

MITTEILUNGEN

Afghānī on the Decline of Islam *

Muslim thinkers of the nineteenth century addressed themselves in one way or another to the problem of the decline of Islam and how to revive it. Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1838-1897), the well-known reformer, was no exception. Our understanding of his thoughts on this and other subjects is, however, still obscure. This obscurity is due to a number of reasons, among which are the facts that Afghānī wrote sparingly and that some of what he wrote lacks consistency.¹ In this article one of his least known essays, entitled "Why Has Islam Become Weak",² is translated in full from the original Persian. Internal evidence, such as poor organization, inaccurate quotation of Qur'anic verses and some repetition, suggests that it is based on a speech given by Afghānī and committed into writing by one of his followers. The essay is also undated, but its appeal to Muslim unity fits well with his Pan-Islamic activities during his stay in Istanbul in the 1890's. Its reference to the British occupation of the Sudan would also date it at this period.

In this essay Afghānī appears as a devoted Muslim, with a sound and universal religious view, who considers Islam as the highest religion and the Qur'ān as the revealed and perpetual guide to mankind. God had promised that the "Muslims should become the cream of Adam's children and the masters of mankind." He promised them honor, glory, support, victory and power. It was a "handful of unequipped Arabs," says Afghānī, who amazed the world by achieving this power and glory within a very short time. The reason for this success is because the Muslims were with God and "remained loyal to the covenant they had entered with Him" and so He rewarded them in this world and the hereafter.

Afghānī goes on to describe and lament the demise of the Muslims of his day: their number has increased two thousand fold over what it was at the time of their great conquests; yet they are now disgraced, humiliated and oppressed by foreigners who have occupied most of *Dār al-Islām*. What is the reason for this sad state of affairs? The answer to this question lies in the fact that the Muslims have lost their courage and strength and can no longer fight; their rulers "humble themselves before the non-Muslim kings in order to live a few days longer;" and the people are apathetic and want only peace of mind. The decline is not due to God's failure to keep His promise; rather, it results from the Muslims' failure to keep theirs and their having turned away from the right path. The responsibility for this decline, according to Afghānī, lies with the Muslims themselves and it is therefore up to them to reverse the situation, for "God changes not what is in a people until they change what is in themselves." (13:11).³

It is interesting to note that, unlike some of Afghānī's other writings,⁴ this essay contains no clear reference to the need for learning Western sciences and technology; nor does it criticize the backwardness of the 'ulamā' as a major cause for the decline of Islam. On other occasions Afghānī singled out only the British as oppressive rulers over Muslims,⁵

* I wish to acknowledge my gratitude to Dr. A. Albert Kudsi-Zadeh of the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Montreal, for his kind assistance in the preparation of this article and in the translation of Afghānī's essay.

¹ These reasons are spelled out in Kudsi-Zadeh, *Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī: An Annotated Bibliography* (Leiden, 1970), pp. xiii-xiv.

² "Chirā Islām za'if shud," in Afghānī, *Maqālāt-i Jamāliyya*, edited by Luṭf Allāh Khān Asadābādī (Tehran, 1312 h. solar/1933), pp. 164-170. Reproduced from the journal *Tazakkur* (Tehran), Nos. 3,4,5.

³ The verses cited here are from the English translation by A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (London, 1955). (Rev. in WI, N.S., vol. V, p. 121).

⁴ Such as his response to Ernest Renan published in *Journal des Débats* (Paris), May 18, 1883. For other sources, see Kudsi-Zadeh, *Bibliography*, *passim*.

⁵ Kudsi-Zadeh, "Les idées d'Afghani sur la politique coloniale des Anglais, des Français et des Russes," *Orient* (Paris), No. 47-48 (1968), pp. 197-206

but in this essay he includes the French, the Dutch, the Russians and even the Chinese. These facts lend further credence to the view recently expressed by Professors Keddie, Kedourie and Kudsi-Zadeh that Afghānī said and wrote different things to suit particular audiences or arguments.¹

Translation of the essay:

Why Has Islam Become Weak

"God changes not what is in a people, until they change what is in themselves." (13:11)

"That is because God would never change His favour that He conferred on a people until they change what was within themselves." (8:55)

These are verses of the Honourable Qur'ān, the Admonitory Book which leads to the Right Path, and which calls [men] to the true religion. No one doubts it except erring people who are insane, and atheists who are foreign to wisdom. The Qur'ān is a book revealed from heaven to the best messenger [of God] in order to guide [His] creatures and save them from the wrong path. Then answer [me]: does not God keep His promise? Does He refute the messengers? Does God deceive? Does He lead His servants astray? Has He revealed the indisputable verses (*āyāt-i bayyināt*) in vain? Have the prophets ascribed lies to Him? God forbid! God save [us] from that! God is the most truthful of all; He is true to His promise. The messengers and prophets are also infallible, they do not tell lies, they do not slander; but they [only] call mankind to the right way. It would be blasphemy and heresy to ascribe vain and idle talk to His glorious Essence: "... be He exalted above that [which] they say!" (17:45).²

The Absolute and Wise One does nothing other than what is based on wisdom; He fulfills His promises and threats; His tradition (*sunnat*) never changes; His words do not change: "... no man can change His words..." (6:115). Are these unequivocal verses [written] in another language which we are not supposed to understand? Has God spoken mysteriously and has He forbidden mankind to be guided by the Qur'ān? Are there any allusions [in it] that we cannot perceive? Is the language so strange that no one except a prophet can understand [it]? I ask God's forgiveness!

The Qur'ān is the Book of God which He has sent down for the guidance [of mankind] and in which He has explained, in a simple Arabic language, what is for the use of man and what is necessary for his life in this world and the world to come. It is a cure for the disease of straying [from the right path] and a remedy for the disease of ignorance, because [the Qur'ān says: it is] "... a healing for what is in the breasts..." (10:57). It is not the language of the birds. He has not made any allusion in His unequivocal verses. He has spoken clearly and explicitly in a language which the bedouins, the Arabs and everyone who knows Arabic can understand.

The Qur'ān is a perpetual and literary guide which [will remain] stable (*barqarār*) and will correct errors until the day of resurrection. Falsehood never comes close to it and no disorder (*khalāl*) reaches it from any direction: "... falsehood comes not to it from before it nor from behind it..." (41:42).

God, the exalted One, in His Glorious Book has given promises to us Muslims; He has given glad tidings; He has promised greatness on the basis of which Islam should have superiority over other religions of the world. The Muslims should become the cream of Adam's children and the masters of mankind, as He says: "... glory belongs unto God, and unto His messenger and the believers..." (63:8). Might and greatness belong only

¹ Elie Kedourie, *Afghani and 'Abduh: An Essay on Religious Unbelief and Political Activism in Modern Islam* (London, 1966); Nikki R. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn 'al-Afghānī* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1968); Kudsi-Zadeh, "The Legacy of Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī in Egypt," unpublished Ph. D. dissertation (Indiana University, 1968), chapter I: "The Controversy Over Afghānī's Origin."

² The text reads: "*Ta 'āla Allāh 'ammā yaqūl al-zālimūn 'uluwwan kabīran.*"

to God, His messenger and the Muslims. Might has been given to no one but the Muslims and this robe of honour adorns only this blessed community.

On another occasion God reveals: "... and it was ever a duty incumbent upon Us, to help the believers." (30:46). It means that it is necessary and compulsory for God to aid the Muslims and the faithful and make them triumph over other peoples. He also says in another place that: "... He may uplift it above every religion. God suffices as a witness." (48:28). It means that God should make the true religion of Islam (*Din-i Hanif*) triumph over all the religions and sects in order that it might seize them all. He Himself is a sufficient witness to the promise He has made.

There are many verses of this kind; there are also countless numbers of traditions concerning this matter, for example: "... Islam is high and nothing is higher than it".¹ Islam should always be in the highest rank and [thus] no religion will become higher than it. Yes, in these unequivocal verses God has explicitly promised [us] support, victory, power and nobility of expression (*'uluw-i kalima*) in such a way that there is no ground for any misinterpretation (*ta'wil*) and no religious Muslim can deny it unless he is a person who deviates from the right path of the *Shari'a* and tampers with the divine words.

Are these [then] obscure verses which should be ignored? Do they need any explanation and interpretation? Has God promised a provisional power to the Muslims and given a time limit through the verses? No, they are unequivocal verses the meaning of which no one can ever doubt; there is no limited duration in them and Islam and the Muslims should be honoured and proud and should take precedence over people all over the world until doomsday.

God roused the Islamic *umma* with a small number of people and gave them the highest rank to the point that the Muslims trod upon the lofty mountains and shook them with awe. Hearts pounded strongly on hearing their names, bodies trembled and the gall-bladders (*zahra*) of the celebrated people burst from awe of them. Their astonishing advent frightened every soul and their extraordinary progress amazed every intellect. The inhabitants of the world bit their fingers in astonishment at the unbelievable progress which these people achieved in a short period of time. They wondered where they had found this electric railway by which they travelled over many *farsangs* ² in the twinkling of an eye; how they had created such a powerful machine which carried thousands of heavy loads within a moment; how the brave nations of the world had fallen helpless in facing them; and how the powerful states had been worn out under the hoofs of their horses.

But the wise men who see the truth and seek the truth and know the truth found the cause of this sudden progress and explained it this way: "those people who are with God, God will be with them".³ The Muslims were with God, and endeavoured to exalt the divine word and they did not forget God in any circumstance. Therefore, God was also with them and gave them His support, as this fact is clearly expressed in the Holy Qur'an: "... in *tanşurū Allāh yaŋşurkum* ..." (47:7). It means that if you help God, God also helps you.

It is obvious that God has no quarrel with anybody; He is not helpless to need His servant's help; therefore, the meaning [of the above verse] is that if you consider God always present and watching you and endeavour to exalt His word, and to execute His command and interdiction, God will grant [you] victory and support. When the Islamic people (*millat*) first appeared they were neither a large number nor adequately supplied with food or weapons. In spite of this, they split the ranks of nations and took under their own dominion [lands] from coast to coast and occupied the territories of others. Neither did the Zoroastrian towers and moats stop them nor the strong forts of the Romans prevent them from conquering and defeating; neither did huge armies become an obstacle nor shining swords a barrier; neither did the grandeur of the kings of the world strike fear in their hearts nor the wealth

¹ A *ḥadīth* attributed to the prophet Muḥammad. See Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi' al-ṣaḥīḥ*, edited by M. L. Krehl (Leiden, 1862), vol. I, p. 340.

² *Farsang* or *farsakh* is a unit of length of about 18,000 feet. This unit is still in use in Iran and is considered equal to six kilometers.

³ *Qawmun kānū ma'a Allāh fakāna Allāh ma'ahum*. This seems to be a *ḥadīth*, but it was not possible to locate it.

of the enemies impress them. The ordered existence of the state affairs [of others] did not create any disorder in them. The science and arts of others did not penetrate into their foundation. In whatever direction they turned they destroyed the nerve center (*shirāza*) of their enemies and whatever way they faced they turned the opposing army upside down.

It never had occurred to anyone that a handful of unequipped Arabs would shake the pillars of the powerful states and would wipe out their names and all traces of them from the face of the earth. It had not entered anyone's mind that this weak group would defeat the powerful nations of the world and would establish and consolidate their own religion, the *Shari'at* of Islam, and would have these nations obey the command and interdiction of the Qur'ān. But [in fact] this great event took place and this blessed nation [of Muslims], lacking power and equipment, reached a rank such that no [other] nation could achieve and whose parallel has not been seen in any century. What was the reason? The reason was that [the Muslims] remained loyal to the covenant into which they had entered with God, and so God granted them an ample reward in this world and the hereafter. He gave them power in this world and happiness in the world to come.

Let us now take a look at the present situation of the Muslims and compare it with their past and clarify their progress *vis à-vis* their decline. The Muslim population in the world today is more than six-hundred *kurūr*,¹ that is to say, two thousand times as large as the Muslim population at the time of their conquest of the territories of the world. The Islamic state extended from the shore of the Atlantic Ocean in West Africa to the heart of China. All these areas were independent and prosperous lands located in the best regions of the earth; they enjoyed nature (*ṣāhib-i ṭabī'i*), a pleasant climate and fertile soil. Their lands had different kinds of God-given gifts and were suitable for every kind of cultivation. They were centers of wealth and sources of knowledge. These are the same places which, from early times until recently, were refuges for people and were centers of civilization and prosperity, and their rulers were always the kings of the kings of the world. For example, in a small part of this territory, that is from the banks of the Tigris river to the Nile, there flourished several great nations each of which was regarded as one of the world's greatest, such as the Assyrians, Phoenicians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Chaldeans, Israelites and others.

In spite of this, the Islamic states today are unfortunately pillaged and their property stolen; their territory is occupied by foreigners and their wealth in the possession of others. There is no day in which foreigners do not grab a part of the Islamic lands, and there is no night in which foreigners do not make a group of Muslims obey their rule. They disgrace the Muslims and dissipate their pride. No longer is the command of [the Muslims] obeyed or their word heeded. [The foreigners] chain up the Muslims, put around their necks a yoke of servitude, debase them, humiliate their lineage,² and they do not mention their name but with insult. Sometimes they call them savages and sometimes regard them as hard-hearted and cruel and finally consider them insane animals. What a disaster! What an affliction! What kind of situation is this? What kind of adversity is this? England has occupied Egypt, the Sudan and the great Indian Peninsula which are large parts of the Islamic states; the French have taken possession of Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria; the Netherlands have become a despotic ruler (*mālik al-rīqāb*) of Java and the Oceanic islands; Russia has captured West Turkestān, the large cities of Transoxiana, Caucasia and Dāghistān; China has taken East Turkestān. Not more than a few Islamic countries, which are also in great danger, have remained independent.³

Out of fear of the Europeans and Westerners they [the Muslims] cannot sleep at night and have no peace in the daytime. The foreigners' influence has affected [even] their blood vessels to the extent that they shudder with fear when they hear the words of Russia and England; they become stupefied with dread when they hear the words of France and Germany. This is the same nation which used to take poll-tax from great kings and to whom the leaders paid tribute voluntarily with the utmost humility, [but] today [the Muslims]

¹ That is, 300 million. 1 *kurūr* equals 500,000.

² *Ātish-i qahr dar dūdmānīshān zanand*, literally means "they put fire of wrath on their lineage."

³ Here Afghānī must be referring to Ottoman Turkey and Iran.

have come to the point where the whole world lost hope about their existence [because] they are bitterly oppressed in their own homes.

The foreigners are forever frightening these helpless people by tricks and making them unhappy by deceit and ruining their lives. [On the other hand], the Muslims neither have legs to run away nor have they hands to fight. Their kings humble themselves before the non-Muslim kings in order to live a few days longer. The subjects of the [Muslim] kings take refuge in different houses here and there, hoping to have peace of mind. Oh! Oh! What an immense tragedy! What a great catastrophe has fallen [on us]! What a situation has arisen! Where is that power and dignity? What happened to that omnipotence and greatness? Where did that magnificence and glory go? What is the cause of this measureless decline? What is the reason for this poverty and helplessness? Is it possible to doubt God's promise? God forbid! Is it possible to lose hope of God's mercy? God protect us!

What should be done then? Where can we find the cause? Where can we look for the reason and whom should we ask? [There is no answer to these questions] except to say that: "God changes not what is in a people, until they change what is in themselves: *inna Allāh lā yughayyiru mā bi qawmin ḥattā yughayyirū mā bi anfusihim.*" (13:11).

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2. A DIARY ON MESOPOTAMIA IN 1906

In the summer of 1906, Y. W. A. Young travelled in Syria and Mesopotamia by steamer, caravan and *shakhtūr*¹ in the company of a fellow Englishman. Little is known of him other than that he was financial advisor to the Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem and in 1926 co-authored, with Sir Thomas A. Bertram, a report "upon certain controversies between the Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem and the Arab Orthodox Community" commissioned by the Government of Palestine.²

Young left a brief but interesting account of this journey in the form of a diary which has not been published.³ In his description of the people he encountered and the places he visited he shows an understanding of the social, economic and political conditions of the Fertile Crescent that is not superficial. The diary also contains an appendix entitled "A Note on Mesopotamia in 1906" in which Young offers some interesting observations on major contemporary issues. Among these are the Baghdad Railway project, Arab attitudes toward Ottoman rule and their response to the Pan-Islamic appeal of Sultan Abdülhamid II, as well as relations between the Ottoman authorities and the Kurdish and Arab tribes. The appendix is offered below, in full, as an additional document on the social and political climate of the region at the turn of the century.

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At present out of the 2400 kilometers of the Baghdad railway scheme from Konia to the Persian Gulf only 200 kilometers have been completed: that is the section between Konia and Eregli. Also it is probable that there still remains some time before we shall see a railway at Baghdad, as by Article 29 of the Baghdad Railway Convention of 1903 the working of any section of the line between Baghdad and Basra is forbidden before the completion of the main line from Konia to Baghdad. At present, the great difficulty is, how to get over the Taurus mountain range between Eregli and Adana. Meantime the French Damascus Hamah Company have reached Aleppo. Through passenger traffic opens on November 1st.

Evidently the object of the Turkish Government is to join this line with the section of the Baghdad railway when it has come over the Taurus. When this is completed there will be through railway communication between Constantinople and a point some 100 kilometers south of Maan. This means in a few more years that Turkish troops will travel

¹ The *shakhtūr* is described by Young as "a flat bottomed boat made of boards with upright staves of pine wood and one longitudinal pole along each side. It is about 30 feet long and 8 feet wide and four feet deep, drawing about one foot of water." MS., p. 23.

² *Commission . . . to inquire and report upon certain controversies . . .* London, 1926.

³ MS. in the library of the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Montreal.