

Disputing the “Iron Circle”: Renan, Afghani, and Kemal on Islam, Science, and Modernity*

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All those who have been in the East, or in Africa, are struck by the way in which the mind of a true believer is fatally limited, by the species of iron circle that surrounds his head, rendering it absolutely closed to knowledge, incapable of either learning anything, or of being open to any new idea.

—Ernest Renan¹

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¹ Ernest Renan, “Islamism and Science,” in *The Poetry of the Celtic Races and Other Peoples*, by Ernest Renan, trans. and ed. William G. Hutchison (London: W. Scott, 1896), pp. 84–108. This is an English translation of a lecture Renan delivered at the Sorbonne on 29 March 1883. For the French original, see Ernest Renan, “L’Islamisme et la science” in *Oeuvres complètes*, by Ernest Renan (Paris: Calman-Levy, 1947), 1:945–959.

A true believer must, in fact, turn from the path of studies that have for their object scientific truth, studies on which all must depend, according to an opinion accepted at least by some people in Europe. Yoked, like an ox to the plow, to the dogma whose slave he is, he must walk eternally in the furrow that has been traced for him in advance by the interpreters of the law. Convinced, besides, that his religion contains in itself all morality and all sciences, he attaches himself resolutely to it and makes no effort to go beyond.

—Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani²

Islam neither destroyed knowledge nor was it destroyed with knowledge.

—Namık Kemal³

THE ICONOCLASTIC French liberal Ernest Renan's 1883 lecture "Islamism and Science" provoked two of the most outspoken Muslim political activists of the time, Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani (1838/1839–1897) and Namık Kemal (1840–1888), to write seminal responses. Renan's work broadly condemned Islamic societies and the Arabic people from Muhammad onward as incapable of embracing reason-based scientific knowledge, the core of modernizing reform. These writings incited both Afghani and Kemal to defend Islam's compatibility with science and reform. Both Afghani, an influential Pan-Islamic thinker who helped inspire the first modern political parties in Egypt, and Kemal, a "Young Ottoman" reformer credited with introducing Muslim nationalism and innovative political measures to the Ottoman state, were well aware of Renan's anti-religious tendencies. These tendencies had been demonstrated in Renan's pioneering historical criticism of the life of Jesus and by his dissertation on the twelfth-century Islamic dissident Averroes. Yet Renan did not completely discount religious heritage as a factor in the success of a civilization. His work claimed, in broad historical terms, that Judeo-Christian societies were

² Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, "Answer to Renan," in *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani*, trans. and ed. Nikki R. Keddie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 183. Afghani published the French original on 18 May 1883 in the *Journal des Débats*. See "Réponse de Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani à Renan," *Réfutation des matérialistes*, trans. A. M. Goichon (Paris, 1942), pp. 176–177.

³ Namık Kemal, *Renan Müdafaanamesi*, ed. Ali Ekrem Bulayır, Külliyyat-ı Kemal, Birinci Tertip (Istanbul: Selanik Matbaası, 1326/1910–1911), p. 58. Namık Kemal wrote the original in September 1883. For a translation of the work into modern Turkish, see Namık Kemal, *Renan Müdafaanamesi*, ed. Fuad Köprülü (Ankara, 1962).

far more open to scientific thought and innovation than their Islamic counterparts.

Afghani's and Kemal's arguments with Renan took place during a critical time in Middle Eastern history. France and England, the two major European imperial powers, had recently expanded their colonial presence. France had just taken over Tunisia in 1881, and England declared Egypt to be a protectorate a year later. Afghani and Kemal perhaps wrote out of fear that Renan's views on Islam and Semitic Arabs as inferior to “Aryan” Europeans and Iranians could justify colonization. While Afghani corresponded directly with Renan in the French *Journal des Débats*,⁴ Kemal wrote for an Ottoman audience. Kemal, one of the most outspoken political critics of the Sultanate, and a coauthor of the short-lived 1876 Ottoman constitution, had earlier run afoul of the authoritarian Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II (1876–1909) and was sent to Lesbos in exile. He now wrote his refutation of Renan to reconcile Islamic concepts of governance with modernist thought—an argument he thought likely to appeal to his Pan-Islamic sovereign.⁵ Given such pressures, Kemal could only speak metaphorically about current events, making thinly veiled commentaries on such critical issues as the ability of native Middle Eastern states to govern themselves, the viability of Muslim modernization, racial and national identity, and Europe's relationship with the region.

In “Islamism and Science,” Renan claimed Muslim single-minded adherence to religious dogma hindered critical scientific thought, the secular foundation of modern liberalism. He also asserted that the flourishing of mathematics, science, and medicine during the Abbasid period (750–1258) defied Islamic norms. Renan believed that there was a racial explanation to this development: the Arabs, allegedly a poetic and warlike people, were prone to religious orthodoxy and suspicious of science. In his eyes, the Persians, who had never given up their sense of racial unity and ties to the ancient Greek world, were far more capable. They were for a time successful in retaining their own unique Shia faith [*sic*]⁶ and even reviving rationalism during the Abbasids.

⁴ Afghani's “Answer” to Renan is atypical of his writings. His other work, aimed at a Muslim audience, was not critical of Islam. Rather, after 1883 he was most often in search of a new political patron who would support his version of Islamic reform. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, pp. 22–24.

⁵ Bedri Gencer, *İslam'da Modernleşme: 1839–1939* (Istanbul: Lotus, 2008), pp. 534–535; Fevziye Abdullah Tansel, “Kemal, Mehmed Namık,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 8:876.

⁶ There are a variety of Shia groups throughout the Islamic world. Moreover, Jafari, or Twelver Shiism, became the dominant faith in Persia during the sixteenth century.

But they were eventually subjugated by “primitive” peoples (i.e., the Mongols and Turks) who adhered to Islamic dogma. This intellectual decline contrasted with Europe, where humanists, building on earlier Greek traditions, initiated a philosophical dialogue that paved the way for such secular developments as the Scientific Revolution, liberal political thought, and the modern notion of progress.⁷

Afghani, who published his “Answer to Renan” some seven weeks later, offered substantial criticisms. First, Afghani argued that Renan should qualify his comparison of the Islamic world with Europe by considering the evolutionary nature of scientific development. He qualified Renan’s negative views about scientific reform among Muslim societies, pointing out that Islam was a much newer faith that was just opening up to humanism in Afghani’s day, some 1,200 years after Muhammad’s death. After all, he argued, Christian Europe took almost 1,500 years after Christ’s crucifixion to initiate the Reformation. Although Afghani acknowledged that Islamic orthodoxy had stifled the development of science since the downfall of the Abbasids, and that Muslims needed to use humanistic philosophy and scientific reform to break down this barrier, he was highly critical of Renan’s racial claims. He asserted that Arabs, and not just Persians, embraced scientific thought during the early centuries of Islamic civilization. He stated that Arab scientists flourished not only under the Abbasids but also under the preceding Umayyad dynasty and even the early caliphates. Thus, he held out hope for cultural renewal in the Arab-dominated areas of the Middle East. Afghani thereby countered Renan’s hope for a revitalized Shia Persian culture with his belief in a future multi-ethnic Islamic Renaissance.⁸

Kemal’s “Refutation of Renan,” published in Ottoman Turkish and never translated into French or another Western European language, had a much harsher tone than did Afghani’s writings. Kemal, who did not cite Afghani,⁹ similarly concluded that Arab scientists, mathematicians, and medical thinkers deserved much greater recognition than Renan was willing to concede. He likewise focused his discussion on the earlier periods of Islamic history, although he also used later examples to bolster his case. However, Kemal was not willing to acknowledge that Europe was an example that Muslims should blindly emulate.

⁷ Renan, “Islamism,” pp. 84–108.

⁸ Afghani, “Answer to Renan,” pp. 181–187.

⁹ It is not at all clear whether Kemal was aware of Afghani’s “Answer,” as Renan’s work was far more famous at the time. Renan’s work was published separately from Afghani’s, and it is conceivable that Kemal was aware of Renan’s alone.

Kemal not only underscored Renan's admission that the Spanish Inquisition and the religious wars between Protestants and Catholics were blemishes in the history of Western civilization, but he also wrote that a singular focus on humanity's control of nature led to a megalomaniacal society that endangered itself and those around it. Kemal believed that Renan's article was indicative of the recklessness of Western European "Orientalist" scholarship on the Islamic world. Presaging later twentieth-century critiques that Orientalists failed to understand the nature of the Islamic societies—and often had inadequate linguistic training—Kemal argued that Renan simply was repeating the prejudices of earlier Western authors to bolster his own civilization's image of itself. He hinted that these prejudices were also useful for drumming up support for their own colonial projects and thus were mere pieces of propaganda. To Kemal, the only use for such work was to call his fellow Muslims' attention to the need to balance scientific reforms with the moral legal foundations that only Islamic law (*şeriat*) could provide.¹⁰

Modern scholars have approved some of Renan's and Afghani's arguments but remained far more critical of Kemal. Nikki Keddie concludes that Afghani rightfully questioned Renan's racist arguments about Persians and Arabs, and was in the midst of transforming himself into an exponent of Pan-Islamic thought. To Gencer, Niyazi Berkes, and Şerif Mardin, Kemal's "Refutation" is a fundamentally flawed document. In their opinion, Kemal could not accept natural law alone as the basis of scientific thought, since it conceived of material reality in secular, mechanistic terms. Likewise, Kemal supposedly failed to recognize the "barren" nature of Arabic science when he accepted Islamic law as fundamental to modernization. Thus, Turkish scholars to date have largely agreed that Kemal's idea of using Islamic legal traditions, moral values, and personal and communal identity to support scientific reforms simply could not withstand the test of time. Kemal's resistance to a purely secular science contrasted sharply with modern, post-Ottoman Arab or Turkish nationalist models that abandoned Islamic justifications entirely.¹¹

¹⁰ Kemal, *Müdafaanamesi*, p. 25.

¹¹ Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1964), pp. 207, 209–223, 226, 230–233, 236, 315–317, 325, 482; Gencer, *Modernleşme*, pp. 534–538, 577–580, 587–590, 593, 610, 624–625; Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, pp. 283–336; Nikki R. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal a'd-din "Al-Afghani": A Political Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 189–199; Şerif Mardin, *The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought: A Study in the Modernization of Turkish Political Ideas* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 324–326.

Such conclusions largely ignore the historical complexities with which Kemal was interacting. Kemal may have defied the standard model of modernization that called for the dominance of a secular, humanistic philosophy, but he was no doubt also aware that previous Ottoman reformers often used Islamic legal justifications to bolster their arguments. That Kemal helped draft the article of the Ottoman constitution in 1876 stating that Islam is “the religion of the Ottoman state” is a case in point.¹² One could gain far more popular support for any innovation among the empire’s Muslim majority in late nineteenth-century Ottoman society by Islamic legal sanction. His warning about the danger of purely secular scientific reform also would appeal to those wary that it would signal wholesale Westernization, making the empire more vulnerable to outside control at a time when colonial imperial projects were a constant threat to non-Western sovereignty. These messages, conveyed by Kemal’s “Refutation of Renan” and other published works and plays, helped to mobilize their audience into the first modern Pan-Islamic mass political movement. The following essay, which will reexamine Kemal’s debate with Renan and Afghani on the nature of Islam, European influence, and modern romantic nationalism in the Middle East, will highlight the continuing relevance of these themes to modern Middle Eastern countries, like Turkey, which similarly balance modern reform with notions of popular sovereignty and a continuing identification of Islam.

THE NATURE OF ISLAM

For Renan and most other modern philosophers, humanistic values—the pursuit of reason and knowledge of natural law, the belief in a human-centered universe, and commitment to an ever-improving society—were the key to scientific and political success in Europe and beyond. In his opinion, science, the acquisition of reason-based knowledge, was “the very soul of a society” and led to Western Europe’s military and industrial superiority. Renan also posited that a society that recognized universal natural laws was bound to be more just and humane.¹³

Every society should strive to adopt this model regardless of its traditional faith or political system: “If religion divides men, reason tends

¹² Berkes, *Development of Secularism*, p. 244.

¹³ Renan, “Islamism,” p. 97.

to unite them; and that, at bottom, there is but one reason."¹⁴ The real issue, instead, was the struggle against religious dogma, static traditions, irrationality or anything that would hinder science or the acquisition of reason-based knowledge.

In Renan's eyes, Muslim societies were the most resistant toward science. Convinced that God determined who was rich and powerful, Muslims supposedly had "the most profound disdain for instruction, for science, for everything that constitutes the European spirit."¹⁵ The main reason for this resistance was Islam's dismissal of rational thought and innovation as sinful rebellion against God. One should instead blindly follow the timeless instructions of the Quran, accepting human suffering, ignorance, and backwardness as God's will. While Islam was not necessarily more violent than other religions, its dogmas were more effective in preventing a rational mindset:¹⁶

All those who have been in the East, or in Africa, are struck by the way in which the mind of a true believer is fatally limited, by the species of iron circle that surrounds his head, rendering it absolutely closed to knowledge, incapable of either learning anything, or of being open to any new idea. From his religious initiation at the age of ten or twelve years, the Mohammedan child, who occasionally may be, up to that time, of some intelligence, at a blow becomes a fanatic, full of a stupid pride in the possession of what he believes to be the absolute truth, happy as with a privilege, with what makes his inferiority. This foolish pride is the radical vice of the Mussulman.¹⁷

Here Renan argued that Muslims, like all humans, acquired their value system as a result of their social interaction. The real culprits were those who propagated this dogmatic worldview. One might have inferred that if humanistic reformers were able to take over Muslim society, they would have the opportunity to save new generations from ignorance and implant the scientific, progressive spirit into these once blank slates. This argument, along with his earlier assertion that science was the "European spirit," raised the question of whether Muslims should be left in charge of their own societies.

Renan implied that current Muslim elites were utterly incapable of modernizing their own societies. He alluded to an encounter between a European traveler and a local Ottoman judge (*kadı*) in the mid nine-

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 103.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 85.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 97–98.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 84.

teenth century. The European traveler, struck by the poverty and ignorance of the country, asked the judge why they did not undertake censuses and promote overseas trade as this may lead to greater reforms. The Ottoman judge allegedly responded: "I have never sought to count the houses, or to inform myself of the number of their inhabitants. And as to what merchandise this man putteth upon his mules, and that man in the hold of his ship, in very truth these are things that concern me not at all."¹⁸

Renan suggested here that the Muslim judge's refusal to adopt modern bureaucratic methods of governance was the logical consequence of cradle-to-grave indoctrination in timeless religious dogma. Moreover, Renan also used this quotation to show that Muslim local officials, so critical to implementing the censuses and fiscal policies that initiate modernization, were totally indifferent to reform. To this reader, Renan's argument implies that the only way to change this pattern was to replace the local official with someone more "in tune" with the "European scientific spirit," presumably either a Westerner or a Westernized Middle Easterner. The only way one could train and appoint such an "enlightened" official would be through a colonial or reform-minded regime. Both types of government were subject to greater Western control, either through direct colonial occupation or the financial pressure of borrowing from Western financiers to pay for the schools and institutions necessary to implement the reforms. Renan's example therefore was a metaphorical justification for increased Western control of the Muslim Middle East.

Afghani was at least partially receptive to Renan's arguments. He admitted that Islam succeeded in stifling science and preventing further progress.¹⁹ He, like Renan, used his own metaphor to illustrate the typical dogmatic Muslim:

A true believer must, in fact, turn from the path of studies that have for their object scientific truth, studies on which all must depend, according to an opinion accepted at least by some people in Europe. Yoked, like an ox to the plow, to the dogma whose slave he is, he must walk eternally in the furrow that has been traced for him in advance by the interpreters of the law. Convinced, besides, that his religion contains in itself all morality and all sciences, he attaches himself resolutely to it and makes no effort to go beyond.²⁰

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

¹⁹ Afghani, "Answer to Renan," p. 183.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

Afghani's choice of an ox to illustrate the traditional Muslim's tragic indifference to anything outside of dogmatic truth contrasted with Renan's choice of metaphors. Afghani believed that the "Muslim and Arab child, whose portrait Renan traces in such vigorous terms," was in fact capable of proving his "taste for science, for all the sciences, including philosophy."²¹ He also did not mention the example of the local Ottoman Muslim judge. Instead, he only vaguely commented that Muslim despots were responsible for enforcing dogmatic beliefs.²²

Afghani, like Renan, offered an argument by implication. If properly trained in science and other subjects, new generations of Muslim youth would be able to guide their countries to modernity. The schools might even be able to transform their students from peasants who merely accepted the status quo to citizens who would actively participate in the molding of their own state and society. This in turn suggested that these new citizens might share in government, limiting or possibly eliminating "despotic" rule. Afghani's reference to despotism was familiar to political discussions on non-Western governments from the sixteenth century onward—especially in regard to the Ottoman Empire. Many considered the only solution to avoiding despotism to be the establishment of a parliament that would limit or replace monarchical rule. Afghani did not clearly spell out his wish for such reform, but his criticism of despotism implied it. Sultan Abdulhamid II would certainly not have appreciated the message. Such criticisms threatened to bring liberalism outside of Europe, creating the universal reason-based society that Renan idealized in the first place.

Afghani openly admitted his fear of a popular backlash against science and liberalism. He contended that the rational pursuit of human happiness, material prosperity, and the quest for knowledge inevitably left some individuals spiritually unfulfilled and unwilling to give up traditional dogmatic morals for newfangled humanistic ones.²³ These individuals would remain fundamentally irrational, not knowing "either how to trace back causes or to discern effects."²⁴ Society's resistance to a reason-based system of knowledge was therefore inevitable:

Whenever religion will have the upper hand, it will eliminate philosophy; and the contrary happens when it is philosophy that reigns sov-

²¹ Ibid., p. 184.

²² Ibid., p. 187.

²³ Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, p. 89; Keddie, Sayyid Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani," p. 195.

²⁴ Afghani, "Answer to Renan," p. 182.

ereign mistress. So long as humanity exists, the struggle will not cease between dogma and free investigation, between religion and philosophy; a desperate struggle in which, I fear, the triumph will not be for free thought, because the masses dislike reason, and its teachings are only understood by some intelligences of the elite, and because, also, science, however beautiful it is, does not completely satisfy humanity, which thirsts for the ideal and which likes to exist in dark and distant regions that the philosophers and scholars can neither perceive nor explore.²⁵

Afghani argued that he and fellow liberal reformers faced Hegelian-like dialectical struggles against the forces of religion. He, like many political leaders of the day, believed that only an enlightened political elite could effectively promote its cause, since the bulk of the population was too easily swayed by emotional appeals to traditional religious identity. Thus, Afghani argued that the majority would continually endanger social progress. Educating the intelligent youth might build up a reformist movement, but there were limits to how many people they could effectively convert to their cause.²⁶

However, Afghani did posit that Islamic societies were capable of eventually assimilating scientific and liberal values. He cited the example of the Christian Reformation, which, by critiquing scholastic thought, criticizing the place of the church, and by promoting trade and print culture, allowed Europe “to advance rapidly on the road of progress and science.”²⁷ Muslim society may have “not yet freed itself from the tutelage of religion,” but he believed that it “will succeed some day in breaking its bonds and marching resolutely in the path of civilization after the manner of Western society.”²⁸ The key was the promotion of liberal reform and scientific educational institutions. He believed himself to be the agent of just such a movement, and pled for Renan and other Western liberals to support him to save “millions of men who would thus be condemned to live in barbarism and ignorance.”²⁹

In sum, Afghani admitted the shortcomings of the Muslim Middle East when it came to the development of science and the underlying liberal political program needed to promote it. He also agreed that the

²⁵ Ibid., p. 187.

²⁶ Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, p. 89; Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din “al-Afghani,”* p. 195.

²⁷ Afghani, “Answer to Renan,” p. 183.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

true obstacle to progress among Muslims was dogmatic adherence to the faith itself. All that was needed was a change of mindset, a problem that Western liberals and Muslim reformers like himself could address. To him, progress was a war of ideas.³⁰ What he, like Renan, left out of the equation was the influence that European colonization had in promoting or hindering science and liberal reform. This makes sense given that Renan and Afghani addressed their comments to a largely Western European audience receptive to liberal justifications for Westernizing the Middle East as part of the greater French colonization efforts.

By contrast, Kemal directed his ideas to an Ottoman audience that was hostile to the European imperial project but open to modern reform programs. He was not impressed by such a dialogue and denounced Renan's scholarship on Muslim societies as a great distortion. For him, Renan and other European scholars of the Middle East considered "the glorious religion of Islam as an obstacle to free thought and the progress of civilization, but [they] really [required] a profound, lengthy investigation of this religion's character and excellence."³¹ In Kemal's eyes, Renan and others like him failed because of their rigid belief that Islam was a violent, destructive faith that disregarded other peoples and the study of science and philosophy. To him, Renan "restricted his sources only to those articles that advocate spreading the faith by force . . . [and] tailored [his] research to fit this preconceived notion."³² He found this simply amazing given that "there were hundreds of thousands of books circulating about a civilization which encompassed a substantial amount of the globe for 1300 years."³³

One reason for this scholarly imbalance was the supposed failure of Renan and those like him to master Arabic and other major Middle Eastern languages. The tendency was to rely upon Western travelers' accounts and colonial records instead of interacting with Muslims or reading Islamic religious literature, such as the Quran, the sayings of Muhammad (*hadis*), and the commentaries of Muhammad's successors and major Islamic thinkers. Accordingly, if Renan and others had done this, they would have realized that there were indeed Muslim schools that promoted scholarly inquiry, even if they had lagged behind in mathematics and natural sciences for the past century. To Kemal, this lag was not due to religious factors, as it was incredible that "Muham-

³⁰ Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani,"* pp. 190–191; Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, p. 96.

³¹ Kemal, *Müdafaanamesi*, p. 19.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

mad's followers cultivate scientific knowledge only to encourage people to be ignorant."³⁴ By ignoring the beneficial role Muslims had played in fostering science, Renan and most Western scholars wrote distorted accounts based on unfounded assertions that reflected and justified European biases against Islam:³⁵ "God forbid, it is so artificial that one can compare [these works] to their descriptions of the Zulu people's religion."³⁶

Such criticisms are remarkably familiar to present-day Middle Eastern scholars, who are very much aware of Edward Said's seminal *Orientalism* (1978). This work criticized French and English scholarship of the Middle East as warped by colonial political and economic agendas, cultural biases, and a frequent misreading of original Middle Eastern sources. Interestingly, Said also argued that native Muslim scholars who did not fit into the Western European scholastic agenda were frequently ignored.³⁷ Kemal's work, aimed at Ottoman-educated elites rather than European ones, is a case in point.

Kemal also directly contradicted Renan and Afghani's claim that Islam hindered education. In his opinion, Muslim societies past and present supported scientific scholarship and in general facilitated education. Muslims had nothing to fear from such developments:³⁸ "Islam neither destroyed knowledge nor was it destroyed with knowledge."³⁹

Kemal then cited Islamic scripture to prove Islam's positive attitude toward science. He believed that a number of verses justified the validity of scientific study. This included statements that "the sun turns around on its orbit," "do We not send water in abundance from the clouds," "and have We not created you in pairs?"⁴⁰ Other verses and sayings of the Prophet were used to prove the worthiness of scientific scholarship:

God gives wisdom to whoever He wishes. Whomever is given wisdom is given much prosperity. But none will grasp the message except men of understanding.

God will raise up to suitable ranks and degrees those of you who believe and have been granted knowledge.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 29.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 21.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 19.

³⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), pp. 323–326.

³⁸ Kemal, *Müdafaaanamesi*, pp. 12, 58, 25–26.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 58.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 22, 34, 57.

Are those equal, those who know and those who do not know? It is those who are warranted with understanding that received admonition.

Scholars are the inheritors of the Prophets.

The death of a learned one is like the migration of a world.

Kemal also pointed to verses and sayings that justify the pursuit of scientific knowledge:

Oh my God, please increase my knowledge!

You shall ask for knowledge from the cradle to the grave.

You shall ask for knowledge even if it is in China!⁴¹

These passages would have great appeal for most of Kemal's readers, who, as participants within the newly emerging Ottoman print culture, sought justifications for promoting science and liberalism and defending themselves from their conservative opponents. Kemal's tactic of using Islamic religious authorities was not new, as innovators and Ottoman reformers since the sixteenth century used scriptural citations to sway an administrative and bureaucratic elite that readily identified with Islam.⁴²

Kemal clarified that these passages refer to knowledge as a whole, which should not be artificially divided into opposing spiritual and material categories. While these categories certainly existed, they were complementary to one another. This view contrasted sharply with both Afghani and Renan, who argued that Islam and other dogmatic faiths continually struggled against science. In Kemal's opinion, the real danger of pursuing science alone was that it scorned any moral safeguard to the pursuit of material knowledge. Without religion, people would “study [science] with the sole purpose of gaining prosperity and power.”⁴³ Muslims questioned this “addiction” and wanted to maintain a balance between science and faith.

To Kemal, key scientific thinkers like Descartes, Pascal, Coperni-

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 34.

⁴² For examples of how Islamic rhetoric was used to justify reform, see: Birsan Bulmuş, “The Plague in the Ottoman Empire: 1300–1838” (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2008), pp. 44–86 and Mustafa Gökçek, “A Kazan Tatar Contribution to the Late Ottoman Debates on Nationalism and Islam: The Life and Works of Halim Sabit Şibay” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2008), pp. 150–185.

⁴³ Kemal, *Müdafaanamesi*, p. 25.

cus, and Galileo also wished to maintain such a balance. Muslims regularly exchanged their views with such scholars, following the Quran's injunction: "If you are a sincere and honest person, you shall bring your proof." He condemned others like Bacon and Darwin since their innovations legitimized a material understanding of the world that excluded direct, divine action. He criticized Renan for supporting such an understanding when Renan claimed that "only the prosperous and powerful are skilled and excellent."⁴⁴

Scholars have been quick to criticize Kemal's views on science as being bounded by religious values, since a modern liberal view would see secular scientific inquiry as fundamental. Yet, one should not forget the political context in which Kemal was writing. The Ottomans to whom Kemal was writing were often suspicious of any innovation, and a successful argument in favor of change required invoking Islamic principles. Supporting a mechanistic view of the world or evolutionary theory would simply be too much for this audience to bear.

In fact, Kemal was much more interested in rallying people to a "national" cause—the defense of the Ottoman Empire. Having just witnessed the mass exodus of Muslim refugees from the Balkans after the defeat of 1877–1878, he was more committed than ever in redefining what this "nation" was. To him, as to many of the refugees and the supporters of Abdulhamid II, the empire's status as the premier Islamic state defined its people and politics. Privileging science over Islam could hurt the prospects of this cause, since "science" could redefine people ethnically and linguistically. This was anathema to the Ottomans since no single ethnic group dominated the empire's Muslim majority.

NATIONAL, CIVILIZATIONAL, AND RACIAL COMPARISONS

Renan opposed such notions of Islamic unity as he thought religion could hinder the development of a modern nation. The adoption of a dogmatic, universal faith would simply doom a society to "intellectual nullity." He also saw a people's conversion to Islam as enough to erase "any difference of race and nationality."⁴⁵

To Renan, racial degeneration had a negative impact on the early

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 25, 57.

⁴⁵ Renan, "Islamism," p. 85.

development of Muslim states. He believed both Arabs and Turks were responsible for depriving their Middle Eastern subjects of the "philosophical and scientific spirit."⁴⁶ The Arabs, whom he characterized as a poetic group of warlike nomads, were not prone to any "intellectual movement of a profane character."⁴⁷ In his opinion, there was little or no intellectual development "in the hands of the Arab race, that is to say, under the first four caliphs and the Umayyads."⁴⁸ Similarly, after 1200, when "the Turkish race assumed the hegemony of Islam, only a rare genius could be counted as an important scholar." Thus, the Turks, like the Arabs, had "slain the science and philosophy within . . . [themselves]."⁴⁹

The Persians, in Renan's opinion, had a much more positive role in Middle Eastern history. Greatly influenced by the ancient Greeks, the Persians were uniquely successful in altering Islam to favor Shiism, a separate faith [*sic*] that allowed for profound intellectual development. The Persian and Shia-influenced Abbasid Empire gave birth to some of the greatest philosophers of the medieval world, including Averroes and Avicenna. Almost all of these great philosophers were allegedly Persian, and not Arabic or Turkish by birth.⁵⁰

According to Renan, the Persians not only struggled against the dogmatic Muslim majority within their state, but even with the Arabic language itself. Like Latin in Christian Europe, Arabic remained the lingua franca of the Middle East. Just as the European humanists of the fifteenth century longed to write their ideas in the vernacular, so too the Persian philosophers struggled with the Arabic language's poetic nature, since it "was a very unsuitable instrument for metaphysics."⁵¹ To Renan, only the Western world truly appreciated the contributions the Abbasid Persian philosophers gave to mathematics, science, and medicine. After the Abbasid collapse, the Persians became insignificant.

Renan thought the Persian-born Afghani⁵² had the chance to rejuvenate the national spirit among his people:

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 94–95.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 87.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 94.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 94–95.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 86, 95.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 95–96.

⁵² Nikki Keddie has shown that Afghani was in fact born in Persia. Afghani claimed at times that he was from Afghanistan or even from Istanbul. He took on assumed origins to help him promote his political cause better. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, pp. 5–9. Renan thought he was an Afghan, but Renan still saw him as Persian and "Aryan" by race.

The Shaikh [Jamal ad-Din] is . . . entirely emancipated from the prejudices of Islam; he belongs to those energetic races of the Upper Iran bordering upon India, in which the Aryan spirit still flourishes so strongly, under the superficial garb of official Islamism. He is the best proof of that great axiom, which we have often proclaimed, that the worth of religions is to be determined by the worth of the races that profess them. The freedom of his thought, his noble and loyal character, made me believe, when in his presence, that I had before me, in a resuscitated state, one of my old acquaintances, Avicenna, Averroes, or some other of those great skeptics who for five centuries represented the tradition of the human spirit.⁵³

Here Renan not only expounded on race as an explanatory factor in the history of “primitive peoples,” but also was supremely condescending toward his Middle Eastern contemporary. He complimented Afghani as a direct intellectual and racial descendant of Avicenna and Averroes, who themselves reflected in part the greatness of ancient Greece, the heart of Western civilization. Afghani appeared to him as exemplary: “There is nothing more instructive than thus to study, in its original and sincere manifestations, the conscience of the enlightened Asiatic.”⁵⁴

To Renan, the French and other European nations had developed beyond mere racial identity:

We speak of the Greeks, of the Romans, of the Arabs, as though these words designated human groups ever identical with themselves, without taking into account the changes due to military, religious, and linguistic conquests, to fashion, and to the great currents of every description which traverse the history of humanity. Reality does not govern itself in accordance with such simple categories. We French, for instance, are Roman by language, Greek by civilization, and Jewish by religion. The matter of race, of capital importance in the beginning, has a constant tendency to lose that importance, when the great universal facts, known as Greek civilization, Roman conquest, Teutonic conquest, Christianity, Islamism, the Renaissance, philosophy, and revolution pass, like grinding mill-stones, over the primitive varieties of the human family, and force them to mingle themselves in more or less homogeneous masses.⁵⁵

⁵³ Renan, “Islamism,” p. 104.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

Renan posited that race was a critical first step to historical development, as it allowed a nation to form in contradistinction to outside forces, like Christianity or Islamism. Over time, racial identity allegedly softened to a more humanistic, cosmopolitan form that harmoniously intermingled with other elements. This dialectical vision of history, vaguely reminiscent of Ranke, Hegel, or even Afghani, assumed that the progress of Western nations was inevitable, and would lead, as Kemal alluded, to greater "power and prosperity." Renan's views thus run counter to anti-Semites who believed such a cosmopolitan culture led to racial and national decline—as later apparent in the Dreyfus affair.

Afghani accepted very few of Renan's views on race and national development. He agreed in principle that a country could not arise without an initial racial unity. He furthermore accepted the premise that a national revival was necessary in the Middle East, and that all Muslim peoples were currently suffering from dogmatic stagnation.⁵⁶

In contrast to Renan, Afghani defended rather than denigrated Arabs as a part of Islamic civilization. He posited that the Arabs may have conquered the Persians when Islam began to expand, but they also helped develop and expand the sciences "with a perfect taste and a rare precision and exactitude."⁵⁷ He therefore viewed Muhammad, the first four Caliphs, and the Umayyads as the early leaders of the greater Islamic nation, who gave their Arabic language and support to science and education. Certainly, incorporating such vast swaths of territory throughout the Middle East would have involved working with the subject peoples to develop science. But, Afghani argued, it would be a mistake to ignore that it was the Arabic language that helped unify Muslim scholars of that time and the latter Abbasid period as a culture, not a race:

The Arabs cannot, no doubt, claim for themselves the glory that renders these writers illustrious, but we believe that they do not need this claim; they have among themselves enough celebrated scholars and writers. What would happen if, going back to the first period of Arab domination, we followed step by step the first group from which was formed this conquering people who spread their power over the world, and if, eliminating everything that is outside this group and its descendants, we did not take into account either the influence exercised on minds or the impulse it gave to the sciences? Would we not

⁵⁶ Afghani, "Answer to Renan," p. 184.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 184–185.

be led, thus, no longer to recognize in conquering peoples other virtues or merits than those that flow from the material fact of conquest? All conquered peoples would then regain the moral autonomy and would attribute to themselves all the glory, no part of which could be legitimately claimed by the power that fructified and developed these germs. Thus, Italy would come to say to France that neither Mazarin nor Bonaparte belong to her; Germany or England would in turn claim the scholars who, having come to France, made its professorships illustrious and enhance the brilliance of its scientific renown. The French, on their side, would claim for themselves the glory of the offspring of those illustrious families who, after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, immigrated to all Europe. And if all Europeans belong to the same stock, one can with justice claim that the Harranians and the Syrians, who are Semites, belong equally to the great Arab family.⁵⁸

Afghani revised Renan's historical views of nations and peoples in an intriguing manner. Not only did he claim that the Arab conquest of others was a stage in national development similar to the French or Italians, but he also went so far as to assert that "the great Arab family" incorporated others like the "Harranians and the Syrians." This meant that the Islamic "nation" even went through Renan's primitive "racial" stage of history by the Abbasid era, since Afghani is responding to Renan's argument that Muslim scholars like Averroes and Avicenna were actually Persian. Thus the Abbasids, as a whole, comprised an advanced civilization; and they should be respected as such by the Europeans, who were only now reaching that cultural level.

This argument spoke also in part to Afghani's own complicated identification with nationalism. He too was of Persian origin, yet he claimed to be the intellectual leader of a reemerging Islamic nation. Perhaps there was some truth to Renan's flattery about Afghani as the next Averroes. Yet Afghani, a believer in nationalism as well as science and liberalism, was more true to the romantic overtones of that European movement. After all, European nationalists sought to revive great national traditions, not build up a primitive race-based state from scratch. In other words, a revived Islamic nation, after a limited period of tutelage, would soon become an equal among its European peers.

To Kemal, like Afghani, Renan's talk of a separate Persian nation was ludicrous. He believed in a Pan-Islamic cause under a united Ottoman Empire, and he shared Afghani's belief that successful Islamic civilizations of the past incorporated different cultures under a single

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 186.

language. Thus Kemal countered Renan's argument that the Abbasid scholars struggled with Arabic: "Praise be to God! What language were they going to speak if they got rid of Arabic in the Abbasid Dynasty? Although they obtained the imperial throne by becoming the Caliphate of the Islamic world, were they going to destroy their state by refusing religion and the language of the Quran?"⁵⁹ He also refused the idea of an enlightened Persian people: "If the Persians were so adorned with knowledge, where are their books?"⁶⁰ This denial could perhaps be explained by his sense of Ottoman identity. The Ottomans, a Sunni Muslim dynasty, had long regarded the Persians as a heretical Shiite rival.

When analyzing modern Islamic civilization, Kemal did not accept the idea that the Arabs would ever break from his empire's common Islamic cause: "Since the Arab people are dedicated as brothers to the Ottoman cause and the Islamic caliphate, no one need be afraid of their separation."⁶¹

Kemal in fact sought to fundamentally redefine the idea of the "nation" as it applied to the Ottomans and the Muslim Middle East. To him, the Ottomans were the latest dynasty in the long history of the Islamic civilization. All of the dynasties, the Caliphates, the Umayyads, the Abbasids, and the Ottomans, successfully incorporated various nations and peoples into their states by converting them to Islam. These nations might have given up their geographical borders, but they thrived culturally: "History demonstrates that almost all nations that accept Islam are able to preserve their nationality. However, if anyone is asked, they would name themselves first by their religion and second by their ethnicity."⁶² Thus, the nation (*vatan*) was "a holy idea . . . and not simply composed of imaginary lines drawn by the sword of the victor or the pen of a clerk."⁶³ These views were also substantiated by the Quran (49:13): "We made you into tribes and nations."⁶⁴

The nation, in Kemal's eyes, was really Islamic civilization itself. This civilization was, like Afghani's vision of the pre-Ottoman Arabic culture, already at an advanced stage of intellectual and cultural devel-

⁵⁹ Kemal, *Müdafaanamesi*, p. 36.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁶¹ Kemal, "Vatan," *İbret*, 12 March 1873. However, Gencer believes that Kemal and Abdulhamid began to shy away from political unity with the Arabs. Gencer, *Modernleşme*, pp. 537–538.

⁶² Kemal, *Müdafaanamesi*, p. 26.

⁶³ Kemal, "Vatan."

⁶⁴ John Esposito, *Islam and Politics* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984), p. 341.

opment. Unlike Afghani or Renan, Kemal made no reference to race as part of the history of the Islamic peoples. Kemal was almost certainly aware of the popular European literature on race at the time, such as that of Gobineau, that likely fed into such visions.⁶⁵ Race was a powerful social construct that could be used to justify the “advanced” Europeans’ consolidation of empire in places like Tunisia and Egypt. He perhaps foresaw such ideas could be used to justify hindering education for these Muslim colonies rather than promoting it. As he pointed out, Western imperial powers “wanted to close down schools for Muslim children” out of fear that they may threaten their domination.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, Kemal was similar to Afghani in that he too sought to start a political movement. As seen earlier, Kemal called for the Ottomans to develop mathematics and the natural sciences, studies they had neglected for the past hundred years. Rather than seeing this as a justification for a new separatist nationalist state, he believed that the Ottomans only needed to build on its earlier greatness, seen during the reigns of Mehmed the Conqueror and Süleyman the Magnificent. To him, the Ottoman’s foundation of medical schools during that time and their use of compasses and emerging navigational technologies were examples for the Ottoman political leaders of his day.⁶⁷ Kemal’s vision was a unique combination of romantic nationalists, who liked to glorify a lost tradition of greatness, with the more traditional Ottoman historical accounts, which from 1600 onward sought to reclaim the greatness of the Empire’s two most famous sultans. What is intriguing is that Kemal would entirely leave out earlier modernizing Ottoman reformers, who also prided themselves on using earlier Ottoman history and the encouragement of European liberals to reform their state. Kemal almost certainly did this out of political expediency as he did not want to arouse the anger of Abduhamid II by praising his former Tanzimat rivals.⁶⁸

Kemal was, however, a skillful proponent of Pan-Islamic loyalties. Earlier, in 1874, Kemal was able to tap into Muslim anxieties about losing their Balkan and Caucasian possessions to the Russians and their

⁶⁵ See: Artur Gobineau, *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1933).

⁶⁶ Kemal, *Müdafaanamesi*, p. 58.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 42–43.

⁶⁸ Berkes, *Development of Secularism*, pp. 209–223. One can also compare Kemal’s ideas to that of later Ottoman political thinkers. See: Gökçek, “A Kazan Tatar Contribution to the Late Ottoman Debates on Nationalism and Islam.”

nationalist allies when he wrote his massively popular play called *Vatan yahut Silistre*, or *The Homeland or Silistre*. Here he promoted selfless service in the name of the state: "God created me, and the country raised me. God nourishes me. He nourishes me for the country! When I was born in the country, I was hungry and the country fed me! I was naked and I wore something because of the country. The blessing of the country is in my bones. My body is from the soil of the country. My breath is from the air of the country! If I am not going to die on behalf of the country, tell me why I was born?"⁶⁹ Receptiveness to this message was even greater among the Muslim refugees from the Ottoman Russian War of 1877–1878, who saw nationalism and the Ottoman reform movement as responsible for their misery. Kemal's emotive writing helped Abdulhamid II mobilize this popular dissatisfaction with the liberalizing reforms. Thus, Kemal, and not Afghani or Renan, became the actual leader of a political movement at the time the three authors wrote.

CONCLUSION

To some scholars, Renan's and Afghani's common consensus that traditional Islam's domination of society hindered science and education was of much more lasting importance than Kemal's Pan-Islamic vision. Renan and Afghani advocated a secular liberalism, which contradicted Islamic dogmas and stressed that the formation of a culture open to science and education was a way to progress. In Renan and Afghani's eyes, only a national regime could actually carry out this program. Admittedly, they likely had different intentions as to what extent the European powers should be involved in the process. Renan's racial concept of a primitive nation could be used to justify European colonial domination, since the rulers of such states would be from a more tolerant and advanced culture, and thus could impart their scientific knowledge and liberalism in a more efficient manner. Afghani instead looked for outside support for a reinvigorated, independent, Islamic nation that would be able to accomplish a science-based modern society by going back to the pre-Ottoman times. Modern Middle Eastern reformers continued to debate these issues up until the breakdown of formal colonial states in the 1950s, when the United States began to assume more the role of an informal patron of secular national development.

⁶⁹ Namık Kemal, *Vatan yahut Silistre*, ed. Kenan Akyüz (Ankara: Kültür Bakanlığı, 1990), p. 31.

Kemal's political legacy should not be underestimated, however. His idea of propagating a Pan-Islamic identity to thwart foreign control—and his argument that Islam, science, and liberalism were compatible—have remained relevant until now. His work, aimed at a domestic audience, was a major contribution to mobilizing Muslim political movements in the Ottoman Empire and beyond. Similarly, Abdulhamid II's use of Islam to unify the Ottoman Empire and provoke rebellion in Muslim-dominated European colonial states posed serious challenges to the colonial powers. Even though Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic, promoted a full-blown secular nationalist program in the late 1920s and 1930s, it was necessary for him to use the common cause of Muslims to fight the Greeks and establish the regime. Many citizens of modern Turkey, like elsewhere in the Middle East, continue to identify themselves by their religion. It was no coincidence, therefore, that modern Muslim political parties have led governments in Turkey, as seen most clearly today in Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's ruling Justice and Development Party. Erdoğan's party has often addressed issues of urban development and free trade by appealing to Muslims to work together to modernize. As Kemal argued, Muslim governments past and present should welcome debate and seek common ground with modern scientists, educators, and political reformers to improve their own society. Erdoğan, the current heir to many of Kemal's ideals, promotes an Islamic-based vision of modernity.⁷⁰ This suggests that, as Kemal asserted, religion might promote rather than hinder civilizations.

⁷⁰ Admittedly, Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party differ from Namık Kemal in their commitment to Turkey's secular law; Kemal consistently defended the *şariat* as the basis of the Ottoman state.