

Islamic Civilization in the Face of Modernity: the Case of Jamal Al-Din Al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh

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Abstract

From the beginning of the 19th century, a large number of the Muslim World lost their cultural and political sovereignty to European powers. In reaction to this domination, several responses were recorded, but the major response to Western occupation was Islamic Modernism. Islamic Modernism is the intellectual response to religious and cultural challenges in an attempt to reach a medium between adaptation and rejection of the Western technological advancement. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897) and his disciple Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) were the pioneers of Islamic Modernism. They both believed that Islam is compatible with science and reason and that in order to save Islamic civilization from declining Muslim World must abandon dogmatism and embrace progress. This paper discusses the role of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh in defense of Islamic civilization against the Western colonial powers. It focuses on their thoughts with regard to the concept Taqlid, Shura and political reform. It analyzes their impact in preserving Islamic civilization in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Keywords: Islamic Civilization, Modernity, Reform.

I. Introduction

One of the fundamental challenges faced by the Muslim world in the 19th century was the decline of Islamic Civilization in the face of modernity. This decline has called for a rescue operation and immediate response from Muslim intellectuals and reformers. In trying to address this problem, reformers and Muslim intellectuals differed on whether the problem is external or from within? In other words, Should Islam be adjusted to be compatible with modernity? Some reformers, who were profoundly influenced by the West, believed that in order to address this problem adequately, Muslim world must abandon dogmatism and imbibe Western scientific development, asserting that the West is the solution to this problem. While some reformers tried to harmonize Islam with modernity, others found it difficult to do so, as they found the two parallel and have nothing in common. In fact, this category of scholars considered the West as the prime suspect and an open enemy of Islam, and, to a large extent, the cause of the decay. Therefore, they maintained that the only way out was to abandon Western civilization and values and go back to the pristine purity of the teachings of Islam. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838–1897) and Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) both argued that Islam is inherently rational and need not to be abandoned in the face of modernity and the encroachment of Western scientific and cultural thoughts. They maintained that it is possible to demonstrate the authenticity of Islamic teachings and their relevance within an Islamic society. This paper discusses the role of al-Afghni and Abduh in defense of Islamic civilization against the Western colonial powers. It focuses on their thoughts with regard to the concept of *Taqlid*, *Shura* and political reform. It concludes by analyzing their impact in preserving Islamic civilization in the 19th and 20th centuries.

II. Islamic Modernism

Islamic modernity was an effort to give a befitting interpretation of Islam that fits the modern world. These ideas were formulated during the 19th century as an intellectual response to Western colonial influence in the face of declining Islamic civilization. Islamic modernism objected to Western colonial exploitation of Muslim countries and the imposition of Western secular values.

Many Islamic modernists argued that Islam and modernity were compatible, and that all it takes is to re-interpret and re-apply the principles and ideals of Islam to formulate new responses to the political, scientific, and cultural challenges of the West and of the modern life. This reform seems to challenge the status quo maintained by the conservative Muslim scholars, who saw the established law as the ideal order that had to be followed and upheld the doctrine of *Taqlid*. However, Islamic modernists saw the resistance to change on the part of the conservative scholars as a major cause for the problems Muslim community was facing as well as its inability to counter Western hegemony. The modernists' mission was firstly, to define Islam by bringing out the fundamentals in a rational and liberal manner. Secondly, to emphasize the basic ideals of Islamic brotherhood. And thirdly, to interpret the teachings of Islam in order to bring out its dynamic character in the context of the intellectual and scientific progress of the modern world. The modernists sincerely Endeavour to reconcile the differences between traditional religious doctrine and secular scientific rationalism with regards to unquestioning faith and reasoned logic, and between continuity of Islamic tradition and modernity. According to Hourani A. (1983), Jamal al-Din al-Afghani is regarded as one of the pioneers of Islamic modernism. He believed that Islam was compatible with science and reason and that in order to counter European power the Muslim world had to embrace progress. Another notable figure in this regard is Muhammad Abduh, a disciple and collaborator of al-Afghani. He was even more influential than his master and is often referred to as the founder of Islamic modernism. Abduh was born and raised in Egypt and was a well-known scholar. He taught at al-Azhar and other institutions and in 1899 became Mufti of Egypt. Abduh believed that the Islamic world was suffering from an inner decay and was in need of revival. Their views on Islamic modernism are discussed below.

III. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani

Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897), was a 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 centuries. Nasr (2006), asserted that Afghani advocated Muslim unity and was less interested in theology than in organizing a Muslim response of Western pressure. He 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. Afghani fought with the 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. Malik, (2011). Afghani's primary goal was to rebuild a strong Islamic state capable of withstanding Western encroachments. Undoubtedly, he was an ideologist of pan-Islam and Islamic reform, and it was his vision and determination that Islamic history shall again be splendid. Malik, (2011). 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 *Ulamator* to follow the West blindly. He took the middle path. He stressed the need of modern science and technology of the West which the Islamic world should acquire without 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 programme. As he says: "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 Qur'an. The latter, if properly interpreted, will be found to be compatible with modern values."Kedde, (1968). 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. Thus, he stood for constitutional reforms, justice, popular rights, and for the supremacy of Law. Ali, (2008). To Afghani, the only remedy rest in the unity and consolidation of the existing Muslim states and in improving the means of their national defense. 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, 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 relation aspects of Islam. Hourani, (1983).

Moreover, Afghani's leading role as an enlightened intellectual who strived to awaken masses was at its peak in his lecture on "Teaching and Learning", which he delivered in 1882. His equation of the motive and method for truth to philosophy instead of religion is the first remarkable idea of the lecture. The rational and logical underpinnings of his thought are apparent from the beginning when he claims that there is no end or limit to science and that it is science that ruled; rules, and will rule the world. Seda, U. (2011). The profoundness of his thought is introduced with his argument that "men must be related to science, not science to men". He maintained that science cannot and should not be divided into Muslim science and European science but rather refers to the universality of science. It further signals the idea of institutionalization. The inherent rationality of his thought gains an empiricist stratum when he affirms that "the truth is where there is proof". Keddie, (1968). What is even more striking is his assertion that reform of religion can never be achieved by the Muslims except "from above" because the masses are normally religiously educated, and philosophical education, which is the method and motive for truth, can only be attained by a society that has studied science, and thus, is able to understand proofs and demonstrations. Seda U. (2011). In his lecture "The Benefits of Philosophy", Afghani placed philosophy to the centre as the cause of man's intellectual activity. He argued that without philosophy, there will be no production of knowledge, and this will eventually lead to retrogress, and consequently the objective of reaching scientific truth will be impossible. Keddie, (1968).

Reaffirming his call for the truth, Afghani called for the enthronement of the philosophic spirit. Whilst expounding the virtues and indispensability of science, Afghani was also at pains to stress that science needed another science which is more comprehensive to enable man to know how to apply each field in its proper place. This field of knowledge is *Falsafah* (philosophy) or *Hikmah* (wisdom). 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. Javid, (2003). Consequently, he maintained that the study of philosophy 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. Javid, (2003). The secret behind his clarion call to imbibe philosophy was to create political awareness to the citizens and the right to participate in the political process. He deeply believed that the absence of justice, *Shura* and non-adherence by the government to the constitution are some of the causes of this decay. One of his main demands was that people should be allowed to assume their political and social role by participating in governance through *Shura* and elections. Afghani had squarely blamed despotism as the prime factor for Muslims backwardness, because it blocked the attempts of Muslim thinkers to enlighten the public about the essence and virtues of republican government. Azzam (2006).

IV. Muhammad Abduh

Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905), was another important figure in Islamic modernism. According to him, Islam's relationship with the modern age was the most crucial issue facing Islamic communities which they need to address. In his attempt to reconcile Islamic ideals with their Western counterparts, he argued that *Maslahah* (interest) in Islamic thought corresponds to *Manfa'ah* (utility) in the Western thought. Similarly, he equated *Shura* with democracy and *Ijma'* with consensus. Addressing the question of authority, Abduh refused to accept the existence of a theocracy in Islam, and insisted that the authority of the *Hakim* (ruler), the *Qadi* (judge) or the *Mufti* was strictly civil. He demanded that *Ijtihad* be revived to enable Islamic thought address the emerging priorities and problems. He was a proponent of the parliamentary system. He defended pluralism and refuted the claims that it would undermine the unity of the *Ummah*. He argued that the European nations were not divided by it. The reason, he concluded, is that their objectives are the same, what varies is only the method they applied towards accomplishing them. Hourani, (1983). *Shura*, according to him, must be followed and not just be an issue of debate. Practicing *Shura* will be equivalent or even better than the spirit of democracy. It is the lost wisdom which has been rediscovered. The calamity of the *Ummah* then and now is the absence of the system of *Shura* and the adoption of an oppressive dynastical ruling systems. However, what captures my attention in this respect is Abduh's equation of the concept of *Shura* in the Muslim world with democracy in the West. However, what we need to consider here is the fact that Abduh believed that not all Western political aspects are bad, but, rather, some are within the Islamic worldview and could be adopted and implemented in the Muslim world in order to get rid of the political ills that needed to be removed. In addition, he was of the opinion that the Muslim world should look at the West objectively so as to benefit from their experience. Azzam, (2006).

Moreover, Abduh has gone as far as stating that the gist of democracy is that the public can choose the rulers who are going to administer their affairs. The people, having the right to select, criticize and terminate the post of a ruler, and should not be forced to accept systems, trends, and policies to which they do not agree to. They are free to hold elections, referendums, ensuring majority rights, protecting minority rights, having opposition, have multi parties, have press freedom and safeguarding the independence of the judiciary. But once again, to constantly uphold and safeguard the principles of Islam, the firm rulings, the determined laws and the essentials of religion must not be compromised or neglected. On the same ground, Abduh warned Muslims against blind imitation of the West as European influence grew in Egypt. This was due to blind imitation of Western civilization by some Egyptians in the areas of politics and education. But he was in no way opposed to Western science and technology. Abduh advocated the introduction of modern sciences together with the local sciences into al-Azhar University. He described the strength of prejudice against modern sciences in al-Azhar and related that al-Ghazali (1058-1111) and others considered the study of logic and similar disciplines obligatory for the defense of Islam. He said: "There is no religion without a state, and no state without authority, and no authority without strength, and no strength without wealth. The state does not possess trade or industry. Its wealth is the wealth of the people and the people's wealth is not possible without the spread of these sciences amongst them so that they may know the ways for acquiring wealth." Rida, (1973).

He stressed that modern sciences are essential to our life in this age, and they serve as our defense against aggression and humiliation and that they constitute the basis of our happiness, wealth and strength. He said, "These sciences we must acquire and we must strive towards their mastery." Rida, (1973).

In a nutshell, the spirit of such political awareness and emphasis on the nationalism and *Wataniyyah* were mobilized by the spirit of Islamic modernism. In addition, Abduh and Afghani both argued that political awareness is very important but not enough to provide solutions to the political turmoil of their time. They asserted that there is need to add modern sciences to political awareness in order to be fully independent of the Western hegemony throughout the world. Abu Hamdan, (1992).

V. Conclusion

Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh are considered the catalysts of Islamic modernism in the 19th century. Their role in reforming Muslims minds and reshaping their future by equipping themselves with modern scientific knowledge has recorded a huge success. They have succeeded, as well, in creating a suitable response to the Western domination of Muslims land, and such effort of theirs have left a great impact throughout the Arab and Muslim world today. Both Afghani and Abduh collaborated in writing many articles on reform, asserting that certain old traditions, which were not necessary in upholding Islamic law, should be reformed or discarded. Their reform and intellectual response to modernity has awakened the dormant intellectuals throughout the Muslim world.

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