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Criticism of Western Thoughts in the Writings of Sayyid Jamaluddin Afghani: An Assessment

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
Article History Published Online:	Sayyid Jamaluddin Afghani (1838-97) was a pan-Islamic thinker, political activist and journalist, who wanted to revive Islamic thought and liberate the Muslim world from Western imperialism. His entire thought pattern revolved around the main objective of his mission of organising a joint front of Muslims across the globe against the rising European imperialism. He argued that reason, philosophy and science were neither the products of the West, nor foreign to Islam.
Keywords: <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Afghani➤ West and Islam➤ Imperialism➤ Critique of Western Philosophy➤ Critique of Darwin	Afghani is considered as one of the catalysts of Islamic modernization. He advocated for an Islamic renaissance which would unite the Muslim world and simultaneously confront the cultural threat posed by adaptation of Western ideals. He suggested that minor differences that existed among different Muslim sects, particularly Sunnis and Shias, should not come in the way of forging a united front against the European powers. He also emphasized the doctrinal grounds on which Muslims should proceed in order to recover their lost glory and strength. He devoted his life and talents to the cause of the Muslim revival. In that process he emerged as a great critic of Western imperialism, their philosophical thoughts and their negative views of Islam, Muslims and



	Arabs. An attempt is made below to give a brief outline of his critical remarks on Western imperialism as well as the philosophical thoughts and negative views of Western philosophers and thinkers.
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Afghani's Critical Views on Western Imperialism

Sayyid Jamaluddin Afghani had an unusual understanding of European expansionist designs which he thoroughly exposed in his writings. He criticised the imperialistic colonial policy of the Western powers by saying that it was based upon their intention to exploit the weak and the downtrodden. He was of the view that the term "colonization" designated by the Imperialists was in reality decolonization, depopulation and wanton destruction. He even made a distinction between the Holy Wars of Islam and the economic wars of Europe. While the former aimed at the propagation of faith, the latter always ended in the subjugation and enslavement of the vanquished peoples. He also contrasted Muslim socialism based on love, reason and freedom with material communism of the imperialists based on hatred, selfishness and tyranny.

Next, Sayyid Afghani charged the imperialists with camouflaging their evil intention by presenting themselves as well-wishers and friends of the poor, protectors of the weak and defenders of the oppressed as well as their educators and deliverers from superstition and ignorance. But in reality their aim is nothing but enslavement of the conquered peoples and exploitation of their natural resources. He also strongly denounced the sophism and practices of the partisans of the materialistic interpretation of history resorted to by the imperialists.



His Critique of Western Philosophy

Al-Afghani was a great critic of Western philosophical thought. This fact is adequately reflected in his famous work titled *Al-Radd 'ala al-Dahriyyin* (Refutation of the Materialists) which he composed during his sojourn in India. It was undoubtedly his main philosophical contribution. Originally, this book was written in Persian and published at Hyderabad in 1881 in refutation of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and his followers. Later, it was translated into Arabic by his disciple Muhammad Abduh with the help of Al-Afghani's assistant Arif Efendi and published from Beirut in 1886 under the title *Al-Radd 'ala al-Dahriyyin* (Refutation of the Materialists). This book is a critique on Western philosophical thought promoted by the ancient Greek philosophers Democritus (460-370 BC) and Epicurus (341-270 BC), who taught that pleasure and pain are the measures of what is good and evil, that death is the end of both body and soul, and that God neither rewards, nor punishes human beings. He criticized the atomist and materialist philosophers for their denial of the existence of God and denigration of religion.

In this book Al-Afghani has thrown sufficient light on the importance and inevitability of religion which has contributed immensely to human civilization and progress. Religion, according to him, has taught humanity three fundamental beliefs. First, it promotes spirituality in man which in turn urges him to rise above bestial proclivities and live in peace with his fellow human beings. Secondly, it strengthens belief of every religious community in its superiority over other groups. This feeling of competitive superiority generates competitiveness whereby the various communities strive to improve their lot and persist in their quest for knowledge and progress. Finally, the third belief relates to the assertion that man's existence in this world is but a prelude to a higher life in the hereafter entirely free from sorrow and



suffering. This gives the believer an incentive to be constantly aware of the eternal world that awaits him. It also motivates him to refrain from evil and strive to live a life of love, peace and justice.

Afghani further emphasized the importance of religion in the life of man by saying that it implants among its believers the traits of honesty, modesty and truthfulness, and that the greatness of the major nations of the world could be maintained only by their cultivation of these traits. Substantiating his viewpoints with evidences drawn from history, he maintains that the Greeks could confront and defeat the Persian Empire only on the strength of the virtues taught by religion. But when they adopted materialism and hedonism of Epicurus, it resulted in their decay and downfall, following which they degenerated and fell prey to the Romans. Likewise, the Romans were subjugated by the Muslims when they were weakened by their moral degradation. Similarly, the Muslim Empire which rose on the solid moral and religious strength became so weakened in the course of time by their moral degradation that a small band of Franks scored significant victories over them. Finally the hordes of Chinggis Khan crushed the whole land of Islam, sacked its cities and massacred its people. In this way al-Afghani has portrayed religion as a catalytic force in the progress of humanity. He also believed that religion has the practical values of unifying together the community and keeping it away from evil. Moreover, belief in the hereafter based on the concept of rewards and punishment motivates ethical behaviour and encourages people to live the life of love, peace and justice.

His Criticism of Darwin's Theory of Evolution

Afghani was a great critic of Darwinism which is a theory of biological evolution developed by the English naturalist Charles Darwin (1809- 1882), according to which all species of organisms including man arise and develop through the natural selection of



small, inherited variations that increase the individual's ability to compete, survive, and reproduce. Afghani presented a philosophical theory about nature in response to Darwin's theory. Later, his criticism of Darwin lessened, and he also subscribed to the theory of natural selection whereby survival in nature is for the strongest and the fittest. He illustrated his point by saying that if a number of plants are planted in a single space of earth which does not have sufficient food for all these plants, it will be found that the plants will compete among themselves for food. In course of time some of the plants will be more developed than the others which will ultimately wither. He applies the same theory to the world of animals including human beings where the influence of power is more noticeable than elsewhere. Afghani maintains that these developments are due to the impact of nature's aspects rather than the efforts made by man. Although he accepted biogenesis and the evolution of animals, he rejected the theory that the human species is the product of evolution on the basis of the argument that humans have souls. He thus ascribed the creation of life to Allah alone.

Afghani further belittled the importance of Darwin by pointing out that he was not the first naturalist to write on the theory of evolution, but his ideas had already been proposed by Arab-Muslim scientists of the golden age of Islam. He cited some earlier Muslim scholars who had talked about the evolution of plants and animals from dust. It is noteworthy in this context that the main original contribution of al-Jahiz as a zoologist in his book *Kitab al-Hayawan* was that he discussed for the first time such mechanisms of biological evolution as struggle for existence, transformation of species and environmental factors. Illustrating his theory of struggle for existence, he says that there is a natural war for life between every individual existence, and that the



struggle exists between the members of different as well as the same species.

As regards the process of transformation and mutation, al-Jahiz holds that it operates in conjunction with the effect of environmental factors like food, climate, shelter, etc., and that the new characteristics thus developed help them survive their environmental conditions in a better way. This theory of biological evolution discussed by al-Jahiz has influenced a great number of Muslim and European thinkers including Ibn Zakariya al-Qazwini, Kamaluddin al-Damiri, al-Biruni, al-Nuwayri, C. Linnaeus (1707-1778), Lamarch (1744-1829) and Darwin (1809-1882).

His Rebuttal of Ernest Renan's Charges against Islam and Arabs

Ernest Renan (1823-1892) was a distinguished French Orientalist and religious studies scholar. He had negative thoughts about Islam and the Arab race which he eloquently expressed in his historic lecture delivered at the Sorbonne on March 29, 1883, under the title "Islam and Science". The two principal points of his talk were that the Muslim religion was by its very essence antagonistic to the development of science, and that the Arab people, by their nature, do not like either metaphysical sciences or philosophy. As argued by Renan eloquently, this precious plant could not be properly nourished by them. It rather dried up in their hands as if burnt up by the breath of the desert wind. To quote his own words: "Anyone a little knowledgeable about the affairs of our time sees clearly the present inferiority of the Muslim countries, the intellectual nullity of those races that have received their culture and education solely from that religion. All those who have travelled in the Orient or in Africa have been struck by the fatally enslaved spirit of the true believer, by that sort of iron band that encircles his head, rendering it completely closed to science, incapable either of learning anything or of



working with any new idea". He was of the opinion that the Semitic race was inferior to the Aryan race. He also claimed that the Semitic mind was weakened by dogmatism and lacked a cosmopolitan conception of civilization. These assertions resembled the "Clash of Civilizations" controversy generated by Samuel Huntington's article published about 110 years later.

As expected, this lecture caused a great deal of consternation and feeling in Muslim intellectual circles. A number of refutations were produced, the most important of which was the rejoinder written and published by Sayyid Jamaluddin Afghani.

Sayyid Afghani contradicted the views of Ernest Renan on several counts. First, he described Islam as the religion which appeals to reason and intellect. As such he blamed those who believed without having proofs and rebuked those who followed opinions without having any certainty. He further elaborated that in whatever Islam teaches, its appeal to reason is predominant, and that happiness consists in the right use of reason as proclaimed by the holy texts. In the same spirit he advocated the Mu'tazilite doctrine of free will against fatalism as propounded by the Jabrites which has nothing to do with Islam. According to him, fatalism is an attitude which is commonly and wrongly attributed to the Muslims by the Western people. He distinguished between the Muslim belief in *al-qada w-al-qadar* (predestination) and that in *al-jabr* (fatalism). While the belief in *al-qada w-al-qadar* strengthens the faculty of resolution in man, builds up his moral stamina, and implants in him courage and endurance, *al-jabr* (fatalism), on the other hand, is nothing but an evil innovation (*bid'at*) which was introduced maliciously into the Muslim world for political reasons.

Next, Afghani denounced the charge that the backwardness and decline of the contemporary Muslims is because of their religion. He rather ascribed the causes of their decline to the wide-spread



corruption among them as well as to the changes that were introduced into the dynamic and forward-looking religion of Islam in the course of time by the Sufis, the Zindiqs, the Sophists and those who fabricated the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. All these led to the development of the concept of Islam as a fatalistic, backward-looking religion without social responsibility accompanied by a strong objection to an active and ambitious life. He rejected most firmly the concept of man as a feather in the wind and insisted that he is capable of influencing events and shaping his destiny. He, therefore, emphasized upon the Muslims the need for inculcating genuine Islam which he regarded as the essential basis and foundation for their progress, as it provides them with the social and philosophical system best suited for their material, spiritual and intellectual progress and development. Further, he considered the Western attack on the religion of Islam as an attack at the very existence of the Muslim community. Finally, he asserted that Islam is compatible with science, and that it produced a number of Muslim scientists who contributed immensely to promotion of scientific knowledge in different fields.

As regards the second point in the talk of Ernest Renan relating to the incapability of the Arabs in pursuing scientific knowledge, Sayyid Afghani presented history as a witness to the great scientific achievements made by the Arabs. No one can deny, argued Sayyid Afghani, that the Arab people not only established a vast empire extending from the shores of the Atlantic Ocean to the confines of China, but also successfully rushed along the road of intellectual and scientific progress, and contributed a great deal to human thought and progress. Arabic soon became the language of natural sciences, medicine and philosophy. And between the beginning of the eighth and the middle of the thirteenth centuries the Arabic-speaking people were the main bearers of the torch of



culture and civilization throughout the world. They acquired and assimilated in a remarkably short span of time almost all the Greek, Persian and Indian sciences that had developed slowly during several centuries on their native soil. That was the golden period of Arab history. Here it may be added that had the Arabs done nothing apart from saving, preserving and assimilating the ancient sciences of the then civilized world, even then they would deserve the admiration of the modern scholars for this reason alone, for preservation and transmission of knowledge from the standpoint of the history of culture, is no less important than making original contributions. Otherwise, as P.K. Hitti has put it: "Had the researches of Aristotle, Galen and Ptolemy been lost to posterity, the world would have been as poor as if they had never been produced". Besides, they also enriched the ancient scientific legacy with original contributions of their own. Hence, there is no denying the fact that during the entire period of Arab domination, science made astonishing progress among them and in all the countries under their domination.

Sayyid Afghani further stressed the point that the Arabs took up the cause of scientific knowledge at a time when the Greeks and the Romans had abandoned their studies and researches and their most precious books were relegated to oblivion after having followed for several centuries the path of civilization. The Arabs took up what had been abandoned by the then civilized world, rekindled the extinguished sciences, developed and enriched them with original contributions of their own. And they did all that with a perfect taste and a rare precision and exactitude. Sayyid Afghani rightly argued: "Is not all this the index and proof of their natural love for sciences?"

Another important point made by Sayyid Afghani in support of the Arab capability for cultivation of scientific knowledge was that although it was easier for the French, the Germans and the



English by virtue of their being located in close proximity with Rome and Byzantium to exploit the scientific treasures that lay buried in these two great cities in comparison to the Arabs whose capital was Baghdad, no effort was made by them in that direction until the path was shown to them by the latter. Besides, the Europeans did not think of Aristotle at all when he was Greek and their neighbour. They welcomed him only after he had emigrated and become Arab. This was described by Afghani as another strong proof of the intellectual superiority of the Arabs and of their natural attachment to philosophy.

As regards the charge that the philosophers and scientists of the early centuries of Islam who became famous were mostly from Harran, Muslim Spain and Iran including some Syrian priests, Sayyid Afghani held that the Harranians were Arabs, and that the Arab occupants of Spain did not lose their nationality. It is a well-known fact of history that the Arabic language had been the language of the Harranians several centuries before the rise of Islam; and the fact that they preserved their former religion Sabaenism does not mean that they did not belong to the Arab stock. Similarly, the Syrian priests also were none other than the Ghassanid Arabs who had converted to Christianity. Likewise, it is historically not correct to say that the illustrious Muslim philosophers of Spain, namely Ibn Bajjah, Ibn Tufayl and Ibn Rushd, were not just as Arab as al-Kindi on the ground that they were not born in Arabia. In addition to the above, the Arabs have among themselves enough celebrated scholars and writers to refute the groundless charge of Renan.

Lastly, it would not be out of place to mention here that Sayyid Afghani, during his stay in Paris in 1883, met Ernest Renan and had a conversation with him. He left on him such a great impression that the illustrious French writer was compelled to express his admiration of him in these glowing terms: "The



freedom of his thought, his noble and loyal character made me believe during our conversation that I had before me, brought to life again, one of my old acquaintances, Avicenna, Averroes, or another of those great infidels who represented during five centuries the tradition of the human spirit". This admission on the part of Ernest Renan clearly shows how gifted, erudite, eloquent and knowledgeable Sayyid Jamaluddin Afghani might have been.

Conclusion

It is evident from the above that Sayyid Jamaluddin Afghani's defence of Islam against the onslaught of Orientalists and Imperialists, his diagnosis of the causes of degeneration of Muslim countries, his attack on fanaticism and despotism as well as his emphasis on rationalism, toning down of orthodoxy and strengthening of modern education and parliamentary rule made him the father of modernism in the Muslim world. His religious and political ideas had a deep impact on nationalist leaders of different Muslim countries, particularly Egypt, Iran, Afghanistan and India. Many men and movements claimed him as their predecessor. His direct influence is visible on modernists and nationalists of Egypt, particularly his disciple Muhammad Abduh, Sa'd Zaghlul, Rashid Rada, the Salafiyah movement in Egypt and North Africa, and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and elsewhere.

Among the religious reformers and revolutionaries of Iran greatly influenced by Afghani, mention may be made of Sheikh Hadi Najmabadi, Malik al-Mutakallimin, and Sheikh Muhammad Tabataba'i. In addition to the above, his impact was felt in India also. Although he was a bitter critic of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan mainly because of his pro-British policy, he shared with him his ideas on rationalism, reformism, modern education and scant orthodoxy. The pan-Islamic Khilafat movement (1919-1924) launched by the Muslims of India in the years following the First



World War in alliance with Indian nationalism is said to have been inspired by Afghani. The great nationalist leader Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and the distinguished poet-thinker Dr. Muhammad Iqbal bear the impact of this great Muslim reformer on the development of their thought process. The weekly journal *al-Hilal* started by Maulana Azad was on the pattern of *al-'Urwat al-Wuthqa*, the early issues of which published several articles on Afghani's life and career and in praise and appreciation of his religious reforms. Likewise, Allamah Iqbal was deeply influenced by Afghani's diagnosis of the degeneration of Muslims; and regarded him amongst the foremost socio-religious leaders of modern times. His influence is further evidenced by the translations of his writings as well as books on his life and works which have appeared in this country from time to time. Lastly, his combination of pan-Islamism and anti-imperialism continues to have wide appeal in Muslim circles even today.