological consequences coming out from their use in the Western perspective. One should know Afghani's view on science in his renewal and reform program. As he says:

*"The Muslims must not turn to pure imitation of Europeans, as this will open their countries to the acceptance of Europeans rule. Instead, they should find the inspiration for reform and science in their own religious texts, especially the Koran. The latter, if properly interpreted, will be found to be compatible with modern values and even to predict them."*²¹

These ideas obviously led him to propose liberal reforms in politics since he fervently believed that religious reforms could not be affected in a backward society. He stood for constitutional reforms, justice, popular rights, and for the supremacy of Law.²²

Afghani was not in favor of negative reaction against the West. He was in favor of revival of Islam which could absorb the modern science. In his migrant life, Afghani, continuously struggled for the broad based tradition of Islamic intellectuals, which urged him to move from Iran to Afghanistan, India and to another places. When the rulers

failed to heed his advice, he became a revolutionary. To any length he would go to rid the Muslim countries of corruption and tyranny. He said that the evils of autocracy and tyranny, and the rest lying corrupted by the Western colonial powers corroded a part of the Muslim world. He tried to find constitutionalist movements in the former, and liberationist in the latter.²³ Through his tireless preaching, audacious propaganda and dynamic activism, he first awakened the listless masses of the Muslim East to a new sense of their political weakness, and then prepared them for revolt and energetic reconstruction.

The idea that science and Islam are compatible is put forward in one form or another in the construction of all Muslim ideologues of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, the pioneer of pan-Islamism, was convinced that nothing but science and technology could eliminate economic and cultural backwardness. Afghani objected to dividing science into European and Muslim. He said modern science is universal, transcending nations, cultures and religion. He argued that modern science were not popular among the Muslims, because in the past centuries the *Ulama* had divided sciences into ‘Islamic’ and ‘non-Islamic’. This false division had not only created a prejudice among the Muslims against modern sciences but had presented “knowledge” as an “adversary” of Islam in the Muslim societies.”²⁴ Afghani criticized the *Ulama*. According to him:

“These days who have divided science into two parts. One they call Muslim science, and one European science. Because of this they forbid others to teach some of the useful sciences. Afghani was indignant that natural science was left out of the curriculum of Muslim educational establishments. He said: ‘Those who imagine that they are saving religion by imposing a ban on some sciences and knowledge are enemies of religion.’ In an article, ‘The Benefits of Study and Education’, Afghani said that the misery in the Eastern countries was due to their ignoring ‘the noble and important role of the scientists’. Afghani himself set a very high value on the public mission of the scientist. In December 1870, speaking at a conference on the progress of science and the crafts held in the New Istanbul University, Dar ul-Funun, he described the scientist’s work as missionary. He compared the scientist with a prophet, saying that prophecy is a craft (sanat) like medicine, philosophy, mathematics, and so on. The sole difference was that the prophet’s verity was the fruit

of inspiration, whereas scientific verity was the fruit of reason."²⁵

Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani's aim was the revitalization of Islamic world. He was keenly interested in (Western) science although he has slight knowledge of it. He knows that it was science which made the West superior in knowledge and power and dominating the world. He argues for science and says:

*"If Afghani says nothing of the industrial and technical revolution, that does not mean he was not aware of it. He knew that the successes of Europe were due to knowledge and its proper application, and the weakness of the Muslim states to ignorance, and he knew also that the orient must learn the useful arts of Europe. But for him the urgent question was, how could they be learnt? They could not be acquired by imitation; behind them lay a whole way of thought and –more important still –a system of social morality."*²⁶

Afghani argues that originally science came from the Islamic world and it is the cause of Western development and supremacy. He urges the Muslim to reclaim it and become powerful and progressive. According to Afghani:

*"One might say that in all this period the sciences made astonishing progress among the Arabs and in all the countries under their domination. Rome and Byzantium were then the seats of theological and philosophical sciences as well as the shining center and burning heart of all human knowledge. Having followed for several centuries the path of civilization, the Greeks and Romans walked with assurance over vast field of science and philosophy. There came, however, a time when their researches were abandoned and their studies interpreted. The monuments they had built to science collapsed and their most precious books were relegated to oblivion. The Arabs, ignorant and barbaric as they were in origin, took up what had been abandoned by the civilized nations, rekindled the extinguished sciences, developed them, and gave them brilliance they had never had. Is not this the index and proof of their natural love for sciences?"*²⁷

Afghani was fully committed to modernity and human reason. Renan (1883) in exchange with Afghani criticized early Arabs and Islam for being unreceptive and hostile to philosophical and scientific inquiry.²⁸ Afghani criticized Renan as racially prejudiced, because, he said, by nature, Arabs are hostile to science. Afghani argued that all peoples and nation are unable to distinguish good from evil in the early stage. They need prophet, and teachers to guide them.²⁹

And, since humanity, at its origin, did not know the causes of events that passed under its eyes and the secrets of things, it was perforce led to follow the advice of its teachers and the orders they gave. This obedience was imposed in the name of the Supreme Being to whom the educators attributed all events, without permitting men to discuss its utility or its disadvantages. This is no doubt for men one of the heaviest and most humiliating yokes, as I recognizes; but one can not deny that it is by this religious education, whether it be Muslim, Christian or pagan, that all nations have emerged from barbarism and marched toward a more advanced civilization.³⁰

Jamal al-Din Afghani refuting the European thinkers with great vigour, argued that Islam promoted knowledge and favoured the study of sciences. It never supported static attitude. Abu Rayyah narrated that Jamal al-Din was known for his extreme hatred for *taqlid* and stagnation:³¹

*“Once someone narrated Qadi ‘Iyad’s statement as an authority during discussion and insisted so much on his authority as if it was a revealed text. Jamal al-Din Afghani said, “Glory be to God. Whatever Qadi ‘Iyad said was based on his limited wisdom and its relevance was confined to his time. Had no one other than Qadi ‘Iyad the right to convey the clearer and more correct opinion which was closer to truth than his opinion or that of the other jurist? Why was it necessary to confine to the statements of humans and to fall into a static attitude whereas these people never felt restricted by the statements of their ancestors? They used their own intellect; they drew inferences from the original sources and made statements on that authority. They dived deep into the ocean of knowledge and brought forth pearls befitting the needs of their time, familiar to the intellects of their generation. The rules did change with the change of time.”*³²

Afghani used to say:

*“The gate of ijtehad is not closed at all – It is not only a duty but also a right to implement the principles of the Qur’an on the problems of our time continuously. Its refutation is tantamount to taqlid and stagnation. Both these attitudes are as inimical to true Islam as materialism is to it.”*³³

Defining *taqlid* as stagnation, Afghani developed the concept of *ijtihad* as a principle of dynamism. However, his involvement with contemporary politics led him to think in the European framework in such a way that in his thought, *ijtihad* becomes equivalent to the European notion of the “reformation of religion”. In the early period of the reformation of religion in Europe two fundamental trends had emerged, viz. those of regionalism and rationalism. According to Aziz Ahmed, Afghani recommended that “*Ulama*’ should establish regional centres in various countries where *Ijtihad* could be exercised for the guidance of the common man. These regional centres should then be connected with the global centre which may be established in any one of the holy places. The representatives of various centres may gather to exercise *Ijtihad* for the whole of *Ummah*. This will reinvigorate the *Ummah* and will prepare it to withstand foreign challenges.”³⁴

To Afghani, the only remedy lay in the unity and consolidation of the existing Muslim states and in improving the means of their national defense. Thus was conceived the pan-Islamic ideology that has since been associated with his name. It was at best a defensive strategy; in fact, a last-ditch attempt to roll back the tide of Western encroachments.³⁵ To support this approach, Islam itself had ordained such attitude. However, he did not believe that all Muslims ought to unify under one ruler, or Caliph. Rather, cooperation amongst Muslims world was his answer to the weakness that had allowed Muslims to be colonized by the Europeans (namely Britain and France). He believed that, in fact, Islam (and its revealed law) was compatible with rationality and, thus, Muslims could become politically unified whilst still maintaining their faith based on a religious social morality. These beliefs had a profound effect on Muhammad Abduh who went on to expand on the notion of using rationality in the human relations aspect of Islam (*mu'amalat*).³⁶

“The appeal for unity is indeed the theme, which runs all through al-Afghani’s work. Both the common danger, and the values which all Muslims shared, should outweigh differences of doctrine and traditions of

enmity. Differences of sect need not be a political barrier, and the Muslims should profit from the example of Germany, which lost its national unity through giving too much importance to differences of religion. Even the deepest gulfs, between Sunnis and Shi'is, could be bridged."³⁷

The most distinguished idea of Afghani was his vow and dedication for pan-Islamic civilization. He was of the view that Muslim world could make progress and regain the vanished glory of the past. That can be achieved by going back to the fundamental teaching, that is, to unite. His political plan of pan-Islamism was to assemble Muslim nations to struggle and fight against Western domination and acquire the military supremacy and power through modern science and technology. Afghani's mission for Islamic nationalism was the independence of individual Muslim nations. His aim of pan-Islamism was not a religious one but a political one. Afghani believes that the Islamic world could regain its glory by unity instead of division in groups.

*"When he talked of Muslims unity, he did not mean only co-operation of religious or political leaders; he meant the solidarity of the umma, the sense of responsibility which each member of it should have towards the others and the whole, the desire to live together in the community and work together for its welfare. Solidarity (ta'assub) was the force, which held society together, and without it would dissolve. Like all human attributes, it could be perverted; it was not a law unto itself, it is subject to the principle of moderation or justice, the organizing principle of human societies. Solidarity, which did not recognize this principle and was not willing to do justice turned into fanaticism."*³⁸

Afghani believed that to live in the modern world demanded changes in Muslim ways of organizing society, and that it must try to make those changes while remaining true to it. Islam, Afghani believed, was not only compatible with reason, progress and social solidarity, the bases of modern civilization, but if properly interpreted it positively enjoined them. However, he felt that this would be possible only if Islam was interpreted to make it compatible with survival, strength and progress in the world. Afghani felt that a united Islamic civilization was one answer to this problem. He felt that if all Islamic sects were united, they could balance the threat from the West better than they could in their current

divided state. He desired to unite all branches of the Islamic community in a program of self-strengthening that required theological distinctions to be played down -- including the *Sunni/Shii* split -- in favor of a *vague* belief in the superiority of Islam that could appeal to everyone. Keddie argues that pan-Islam and the reform of Islam could seem to him two sides of a program for strengthening the Muslim world and defeating imperialism.³⁹

*“O, sons of the East, don’t you know that the power of the Westerners and their domination over you came about through their advance in learning and education, and your decline in these domains?...Are you satisfied after your past achievements, after you had reached the acme of honor through learning and education, to remain in that wretched state into which you were plunged by ignorance and error. ...Make the effort to obtain knowledge and become enlightened with the light of truth so as to recoup glory and obtain true independence.”*⁴⁰

The pan-Islam, however, did not gain popularity till it first appeared in a French periodical in 1881. Afghani called the society he had founded in Makkah with the object of creating one Caliph over the entire Muslim world, the *Unum-ul-Quran*.⁴¹ This society was, however, suppressed by Sultan Abdul Hamid (1876-1909) within a year of its founding. Afghani developed highly pragmatic and political views regarding the possible panaceas to the predicament confronting the Muslim world. He opposed outright importation of ideas or values from the West, and instead sought to reconcile what he saw as the fundamental precepts of the Islamic faith with the intellectual and social values, which have made sudden upheaval progress possible in the West.⁴²

Like other Islamic modernists, his general line for defending Islam, nationalism, and modernism at the same time was to try to show that modern virtues originated with Islam, and that the Muslims who rejected them were acting against the principles of their religion. Like the early modernists of many cultures, Afghani apparently hoped that the rational attitudes and scientific innovations necessary to self-strengthening could be adopted without the foreigners’ cultural and linguistic baggage, whose acquisition could disrupt national and religious unity and encourage passive admiration for foreign conquerors.⁴³

It can be concluded that viewing the strength of the West as imbedded in the superior knowledge of science and technology, al-Afghani nevertheless argued that Islam, despite its outward decadence

and decline, still possessed strong spiritual and moral values, such values if combined with Western scientific and technological power could raise the Muslim world out of its state of decadence.⁴⁴ Al-Afghani's ideas, however, are faced with serious limitations. In the first place as a politician and activist, he was able to satisfactorily address the philosophical issues, which came to the fore as a consequence of the encounter of cultures and religions. What he advocated was not assimilation, but mixture and amalgamation. Secondly, he never structured his ideas in a distinct formula for action, with the aid of which the Muslims could encounter the West. Al-Afghani's importance, instead, lay in the precedent, which he set and the students whom he trained, mainly through his attempts to bridge the gap, which existed between the traditional Muslims and the Westernizing modernists.⁴⁵ The task of formulating a modernist body of Islamic thought was then left to al-Afghani's disciples. The most noteworthy of whom were Mohammad Abduh, Rasid Rida and Qasim Amin. Expanding upon the trend of thought first initiated by al-Afghani, these disciples addressed an array of issues such as, concepts of liberty, reform, political participation and even women rights in the context of Islam. The most prolific and therefore, famous propagator of modernism in Egypt during this period was Mohammad Abduh. Unlike his mentor, al-Afghani, Abduh was not concerned with imperialism or political action, but rather with religious reform.

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