

JAMAL AL-DIN AL-AFGHANI

WHEN Tahtawi and Khayr al-Din looked at Europe, what they saw were its new ideas and inventions rather than the irresistible power it derived from them. Khayr al-Din indeed was aware of the dangers inherent in the growth of European influence over the affairs of the empire, but thought they could be resisted with the help of the liberal Powers themselves; they had not yet become so great as to constitute the central problem of political life, and the main problem was still what it had been for the Ottoman writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—internal decline, how to explain and how to arrest it. The political ideas and practical skill of Europe were necessary for the one and the other alike, and Europe therefore was first of all a teacher and political ally for those who wished to reform the life of the Ottoman community. Had Tahtawi and Khayr al-Din written their books a few years later they would no doubt have written with a different emphasis, for in the years between 1875 and 1882 there took place events which were to give a new turn to the relationship between Europe and the Near East. The eastern crisis of 1875–8 showed that the armies of a European Power could penetrate to the heart of the empire, and could only be checked there by a threat from another Power; and the Treaty of Berlin which ended it showed that the fate of the empire and each of its provinces was no longer in its own hands. The occupation of Tunis by France in 1881, of Egypt by England in 1882, pointed the moral, and from that time there took place a radical change in the political thought of the Near East. For some of the Near Eastern Christians, indeed, the advantages of the European presence might outweigh its disadvantages; European domination did not challenge their whole view of the universe, and it might hold out hopes of influence and culture for their community, of prosperity for themselves. For a Muslim, however, whether he was Turkish or Arab, the seizure of power by Europe meant that his community was in danger. The *umma* was, among

other things, a political community expressing itself in all the forms of political life, and a community which has no power may cease to exist. The problem of inner decay still exercised men's minds, but there was grafted on to it a new problem, that of survival: how could the Muslim countries resist the new danger from outside?

In the first instance the crisis seemed to give added strength to the arguments of the Young Ottomans. If the Bulgarians and Bosnians were rising in revolt, that was because the reforms of the nineteenth century had given the Christian subjects freedom without giving them a principle of loyalty; their freedom had enabled them to liberate themselves from the Empire, and the foreign Powers, particularly Russia, were encouraging and helping them in this. What was necessary was 'grouper tous ces éléments autour d'un principe vivifiant et régénérateur qui eût cimenté leur union; il aurait fallu créer pour ces différentes races une patrie commune qui les rendît insensibles aux suggestions du dehors'. Such a principle could be given them by a constitution, which alone would ensure that rights and duties were equal and that 'les améliorations dont on veut doter une partie de la population ne constituent pas le malheur et l'infortune de l'autre'.¹ But since an Ottoman constitution, being new, could not possess 'la consistance et l'autorité des vieilles constitutions européennes', it was necessary for liberal Europe itself to provide a substitute for what was lacking, by actively supervising the execution of the charter.²

The words are those of Midhat Pasha, an intelligent and successful official who had held high office and whose views were in the main those of the Young Ottomans, although he did not always agree with them and they had some suspicion of his autocratic tendencies. In May 1876, after the revolts had started and Russian intervention threatened, he led a coup d'état which deposed Abdülaziz and replaced him by his nephew Murad V and then, when Murad proved insane, by another nephew Abdülhamid II. At the end of the year the Ottoman constitution was promulgated: it provided for a responsible ministry, an appointed Senate, an elected Chamber of Deputies, and a hierarchy of local councils. In 1877 the first Chamber was

¹ Midhat, *La Turquie*, pp. 14 & 23 (Eng. trs. p. 986 & 990).

² *Ibid.* p. 28 (Eng. trs. p. 992).

elected. The elections took place under pressure from the local officials; not all the deputies could speak Turkish, or knew how parliamentary debates should be conducted; the Speaker was Ahmed Vefik Pasha, whom we have met in his youth, and who in his old age had not changed his view that nothing should be done which weakened those forces which held the empire together, the authority of the sovereign and the domination of the Muslim element. In spite of all this, however, the debates were real: political ideas were expressed, ministers and court officials were criticized and an opposition group emerged.³ But the constitution had its enemies: the '*ulama*', the conservatives, the sultan himself, who, although before his accession he had had some contact with the Young Ottomans, was not willing to give up his personal power. He had only accepted the constitution because of the pressure of the Powers; once the pressure was relaxed he could destroy it at his leisure. The opposition in the Ottoman parliament was becoming increasingly bold, naming ministers in whom it had no confidence and demanding the indictment of the former Prime Minister and the generals who had failed in the recent war against Russia. Abdülhamid prorogued parliament indefinitely and suspended, although he did not abolish, the constitution. Its author, Midhat Pasha, had already been sent into exile; allowed to return, he was arrested, accused of the murder of Abdülaziz (who in fact had killed himself soon after he was deposed), and sentenced to death. The sentence was commuted, he was sent into enforced residence in the Hejaz, and there quietly murdered a few years later. With him the first constitutional movement died. Abdülhamid was supreme and seemed to have taken up again the policy of his predecessors: administrative reform, but reform from above. In his early years at least he carried on the main lines of their policy: modernization of the system of justice and administration; centralization, made possible for the first time by the use of the telegraph and the building of railways; repression of the beduin and support for settled agriculture; the creation of schools, primary and secondary as well as higher. But as the reign went on, a change took place not only in his policy but in the nature of its appeal. The image of the sultan as a benevolent liberal monarch, father of all his peoples alike, Muslim, Christian, and Jewish, and leader of

³ Fesch, *Constantinople*, pp. 267 ff.

all the forces of westernizing reform—an image which had gradually been formed since the days of Mahmud II—was not destroyed, but it was gradually overshadowed by another: that of the sultan of Sunni Islam, shadow of God on earth, appealing to all Muslims to rally round the throne in defence of the *umma*. Emphasis was placed on the role of the sultan as protector of the Pilgrimage; the railway from Damascus to Mecca, projected in 1903 and completed in 1908, was designed to rally Muslim enthusiasm and support. What was more important still, the claim of the sultan to be caliph was taken up and systematically pushed. First put forward at the end of the eighteenth century, mainly as a bargaining point in the negotiations with Russia at the end of the war of 1768–74, it was not taken up seriously until the reign of Abdülaziz in the 1860's and 1870's. By the time the Ottoman constitution came to be drafted it had won general enough acceptance to be included: 'Sa Majesté le Sultan est, à titre de Kalif Suprême, le protecteur de la religion Musulmane'.⁴

Under Abdülhamid the claim was pushed even farther. It was a policy aimed partly at the European Powers: they had Muslim subjects, the Russians in the Caucasus and Turkestan, the French in North Africa, the British in India, and might fear trouble among them if their policy pressed too heavily on the sultan. But it also aimed at reinforcing the loyalty of the Muslim peoples of the empire, a loyalty which might be shaken by the secularization of law, the spread of liberal ideas, or the contagion of nationalism. For the Turks, the sultanate had a national character, and the intimate link between sultan and people had not yet been broken, as it was to be in the last days of the empire; the Islamic appeal did not need to be addressed to them so much as to the other Muslim subjects, Albanians, Kurds, above all Arabs. The Arabs were the largest Muslim group in the empire, and the one most able, by the extension of their language throughout the *umma*, to win support for the sultan-caliph in Asia and Africa. In particular, they were the key to Africa: through them, the empire might be able to resist European control of the African territories, perhaps to win new lands where Islam was spreading. The pan-Islamic propaganda was thus carried on mainly through the medium of the Arabic language and with the help of men of

⁴ Text in *Düstur*, iv. 2 (Fr. trs. in *State Papers*, lxvii. 683).

Arab origin. Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq was the first to be used, in the reign of Abdülaziz; but Abdülhamid gathered others around him. At his court there were a number of Arab divines, mostly associated with one or other of the orders of mystics, vying with each other to exalt his claims and so to win his favour. There was Shaykh Muhammad Zafir of Mecca, a member of the Shadhili order; Shaykh Fadl of the 'Alawi family from the Hadhramaut; and, most influential of all, Shaykh Abu'l-Huda al-Sayyadi of the Rifa'i order.⁵ An Arab from the province of Aleppo, he belonged to a family which for at least two generations had had a local reputation in the mystical orders. Gifted with great force of personality, he acquired a far wider fame; travelling first to Baghdad, then to Constantinople, he established a personal ascendancy over Abdülhamid, partly because of his reputation for supernatural powers, partly through his sagacity and political understanding. He played a large part in the sultan's religious policy, and wrote many works, both in prose and poetry, in which the same themes recur: the glory of the Rifa'i order and his own ancestors; the exposition and defence of the mystical interpretation of Islam, against the attempts of Wahhabism and similar movements to return up the line of development to some imagined purity of primitive Islam; the defence of the sultan's claim to be caliph, and the call to all Muslims to rally round his throne. The caliphate, he proclaimed, is a necessity of faith, transmitted legitimately from Abu Bakr down to the Ottomans; the caliph is the shadow of God on earth, the executant of his decrees; all Muslims should obey him, being thankful if he does right, patient if he does wrong; even if he commands them to break God's laws, before disobeying they should begin with advice and prayers, confident that God is better able to change him than are they.⁶

There was another movement of thought, however, which also aimed at uniting Islam in face of a common danger, but did not think that the personal rule of a Muslim autocrat could serve as a focus of unity, and which, while it was willing to work with Abdülhamid or any other ruler who seemed to be serving the same purposes, was not prepared to be used for purely dynastic

⁵ Cf. Hurgonje, *Verspreide Geschriften*, iii. 191 ff.; Yakan, *al-Ma'lum*, i. 100; Abu'l-Huda al-Sayyadi, *Tanwir al-absar*, introd. pp. 2-8.

⁶ Abu'l-Huda al-Sayyadi, *Da'i al-rashad*, *passim*.

interests. It would be truer perhaps to speak of a person than a movement, for this revolutionary pan-Islamism, this blend of religious feeling, national feeling, and European radicalism was embodied in the strange personality of a man whose life touched and deeply affected the whole Islamic world in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Much has been written about Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1839-97), and his life was lived very publicly, but there remains something mysterious about him.⁷ Even his origins are obscure. He claimed to be a Sayyid, a descendant of the Prophet, and there seems no reason to doubt it. But was he an Afghan, as he himself said, or a Persian, as his enemies claimed? Shaykh Abu'l-Huda, his enemy at the end of his life, called him *al-Muta'afghhin*, 'he who claims to be an Afghan', and asserted that he was really a Persian from Mazandaran.⁸ The point is of some importance, since if he was a Persian he would have been a Shi'i, and this indeed is what his enemies meant to imply, and what he himself presumably wished to deny in calling himself an Afghan, for the greater part of his career was spent in Sunni countries. There does indeed exist a book, by a Persian claiming to be his nephew, and giving strong circumstantial evidence in favour of his being Persian by birth and upbringing, Shi'i by inheritance and education.⁹ He studied, so the book claims, in the Shi'i holy cities of Najaf and Karbala', and there is some internal evidence that this was so. His writings and lectures show an undoubted knowledge of the tradition of Islamic philosophy, particularly of Ibn Sina, and this was a knowledge more easily come by at that time in the Shi'i schools, where the Avicennian tradition was still alive, than in those of Sunni Islam. However this may be, he first comes clearly into view in his early youth in India: already fully educated in the Islamic tradition, he acquired in India his first knowledge of the sciences and mathematics of modern Europe. With one of those rapid changes which recurred throughout his life, he was next in Afghanistan, where he tried to play a leading part in local politics. But what success he had was brief and limited. Next he went to Istanbul, on his way passing through Egypt where he stopped for a short while and made the acquaintance—

⁷ For the life of al-Afghani cf. E. G. Browne; Rida, *Ta'rikh*, i. 27-102; and the works of al-Maghribi, al-Makhzumi, & Lutfallah Khan cited in the bibliography.

⁸ Cf. *al-Manar*, xii (1909-10), 4.

⁹ Lutfallah Khan, pp. 46 ff.

momentous for both of them—of a young student of the Azhar called Muhammad 'Abduh. In Istanbul he once more found a powerful protector, the reforming statesman Ali Pasha; but a lecture which he gave, and which seemed to place philosophy on the same level as prophecy, in the manner of the Islamic philosophers, aroused the hostility of the orthodox. He left for Egypt once more in 1871. A minister of liberal views, Riaz Pasha, secured him a government pension, and he stayed there for eight years, perhaps the most fruitful period of his life. He became the guide and unofficial teacher of a group of young men, mainly from the Azhar, who were to play an important part in Egyptian life and never to shake off the influence of al-Afghani; besides 'Abduh, the group included Sa'd Zaghlul who, fifty years later, was to become the leader of the Egyptian nation. He taught them, mainly in his own home, what he conceived to be the true Islam: theology, jurisprudence, mysticism, and philosophy.¹⁰ But he taught them much else besides: the danger of European intervention, the need for national unity to resist it, the need for a broader unity of the Islamic peoples, the need for a constitution to limit the ruler's power. He encouraged his disciples to write, to publish newspapers, to form a public opinion, and through them he had a part in bringing about the first stirrings of national consciousness and discontent under Isma'il. For a moment he was on friendly terms with Isma'il's son Tawfiq; but Tawfiq as ruler was less liberal than as heir, and when he became khedive he had al-Afghani deported to India, either (as al-Afghani himself thought) under pressure from the British Consul-General or because of fear of his influence over the educated class.

Al-Afghani spent the next few years in India, and at the time of the British occupation of Egypt was kept under restraint by the authorities. But by 1884 he was in Paris, where he was joined by Muhammad 'Abduh, and together they organized a secret society of Muslims pledged to work for the unity and reform of Islam. The extent of the society is obscure, although it is known to have had a branch in Tunis as well as elsewhere.¹¹ Under its auspices the two of them published eighteen numbers of an Arabic periodical, *al-'Urwa al-wuthqa*. It was devoted partly to

¹⁰ Cf. A. Amin, *Zu'ama' al-islam*, pp. 64–65.

¹¹ Cf. Rida, *Ta'rikh*, i. 284; Ibn 'Ashur, p. 43.

an analysis of the policy of the Great Powers in the Muslim world, particularly of England in Egypt and the Sudan, and partly to an exposition of the inner weaknesses of Islam and an exhortation to Muslims to take thought and cure them. The language of the periodical was 'Abduh's while the thought was al-Afghani's,¹² and both for its thought and its language it became one of the most influential of Arabic periodicals. Although prevented from entering countries under British control, it circulated widely, and more than one thinker of a later generation has borne witness to the profound effect on him of a copy of it found and read by chance years afterwards.

During his stay in Paris his personality and ideas aroused much interest among Europeans concerned with the Muslim world. He engaged in controversy with Renan about the attitude of Islam towards science, and in 1884-5 conducted negotiations with British statesmen about the future of Egypt and the Sudan. These negotiations were begun through the good offices of Wilfrid Blunt. A good minor poet, an aristocrat of wayward and amorous temperament, an old-fashioned patriot shocked by the vulgarity of the new imperialism, a romantic who disliked the mechanical civilization of the nineteenth century, a lover of strange places and Arab horses, Blunt had travelled with his wife in the Syrian and Arabian deserts in 1877-9, and in 1879 they had journeyed as far as Nejd, where the little kingdom of Ibn Rashid, built on the ruins of the first Wahhabi state, with its rustic equality and patriarchal justice, seemed to them, in spite of a primitive brutality which they either did not notice or condoned, to embody the ideal of human freedom. In 1880 Blunt had settled for a time in Egypt, to improve his Arabic and study the modern movements and problems of Islam. There he had met Muhammad 'Abduh and heard for the first time of al-Afghani, and had become acquainted with the new spirit of reform in the world of Islam; he embodied his observations and thought in a series of articles, published in 1882 as a book with the title, *The Future of Islam*. He had followed closely the events which culminated in the British occupation of Egypt, and this experience helped to throw him into active sympathy with nationalist movements, in Ireland and India as well as Egypt. He had played indeed a certain part in the Egyptian crisis of 1881-2:

¹² Rida, *Ta'rikh*, i. 289.

he tried to maintain a link between 'Urabi's government and Gladstone, but while he failed to make any impression on Gladstone he perhaps misled the Egyptians about the extent of his influence and about what England was likely to do. He was now concerned about Britain's policy both in Egypt and in the Sudan, where the Mahdi's movement was spreading but Gordon was still upholding the authority of the Egyptian Government in Khartoum. Al-Afghani had some contact with the Mahdi through former Sudanese students at the Azhar, and may even have been given some authority to act on his behalf. There seems to have been an idea that Blunt should go to the Mahdi, acting on behalf of the British government but with a letter from Afghani, to negotiate the release of Gordon and also a more general agreement by which the Mahdi would halt his advance in return for a British withdrawal from Egypt.¹³ The plan came to nothing, and it is difficult to believe that it was ever taken seriously. But Blunt had access to the little circle which ruled England, and had powerful friends among politicians who were anxious to withdraw from Egypt. In 1885 al-Afghani spent some time in London as his guest, to discuss the future of Egypt with Lord Randolph Churchill, then at the height of his brief power. At the time al-Afghani thought of Russia as a greater danger to the Muslim world than Britain. Russia was advancing in Central Asia, and he wanted an Anglo-Islamic rapprochement. The stumbling-block was the problem of Egypt, and once more a plan was produced. Sir Henry Drummond Wolff was being sent by the government to Constantinople to discuss the future of Egypt with the sultan, and it was suggested that al-Afghani should go with him to help in the negotiations. But this plan too came to nothing, and al-Afghani's visit to London ended with one of those melancholy scenes which punctuate the lives of political refugees. Two of his oriental friends quarrelled in Blunt's house and beat each other over the head with umbrellas: 'I had to beg them both to leave the house', records Blunt, 'and the Seyyid followed them. . . . I have now suggested to the Seyyid that he should take up his quarters elsewhere.'¹⁴

Al-Afghani was now disillusioned about the prospect of an Anglo-Islamic agreement. He went to Persia, then to Russia to

¹³ Blunt, *Gordon*, pp. 542 ff.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 500.

explore other possibilities, then back to Persia again as adviser to the Shah Nasir al-Din. But within a year he had quarrelled with the Shah over a tobacco concession which the latter was prepared to give to a foreign company. He started a popular agitation against it, was deported in 1891, and began a press campaign designed to arouse opposition to the shah's policy both in Persia and in Europe. Next year he was invited by the Sultan Abdülhamid to Constantinople. For a time he enjoyed the sultan's favour and had influence at court, but once more the story repeated itself. He incurred the hostility of Shaykh Abu'l-Huda; and was generally held responsible for the murder of Shah Nasir al-Din in 1896. Whether he had arranged it or not, he had certainly helped to create the atmosphere which made it possible; the assassin was acquainted with him, and is said to have cried, at the fatal moment, 'Take this from the hand of Jamal al-Din.'¹⁵ Certainly he rejoiced at the act, and the incident, like his whole career, showed that he could never be the docile servant of an autocrat who identified his own interests with those of Islam. The lesson was not lost on Abdülhamid; al-Afghani ended his life a virtual prisoner of the sultan although treated with honour.

On all who knew him he left a strong although not wholly pleasant impression: of a man devoted to his convictions, obstinate, ascetic, quick to anger when honour or religion was touched, wild and untameable; in Blunt's phrase, a 'wild man of genius'.¹⁶

He was eloquent, knew many languages, was fond of talking endlessly to his friends, in cafés in Cairo or in his gilded prison in Constantinople, and was a stirring public orator. But he did not like writing, and wrote little. Apart from political articles, a few slight works express his general ideas: a refutation of the materialists, a reply to Renan's lecture on *L'Islamisme et la science*, and the leading articles of *al-'Urwa al-wuthqa*. From these, and the reports of his conversation made by some of his disciples, it is possible however to form a clear idea of his teachings.

The greater part of his life was given up to a defence of the Islamic countries threatened by the danger of European ex-

¹⁵ Arslan, *Hadhir al-'alam al-islami*, i. 203.

¹⁶ Blunt, *Secret History*, p. 100.

pansion, but his thought was not exclusively political. The central problem of it, the problem which gave it its form, was not that of how to make the Muslim countries politically strong and successful; it was rather, how to persuade Muslims to understand their religion aright and live in accordance with its teaching. If they did so, he believed, their countries would of necessity be strong. The problem would have been essentially the same had there been no danger from outside, but of course the power and pressure of Europe gave it a new urgency. Al-Afghani lived in the age when European power suddenly became as wide as the world, so that there was no country however seemingly remote or securely independent which was not becoming aware of the pressure and rivalries of the European States, no political problem however apparently limited in scope which could be considered without taking European interests into account. At every point in his own life he was made aware of this: when he engaged in the politics of Afghanistan, lived and travelled in India, or helped to create opposition to the power of bondholders in Egypt or the tobacco company in Persia. His experience being what it was, he was more aware of the danger from England than from other countries. There is little in the *'Urwa al-wuthqa* about French, Dutch, or Russian imperialism, although there is a passing reference to the French occupation of Indo-China,¹⁷ and while for a moment he played with the idea of an Anglo-Islamic entente against Russian expansion, in general it was the British government which was, in his eyes, 'the enemy of the Muslims'.¹⁸ It was not only direct military attack that he feared. The British had other, subtler ways of working; they had conquered India by a 'trick', insinuating themselves into the Moghul Empire under pretext of helping the Moghuls.¹⁹ They sowed division, and weakened the resistance of their victims by weakening their beliefs; it was thus that General Gordon had brought missionaries from Egypt to spread the idea of Protestant Christianity in the Sudan, while in India the false gospel of materialism was encouraged.²⁰

The European Powers were not, al-Afghani maintained, innately stronger than the Muslim States. There was a prevalent idea that the English were superior, but this was an illusion

¹⁷ *al-'Urwa*, i. 52.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* ii. 68.

²⁰ *Ibid.* i. 13; ii. 138.

(*wahm*) and a dangerous one; such illusions make men cowardly, and so tend to bring about what they fear. The successes won by the Mahdi in the Sudan showed what Muslims could do against the British if only they were awakened; and if Muslim successes were few and defeats the rule, that was because Muslims were disunited, ignorant, and lacking in public virtues. Had India and Egypt been really awake and united, Britain could never have secured a foothold.²¹ This view may appear naïve and is certainly expressed in too sweeping a way. The '*Urwa* was not a work of precise thought but a tract for the times, with the aim of arousing men's spirits. If al-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,²² 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 simply by imitation; behind them lay a whole way of thought and—more important still—a system of social morality. The Muslim countries were weak because Muslim society was in decay.

At this point we become aware of a novelty in al-Afghani's thought, or at least a new emphasis. The centre of attention is no longer Islam as a religion, it is rather Islam as a civilization. The aim of man's acts is not the service of God alone; it is the creation of human civilization flourishing in all its parts. The idea of civilization is indeed one of the seminal ideas of nineteenth-century Europe, and it is through al-Afghani above all that it reaches the Islamic world. It was given its classical expression by Guizot, in his lectures on the history of civilization in Europe, and al-Afghani had read Guizot and been impressed by him. The work was translated into Arabic in 1877, and al-Afghani inspired 'Abduh to write an article welcoming the translation and expounding the doctrine of the book. What was it that seemed to him important in this and similar books? It was first of all the idea of civilization, as the most momentous of all historical facts and that by which other facts should be judged. But it was also a specific meaning given to the word: the meaning of active, willed progress, of 'a people who are pressing forward

²¹ *al-'Urwa*, ii. 200, 203.

²² Makhzumi, pp. 224-5.

... to change ... their condition', and specifically of progress in two directions—social development, or the increase in social power and well-being, and individual development, that of man's faculties, sentiments, and ideas.²³ According to Guizot, both types of development were within the power of man. Man himself, with his ideas, sentiments, moral and intellectual dispositions, governs the world, the condition of society depends on man's moral state, and there are two aspects of this moral state which are important: on the one hand reason, and the willingness of men to have their inclinations and actions controlled by it; on the other, unity or solidarity, the common acceptance by members of society of the ideas and moral principles produced by reason.²⁴

This was Guizot describing Europe, but it seemed to al-Afghani (with one significant change) to be a description of Islamic civilization as well. In its great days, the *umma* had all the necessary attributes of a flourishing civilization: social development, individual development, belief in reason, unity and solidarity; later it lost them. Being of fiery and political temperament, he tended to see both the greatness and the decline in political and military terms, but in reality the military successes of early Islam were for him only a symbol of the flowering of Islamic civilization. What had once been achieved could be achieved again: on the one hand by accepting those fruits of reason, the sciences of modern Europe, but also, and more fundamentally, by restoring the unity of the *umma*.

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.²⁵ Even the deepest of doctrinal gulfs, that between Sunnis and Shi'is, could be bridged. Thus he called on Persians and Afghans to unite, even though the first were Shi'is and the second not, and during the last period of his life he played with the idea of a general reconciliation of the two sects. It was perhaps the possibility of extending his pan-Islamic propaganda into the Shi'i world

²³ Guizot, lecture I.

²⁴ Ibid. lecture III.

²⁵ *al-'Urwa*, ii. 124 ff.

which led Abdülhamid to invite al-Afghani to Constantinople. Al-Afghani seems to have had a plan, as always: Persia would recognize the sultan as caliph, the sultan would recognize the shah as independent and give up to him the Shi'i holy cities in Iraq; a general conference of Islamic leaders would be held in Constantinople, to decide questions of common concern and declare a *jihad* against western aggression. Al-Afghani seems to have had correspondence with Shi'i divines and others, but the plan had no issue, although it may have had something to do with the murder of Nasir al-Din, whose personal power was an obstacle.²⁶

Political factions and dynastic interests should not be allowed to stand in the way of unity; the Muslim rulers should co-operate in the service of Islam. This belief explains much in al-Afghani's attitude towards the Muslim rulers and the stormy history of his relations with them. He did not think it possible or necessary to impose the rule of any one monarch upon the rest. There is no sign that he had it in mind to create a single Islamic State or to revive the united caliphate of early times. When he talked of the caliphate he meant by it some sort of spiritual authority or else simply a primacy of honour. If the spirit of co-operation existed, the existence of more than one State was of no importance; if it did not exist, then Muslims had no obligation to obey their ruler. Al-Afghani had a low opinion of the Muslim rulers of his day. They were not worthy of their position; they cared about nothing except their own pleasures and caprices, and so had fallen easy victims to the guiles and craft of the British. They had allowed foreign officials, linked with the nation neither by religion nor by race, to insinuate themselves into their counsels. The despot if he was well-intentioned could do things quickly, but the danger of despotism was that all rested on the ruler's character. If there was a bad ruler, the leaders of national opinion should get rid of him before it was too late.²⁷

In this statement we can see the explanation of much in al-Afghani's troubled career and endless wanderings. He was not a constitutionalist on principle; his ideal of government was rather that of the Islamic theorists—the just king recognizing the sovereignty of a fundamental law.²⁸ By temperament he was

²⁶ Browne, pp. 30, 82–83; Lutfallah Khan, pp. 98 ff.

²⁷ *al-'Urwa*, ii. 42 & 110.

²⁸ Makhzumi, p. 90.

autocratic and impatient, and all his life was spent in search of a Muslim ruler with whom he could work for the regeneration of Islam, as in that partnership of ruler and philosopher which al-Farabi had suggested as a substitute for the ideal philosopher-king, who appeared but rarely. Each time he was disappointed. The ruler turned out neither to be innately just nor to recognize the authority of the law standing above him. Al-Afghani did not belong to the quietist majority of Muslim thinkers who believed that they should protest against injustice but submit to it; he accepted rather the view of the minority who believed in the right of revolt. Each time then that a ruler disappointed him he turned against him violently, and his opposition served to strengthen the constitutionalist and nationalist movements which had begun to appear. For their part, the rulers who had hoped that he would rally Muslim sentiment behind their thrones found that his real intention was to use their power in the service of Islam.

But even the best of rulers, though they could do much, could not do all that al-Afghani thought necessary. When he talked of Muslim unity, he did not mean only the 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 which it would dissolve. Like all human attributes, it could be perverted; it was not a law unto itself, it was 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.²⁹

Solidarity may have different bases: it may spring from a common religious belief or else from a natural relationship such as language. It is here that al-Afghani finds a fundamental difference between European and Muslim civilization. There is a belief current in Europe, he says, that national solidarity is good in itself and conducive to progress, while religious solidarity is always fanatical and prevents progress. (Was he thinking of Guizot, who, while recognizing the role of the Church in forming

²⁹ *al-'Urwa*, i. 138 ff.

European civilization and giving it the idea of a divine law superior to human laws, and the idea also that material power has no right over the mind and conscience of man, accused it of preventing progress by rejecting the right of private judgement and obstructing the exercise of reason?)³⁰ This may be true of Christianity but it is not true of Islam, where religious fanaticism has been rare and religious solidarity is essential for progress.

This is not to say that he denies the importance of national or other natural ties. There can be, he admits, a virtuous State based on human reason as well as divine law; in the lecture which led to his leaving Constantinople, he had maintained this in words reminiscent of the philosophers: 'Thus is the body of human society compounded. But a body cannot live without a soul, and the soul of this body is either the prophetic or the philosophic faculty. . . . [But] the former is a divine gift . . . while the latter is attainable by thought and study.'³¹ The community based on human qualities and directed by human reason can be just as stable as that based on religion; it can even be more stable and survive two or three changes of religion. (No doubt he was thinking of Persia.) Indeed, language is an essential element in creating a stable community; human groups which have no common language can possess no firm unity, and a group which has no language of its own in which to express its knowledge and skill can easily lose them.³² Even the religious community will be stronger if it also has a language in common: if only the Ottomans had adopted the Arabic language as that of the whole empire, its peoples would have had two links instead of one, and it would have been united and strong.³³ Moreover a religious link does not exclude national links with men of different faiths; in countries such as Egypt and India Muslims should co-operate with others and there should be 'good relations and harmony in what pertains to national interests between you and your compatriots and neighbours who adhere to diverse religions'.³⁴ There is even a natural solidarity beyond the nation: that which binds together all the peoples of the east threatened by the expansion of Europe. In its opening number, the *'Urwa* announces that it

³⁰ Guizot, lectures ii & v.

³¹ Browne, p. 7; Rida, *Ta'rikh*, i. 30-31.

³² al-Afghani, 'Philosophie de l'Union nationale', *Orient*, vi (1958), 123 ff.

³³ Makhzumli, p. 232.

³⁴ *al-'Urwa*, i. 151 ff.

is addressed to 'Easterners in general, and Muslims in particular'.³⁵

When all this has been said, however, it remains true that for Muslims no sort of natural solidarity, not even patriotism, can replace the bond created by Islam. Real unity, in a Muslim nation, rests on common religious conviction. If that goes, society itself dissolves, and this in fact is what al-Afghani believes to be happening. His fear was not only that the *umma* would be weak but that it would cease to exist. In the past it had been held together by the political institution of the caliphate and by the '*ulama*' who preserved correct doctrine. But under the 'Abbasids, caliphate and '*ulama*' had split from each other, and later the caliphate had virtually ceased to exist. Independent kingdoms had arisen, and the '*ulama*' remained as the only organ of unity. They had become 'the spirit of the community and the heart of the Muhammadan people',³⁶ but they too in time had been split by differences of belief, and all except a few of them had diverged from the truth into false doctrines. As a result, the community had in fact dissolved. Abstract conviction was not enough to hold it together, it must be reinforced by real human needs and impulses; there must be a unity of hearts and deeds, for when this did not exist common convictions expressed themselves only in dreams and images. This in fact was what had happened; when a Muslim in one country heard about the misfortunes of those in others, he felt no urge to help them actively, only the kind of ineffectual regret one has when thinking of the dead.³⁷

The salvation of the *umma* could not therefore come from virtuous rulers alone. There was no short cut to the regeneration of Islam. Newspapers by themselves could not do it; schools could not do it, although they could do something to raise the standard of public morality and spread the idea of unity. There could be no real reform of Islam unless the '*ulama*' returned to the truth of Islam, and the community as a whole accepted it and lived in accordance with it. But what is the truth of Islam?

This is the question to which, in the last analysis, all al-Afghani's thought is directed. In his treatment of it we are aware of a new element in Islamic thought. He is addressing himself not only to his fellow Muslims to rescue them from the false

³⁵ Ibid. p. 11.

³⁶ Ibid. ii. 167.

³⁷ Ibid. i. 119.

ideas in which they have so long been sunk; he is also talking, beyond the *umma*, to the learned world of Europe. He wishes both to destroy false views of Islam held by Muslims and criticisms of Islam made by Europeans. When he maintains that only by a return to Islam can the strength and civilization of Muslims be restored, he does so the more emphatically because it had become a commonplace of European thought that religion in general, and Islam specifically, sapped the will and restricted reason, and progress was only possible by abandoning it, or at least by making a sharp separation between religion and secular life.

While al-Afghani was in Paris in the 1880's he took part in a controversy with Renan. In his lecture on 'Islam and Science', given at the Sorbonne in 1883, Renan maintained that Islam and science—and therefore, by implication, Islam and modern civilization—were incompatible with one another:

Toute personne un peu instruite des choses de notre temps voit clairement l'infériorité actuelle des pays musulmans, la décadence des États gouvernés par l'islam, la nullité intellectuelle des races qui tiennent uniquement de cette religion leur culture et leur éducation. Tous ceux qui ont été en Orient ou en Afrique sont frappés de ce qu'a de fatalement borné l'esprit d'un vrai croyant, de cette espèce de cercle de fer qui entoure sa tête, la rend absolument fermée à la science, incapable de rien apprendre ni de s'ouvrir à aucune idée nouvelle.³⁸

Renan admitted indeed the existence of a so-called Arabic philosophy and science, but they were Arabic in nothing but language, and Greco-Sassanian in content.³⁹ They were entirely the work of non-Muslims in inner revolt against their own religion; by theologians and rulers alike they had been opposed, and so had been unable to influence the institutions of Islam. This opposition had been held in check so long as the Arabs and Persians had been in control of Islam, but it reigned supreme when the barbarians—Turks in the east, Berbers in the west—took over the direction of the *umma*. The Turks had 'a total lack of the philosophic and scientific spirit',⁴⁰ and human reason and progress had been stifled by that enemy of progress, the State based on a revelation. But as European science spread, Islam would perish, and elsewhere Renan prophesied that this would

³⁸ Renan, *L'Islamisme et la science*, pp. 2-3.

³⁹ Ibid. p. 11.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 16; *Averroès et l'Averroïsme*, preface to 3rd ed., p. iii.

happen soon. As an example of the way in which Muslim minds were opened by their contacts with Europe, he gave Tahtawi's description of Paris, which was known to him:

La jeunesse d'Orient, en venant dans les écoles d'Occident puiser la science européenne, emportera avec elle ce qui en est le corollaire inséparable, la méthode rationnelle, l'esprit expérimental, le sens du réel, l'impossibilité de croire à des traditions religieuses évidemment conçues en dehors de toute critique.⁴¹

Renan of course was thinking of Catholicism, and of religion in general, when he wrote of Islam. For him Islam, like Christianity, although in a different way, was an example of the tragic result of confusing two realms. Reason should dominate human action, having as its final cause human perfection and the triumph of civilization, and in the modern world science was the form in which reason expressed itself. Religion was necessary too, but as the expression of a moral ideal—'la beauté dans l'ordre morale',⁴² the ideal of unselfishness, of which Jesus was the best exemplar. Properly conceived, there was no opposition between them; both had the same enemy, 'le matérialisme vulgaire, la bassesse de l'homme intéressé'.⁴³ The contradiction only arose when one trespassed on the field of the other: when, as in the French Revolution, reason claimed to govern the world without regard to the needs of the heart,⁴⁴ or when religions laid claim (as both Christianity and Islam had done) to a supernatural revelation of truth, and placed restrictions on the human mind. In a reply by no means lacking in perspicuity, al-Afghani met Renan on his own ground. It was true, he agreed, that while religions were necessary to draw men out of barbarism, they tended to become intolerant. In the childhood of the race, man cannot distinguish good from evil by his own reason, his tormented conscience can find in itself no repose; it is religion which

lui a ouvert les vastes horizons où l'imagination se complaît et où elle a trouvé, sinon la satisfaction complète de ses désirs, du moins un champ illimité pour ses espérances. Et comme l'humanité, à son origine, ignorait les causes des événements qui se passaient sous ses yeux et les secrets des choses, elle a été forcément amenée à suivre les conseils de ses précepteurs et les ordres qu'ils lui donnaient. Cette obéissance lui fut imposée au nom de l'Être suprême auquel ses

⁴¹ *L'Avenir de la science*, p. 50.

⁴³ *Origines du Christianisme*, ii, p. lxiii.

⁴² *Ibid.* p. 475.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. lxiv.

éducateurs attribuaient tous les événements, sans lui permettre d'en discuter l'utilité ou les inconvénients.⁴⁵

But this was only a phase through which religions passed; in a later phase, men liberated themselves from the chains imposed on their reason, and restored religion to its proper place. They had done so in Christendom at the time of the Reformation; Islam was several centuries younger and its reformation was still to come.⁴⁶ Islam needed a Luther: this indeed was a favourite theme of al-Afghani's, and perhaps he saw himself in the role.⁴⁷ Once this reformation took place, Islam was as fitted as any other religion to play its essential role of a moral guide. The past of Islam proved this: it could not be summed up, as Renan had suggested, as a blind triumph of orthodoxy over reason. The rational sciences had flourished, and they had been truly Islamic and Arab; it is precisely language which constitutes nations and distinguishes them from one another, and sciences expressed in Arabic must be called Arab. Thus the Arabs can claim Ibn Sina as theirs in exactly the same way as the French claim Mazarin and Napoleon. It is true, the conflict between religion and philosophy will always exist in Islam, but that is because it will always exist in the human mind:

Les religions, de quelque nom qu'on les désigne, se ressemblent toutes. Aucune entente ni aucune réconciliation ne sont possibles entre ces religions et la philosophie. La religion impose à l'homme sa foi et sa croyance, tandis que la philosophie l'en affranchit totalement ou en partie. . . . Toutes les fois que la religion aura le dessus, elle éliminera la philosophie; et le contraire arrive quand c'est la philosophie qui règne en souveraine maîtresse. Tant que l'humanité existera, la lutte ne cessera pas entre le dogme et le libre examen, entre la religion et la philosophie, lutte acharnée et dans laquelle, je crains, le triomphe ne sera pas pour la libre pensée, parce que la raison déplaît à la foule et que ses enseignements ne sont compris que par quelques intelligences d'élite, et parce que, aussi, la science, si belle qu'elle soit, ne satisfait pas complètement l'humanité qui a soif d'idéal et qui aime à planter dans des régions obscures et lointaines que les philosophes et les savants ne peuvent ni apercevoir ni explorer.⁴⁸

In saying this, al-Afghani was understating his case. He not

⁴⁵ *J. des Débats*, 18 May, 1883, cited in Afghani, *al-Radd* (Fr. trs. pp. 176-7).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Cf. Maghribi, *Bayyinah*, i. 4.

⁴⁸ Afghani, *al-Radd* (Fr. trs. p. 185).

only believed that Islam was as true or false as other religions, but that it was the one true, complete, and perfect religion, which could satisfy all the desires of the human spirit. Like other Muslim thinkers of his day, he was willing to accept the judgement on Christianity given by European free thought: it was unreasonable, it was the enemy of science and progress. But he wished to show that these criticisms did not apply to Islam; on the contrary, Islam was in harmony with the principles discovered by scientific reason, was indeed the religion demanded by reason. Christianity had failed—he took Renan's word for it; but Islam, being neither irrational nor intolerant, could save the secular world from that revolutionary chaos, the memory of which haunted the French thinkers of his time. It was one of the secrets of al-Afghani's attraction for his fellow Muslims, that he offered them an Islam which once more could have a universal mission.

This could only be, however, if he could show that the essence of Islam was the same as that of modern rationalism. This was a dangerous process; some of al-Afghani's contemporaries were aware of the danger, and accused him of being willing to sacrifice the truth of Islam for an illusory welfare of Muslims. Even among his acquaintances there were some who doubted whether he really believed in Islam and fulfilled its legal obligations, just as there were some who later expressed the same doubts about his disciple 'Abduh. To see such accusations in their right perspective, however, it should be remembered that al-Afghani's view of Islam was that of the philosophers rather than that of the orthodox theologians: in other words, he accepted the final identification of philosophy and prophecy, that what the prophet received through inspiration was the same as what the philosopher could attain to by use of reason, but coupled with this the distinction between two ways of communicating the truth—by clear concepts to 'the few', through religious symbols to the 'many'.⁴⁹ Between this view of Islam and the ideas of nineteenth-century free thought it was perhaps not impossible to build a bridge.

If we remember that this was al-Afghani's view of Islam, there seems no reason to doubt that he was a convinced Muslim. Muhammad 'Abduh, who perhaps knew him better than anyone,

⁴⁹ Cf. *al-Yinan*, x (1879), 306.

said that al-Afghani was personally devout, with a tendency towards mysticism in his thought, and that in matters of practice he was a strict observer of the Hanafi code: 'I have seen none stricter than he in adhering to his code in its root and branches'.⁵⁰ Indeed it is impossible to understand either al-Afghani's thought or his political activities unless we realize that he accepted the fundamental teachings of Islam with all his mind: the existence of God, the existence of prophecy, that Muhammad was the last and greatest of the prophets, sent to all mankind, and that the Quran contained the word of God uncorrupted. He might make many concessions to modern thought, but he would not concede anything of that. It was precisely because he believed in the truth of Islam, however, that he was insistent that it should be interpreted aright. What then was the true Islam? First of all it was the belief in a transcendent God, the creator of the universe, and a rejection of all those creeds which maintained that the universe was self-created and that the world or man was a fit object of worship. For al-Afghani, this was the essence of Islam; tolerant as he was of divergences in doctrine or law, he would not tolerate any attack on this. This explains his hostility to certain modern movements in Islam, to Babism and the doctrines of the Indian thinker Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-98). He had a considerable knowledge of the doctrines of Babism, and there were Babis among his political acquaintances and followers. But he regarded Babism as a danger to the community, for, like other offshoots of Shi'ism, it substituted a doctrine of emanation for that of prophecy, and so blurred the distinction between Creator and created; while at the same time its belief in a continuing succession of prophets, and that Muhammad was neither last nor greatest of them, struck at the very existence of the *umma*.

The same fact explains too his attack on the 'modernist' movement started by Ahmad Khan. After a visit to England in the 1870's, Sayyid Ahmad began to preach a new Islam to which was applied the term 'Nayshariyya' (derived from the English word 'Nature'). The Quran, he taught, was the only essential element in Islam, the *Shari'a* was not of the essence of religion; the Quran must be interpreted in accordance with reason and nature, and the moral and legal code must be based on nature. Al-Afghani became aware of this doctrine when he was in exile

⁵⁰ Rida, *Ta'rikh*, i. 33.

in India after 1879. In spite of appearances, there was all the difference in the world between his own belief that there existed a harmony between the truths revealed by Islam and the conclusions reached by human reason properly applied, and Ahmad Khan's belief that the laws of nature, as deduced by reason, were the norm by which Islam should be interpreted and human acts judged. What Sayyid Ahmad was implying was that there was nothing which transcended the world of nature, and that man was the judge of all things. Or so it seemed to al-Afghani; characteristically he ascribed the spread of the doctrine to a British plot to weaken the faith and destroy the unity of Muslims, but he also saw it as a new expression of a way of thought which had always endangered true religion. To expose it he wrote his longest work, *al-Radd ala'l-dhahriyyin* ('The Refutation of the Materialists'). Those whom he attacked under the name of 'materialists' included all, from Democritus to Darwin with their equivalents in Islam, who gave an explanation of the world not involving the existence of a transcendent God. He attacked them not only as endangering the truth, but because as a consequence they were a danger to social well-being and human happiness. True religions, he maintained, taught three truths above all: that man was monarch of the earth and the noblest of created things, that his religious community was the best of all, and that he had been sent into the world to perfect himself in preparation of another life. From acceptance of these truths sprang the three virtues which were the bases of society; modesty (*haya'*), trust (*amana*), and truthfulness (*sidq*). The materialists who denied these truths also destroyed the bases of human society, and 'cast men down from the throne of human civilization to the base earth of animality'.⁵¹ They dismissed modesty as a weakness not a virtue, and by denying the Day of Judgment struck at the root of trust and truthfulness. This subtle poison has been at work whenever civilizations decay. It appeared in the classical world in the form of Epicureanism, in ancient Persia in the person of Mazdak. In Islamic history it found expression in the esoteric movements which interpreted Islam as something other than itself. It was this esotericism, claimed al-Afghani, which weakened the community and made possible the disaster of the Crusades. Some Muslims had kept their original virtues

⁵¹ al-Afghani, *al-Radd*, pp. 31 & 39.

and were able to drive out the Crusaders in the end, but they could not root out the evil from the *umma*, which therefore remained weak; now it was a prey to the new poison of materialism, brewed in France by the freethinkers of the eighteenth century and brought into Islam by Sayyid Ahmad and his like.

First of all, then, Islam is belief in transcendence. Secondly, it is belief in reason. It encourages men to use their minds freely, in the certainty that what they discover will not contradict the truths revealed by prophecy. Islam alone of the great religions liberates the human mind from illusions and superstitions, and allows it to develop all its capabilities:

The first pillar on which the religion of Islam is built is that the idea of divine unity should burnish the human mind and cleanse it from the weakness of illusion. Among the most important of its bases is the belief that God is alone in the disposition of beings, single in the creation of things which act and those which are acted upon, and that it is an obligation to cast aside all belief that men or inanimate bodies, whether higher or lower, have any influence for good or evil upon creation. . . . It is necessary to reject any belief that God in the Highest has appeared or appears in the garb of human kind or any other animal, to do good or ill; or that the holy essence has suffered the extremes of pain or the pains of disease in certain phases, for the benefit of any created thing.⁵²

No other religion teaches in this way that reason is capable of knowing all and testing all, and that every man's reason is so capable; no other therefore gives men the self-respect and sense of equality which Muslims possess—or should possess, did they but know their religion. Judaism and Hinduism, each in its own way, deny human equality; Christianity denies to all but the priesthood the possibility of direct knowledge of divine truth, and teaches moreover certain doctrines which reason cannot accept.⁵³ Human reason therefore can fulfil itself in Islam alone; the law which the Prophet received from God is the same as the law of nature, which man's mind can discern from a study of the universe.

There is of course a difficulty about this view. If human reason can attain to all the truths necessary for life, what need is there for prophecy? Al-Afghani's answer appears to be that, while

⁵² al-Afghani, *al-Radd*, p. 70.

⁵³ Ibid. p. 71.

reason can attain to truth in principle, human nature by itself cannot observe the rules which reason teaches it. Man is full of self-regarding passions and desires, which can only be controlled by the principle of justice in four ways: if everyone defends his own rights by force—but this leads to chaos or oppression; if everyone obeys his own sense of honour—but the idea of honour changes from one society to another, even from one class to another; if everyone is controlled by the power of the government—but this can only suppress a certain type of injustice, it cannot produce real justice; or if men believe in the existence of God, the eternal life and the Day of Judgment. It is this belief alone which provides a stable basis for obedience to moral principles. Prophecy has therefore a practical function: the prophet is sent to establish and maintain a virtuous society. There are two élites which control human society: the teachers who enlighten the understanding, and the moral preceptors who discipline the passions and point out the path of virtue. The prophets belong to the second class, and without them there can be no persistence in doing right.⁵⁴

This view has far-reaching implications. It means that reason should be used fully in interpreting the Quran. If the Quran seems to be in contradiction with what is now known, we should interpret it symbolically. The Quran hints at things which it could not fully explain because men's minds were not ready for them; now that the mind has reached its full stature it should try to uncover the hints. For example, the Quran contains hidden references to modern science and its discoveries, to railways and electricity, as well as to modern political institutions;⁵⁵ for the first time, these can now be understood. Since reason can interpret, all men can interpret, provided they have a sufficient knowledge of Arabic, are of sound mind, and know the traditions of the *salaf*, the first generations of faithful guardians of the Prophet's message.⁵⁶ The door of *ijtihad* is not closed, and it is a duty as well as a right for men to apply the principles of the Quran anew to the problems of their time. To refuse to do this is to be guilty of stagnation (*jumud*) or imitation (*taqlid*), and these are enemies of true Islam just as materialism is an enemy. To imitate the words and acts of others corrupts alike religion and reason. If Muslims imitate Europeans they do not become

⁵⁴ Ibid. pp. 60–76.

⁵⁵ Makhzumi, pp. 161 ff.

⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 178.

like them, for the words and acts of Europeans only have meaning because they spring from certain principles understood and accepted. In the same way, if a Muslim simply repeats the words of his predecessors he will not acquire the true spirit of Islam.

Thirdly, and perhaps most important in al-Afghani's mind, Islam means activity. The true attitude of the Muslim, he said again and again, is not one of passive resignation to whatever might come, as coming directly from God; it is one of responsible activity in doing the will of God. That man is responsible before God for all his acts, that he is responsible for the welfare of society, that his failures are therefore his own, and avoidable: all these for al-Afghani are the lessons of the Quran, and again and again he and his disciples quote a verse which, for them, sums up the whole: 'God changes not what is in a people, until they change what is in themselves'.⁵⁷ The true Islam did not teach that all things were commanded directly by God. It was necessary to distinguish between the belief in compulsion (*jabr*) and the genuine Muslim doctrine of predestination (*qada'*). The first had been a popular belief at some times in Islamic history, but it was not the true view, and was no longer widespread. The second was the authentic view; it implied that all things in the universe happened by sequence of cause and effect, and God was the first cause who initiated the whole chain. The decisions of the human will were necessary parts of the sequence; they were free, but God had given, through reason and the prophets, an indication of how they should be made. To believe in predestination was to believe that if a man acted rightly God would be with him; far from causing him to be passive, this belief would stimulate him to activity. All great deeds had been done by those who thought that God was with them.⁵⁸

This was not true only of activity directed towards individual perfection and happiness in the next world. It was true also of activity directed towards happiness and success in this world. The laws of Islam are also the laws of human nature: if man obeys the teaching of Islam, he is also fulfilling the laws of his own nature, and so attains to happiness and success in this world. What is true of the individual is true also of society: when societies obey the laws of Islam they become strong, when they disobey they grow weak, for Islam commands solidarity and

⁵⁷ *Quran*, sura xiii, 10 (Arberry's trs.).

⁵⁸ *al-'Urwa*, i. 161 ff.

mutual responsibility, and these are the secrets of the strength of nations.

Virtue, civilization, strength are essentially connected with each other. This much, al-Afghani believes, is proved by the history of Islam. In his writings there is a vivid sense of the greatness and littleness of Islamic history: the *gesta Dei* in the beginning, the long and melancholy decline thereafter. When Muslims followed the teachings of the Prophet, the *umma* was great in the worldly sense; and if later the glories faded it was because they denied that truth. Becoming indifferent to God they also became indifferent to each other; solidarity grew weak and with it strength decayed. But here too there is a problem: if the teaching of Islam is in conformity with the needs of welfare and progress in this world, how is it that the non-Muslim countries today are foremost in strength as well as in enjoyment of worldly goods? Al-Afghani resolves the paradox by saying that neither the achievements of Christian nor the failure of Muslim countries are due to their religions. The Christian peoples grew strong because the Church grew up within the walls of the Roman Empire and incorporated its pagan beliefs and virtues; the Muslim peoples grew weak because the truth of Islam was corrupted by successive waves of falsity. Christians are strong because they are not really Christian; Muslims are *weak* because they are not really Muslim.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Ibid. i. 89.

ARABIC THOUGHT IN
THE LIBERAL AGE

1798–1939

ALBERT HOURANI



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