

ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY AND ISLAMIC MODERNISM: THE CASE OF SAYYID JAMĀL AD-DĪN AL-AFGHĀNĪ¹

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Recent years have dealt death blows to a number of clichés about Islamic history and culture, clichés which often stemmed from the heavy concentration of past Orientalists on the early centuries of Arab culture, rather than the whole span of Muslim civilization. Among these clichés is that which says that rationalist philosophy with a Greek base died in the Islamic world after the twelfth century A.D. Even in the Western Islamic world Muhsin Mahdi has shown a living Averroist tradition that influenced Ibn Khaldūn, and it is known that Ibn Khaldūn was translated into Turkish in the eighteenth century. In the Persian-influenced Eastern Islamic world, and especially in Iran itself, there was a living philosophical tradition that remained unbroken through the nineteenth century, and certain works of philosophers like Avicenna continued to be taught even in the religious schools. Some Islamic modernists, notably Jamāl ad-Dīn al-Afghānī, Muḥammad ‘Abduh and Muḥammad Iqbāl, were well acquainted with Islamic philosophy.

Reference to ‘Abduh as a neo-Mu‘tazilite may have some justification, but it appears to me to reflect the Orientalist tendency to refer heavily to the early theological controversies of Islam in describing Islamic culture, and to play down the influence of philosophy except on a very restricted circle and period. Many of the ideas which ‘Abduh is assumed to have got from the Mu‘tazilites he could as easily have got from the philosophers, whom he studied intensively in Egypt under the guidance of Afghānī. To this reader, at least, the *Risālat at-Tauḥīd* reads like a work heavily influenced by the Muslim philosophers. Unfortunately, there is not time here to document this point by point.

More certain is the heavy influence of the philosophers on Afghānī himself. We are now fortunate to possess a catalogue of his books, which documents the word of Rashīd Riḍā and others that Afghānī was much interested in Muslim philosophy and helped to reintroduce its study into Egypt,² where he influenced a significant group of young reformers through his teachings.

At first glance it may not be clear why the essentially Aristotelian and neo-Platonic systems of the medieval Muslim philosophers, which had been outmoded in the West for centuries, should prove so attractive to an early generation of Muslim reformers. On closer examination, however, one can see several features of this philosophy that help account for its appeal to Afghānī and his followers. First of all, traditional Muslim philosophy with a Hellenistic base, or *falsafa*, exalted reason above literalist interpretation of the scriptures as the basis for perceiving truth. The workings of the world were to be explained on a rational basis, and not by an appeal to authority or tradition. *Falsafa* considered the truths of science to be part of its domain, and believed in a lawful universe that worked according to principles accessible to the human mind. Even though the science and the natural law of the traditional philosophers were far from those of the nineteenth century West, the very idea of a rationally ordered world comprehensible to the human mind was far closer to nineteenth century ideas than were non-philosophic interpretations of Islam.

Secondly, and perhaps most important, the traditional Muslim philosophers had worked out a way of dealing with apparent contradictions between scriptural and philosophic truth that was applicable to conflicts between traditional Islam and modern thought. The philosophers taught that mankind was divided into an élite, who were alone capable of understanding philosophic or scientific truth, and the mass of mankind, for whom literalist scriptural religion was needed. Without the religious law, backed by the sanctions of vivid rewards and punishments in the afterlife, most men would follow

¹ This paper was first read at the International Congress of Orientalists, Ann Arbor, Michigan, August 1967.

² Iraj Afshār and Aṣghar Mahdavi, eds., *Documents inédits concernant Seyyed Jamāl-al-Dīn Afghānī* (Tehran 1963), pp. 5 ff., 14 ff.

an egoistic and anarchic path, and a well-ordered society would be impossible. Thus the prophets had wisely brought scriptures to meet the needs of the majority of men, while at the same time strewing them with hints of a higher truth that would be recognized only by the philosophical élite. The philosophers assumed that they were following the path of the prophets when they wrote with different degrees of frankness for different audiences, and Afghānī followed this path of the philosophers. The *Refutation of the Materialists*, and the 'Urwa al-Wuthqā articles that glorify Islam were written for a mass audience; while recorded words and articles critical of the Islamic religion, such as the famous *Answer to Renan*, were directed toward a small élite.

The use of different levels of argument for different audiences had several clear advantages for Afghānī and his followers. Firstly, as with the traditional philosophers, it could help ward off persecution by the orthodox community. Secondly, it opened to the modernists a mass audience whose chief loyalty was to Islam, and who could be moved toward self-strengthening or reformist goals most readily when these were stated in Islamic terms. Afghānī, with his vision of rescuing the Islamic world from encroaching Western Christian conquest, was concerned to arouse Muslims by appealing to what moved them most. It is indicative of his sensitivity to mass sentiments that all of Afghānī's militantly pro-Islamic and pan-Islamic writings and talks date from 1880 or after; this was the period when Muslims generally were reacting to a series of territorial losses to the Russians, French and British by a stronger identification with Islamic unity.³ While adapting his words to changing mass moods Afghānī was also adapting the philosophers' technique to new ends; no longer were the masses simply to be encouraged to follow their religion literally, but their religious loyalty was also to be used to bring about political goals: chiefly Muslim unity and resistance to Western encroachments.

Philosophy, mysticism and Shī'ism had for centuries been intertwined in various combinations in Iran, where it is now certain that Afghānī was born and received his basic education.⁴ It is thus impossible to say with certainty of each element of his thought that it had a clearly philosophical, rather than mystic or Shī'ī, base since parallel ideas can often be found between representatives of these different schools. Yet reports from his Egyptian pupils and the rarely cited Persian articles that Afghānī wrote in India show that he reserved his highest regard for philosophy and considered it the guiding soul of all knowledge.⁵

It is unclear whether it was from Iranian philosophers or from other mystics or heretics that Afghānī got the idea, which he both wrote and spoke, that the Koran has an infinity of meanings. In any case, this basically mystical or heterodox notion was used by Afghānī in his writings to justify a progressive, evolutionary view of human knowledge. Since the Koran has an infinity of meanings, no one generation can exhaust its significance and achieve perfect truth; rather each generation can discover more of these meanings and add to the sum total of human knowledge. In Afghānī's Persian article, "The Benefits of Philosophy", his adaptation of a mystical idea to a modern progressive meaning is clear:

[The Koran] is the comprehensive exemplar of the macrocosm. Each individual is a letter, each species a word, each race a line, and each microcosm a page in it; and each movement and change an elucidation and annotation of it. No end exists for this great Book. . . . In each word, and even in each letter, of it, so many mysteries and secrets are hidden that if all the sages of the past and present had the lifetime of Noah, and each one solved a thousand mysteries and uncovered a thousand secrets each day, nonetheless they would remain incapable of fathoming it, and would confess their inability. . . . Since man's perfection in reason and life is in accord with the extent of his knowledge of the book of the world and his own state, it is clear that human perfection can have no limit or end. . . .⁶

³ Cf. Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (London 1962), pp. 103-8; and Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (Montreal 1964), pp. 253 ff.

⁴ For some of the proofs of Afghānī's Iranian birth and education see Nikki R. Keddie, "Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn al-Afghānī's First Twenty-Seven Years: The Darkest Period", *Middle East Journal* XX, 4 (1966), pp. 517-33; and "Afghānī in Afghanistan", *Middle Eastern Studies* I, 4 (1965), pp. 322-49.

⁵ Some of the relevant articles, published both in India and Iran as *Maqālāt-e jamāliyyeh*, will be translated in my forthcoming *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: The Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn al-Afghānī* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1968). French translations of some of these articles are in a forthcoming book by Mrs. Homa Pakdaman.

⁶ Translation from *Maqālāt-e jamāliyyeh*, to appear in my *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: . . .*

Here Afghānī recognizes that he is deviating from the traditional Muslim philosophers who, he writes, erred in their belief that the Greeks and they had achieved a final version of truth.⁷ Afghānī, while praising the traditional philosophers highly, thus does not advocate the return of a traditional mode of thought which assumed that the final truth of science and philosophy had already been achieved; he suggests the alteration of philosophical rationalism to make room for the continual change and growth in human knowledge.

It may appear to an outside observer that, in choosing to teach a modified form of Islamic philosophy, Afghānī was picking a tortuous route toward modern scientific and political thought, which might have been approached more directly from its original sources. Such a view would ignore one of the major sources of Afghānī's continuing appeal to Muslims; namely, that he found indigenous Muslim sources for most of the new ideas that he presented, rather than having to take them from Christian Westerners. At a time when the Christian West had been achieving military victories over the Muslim world for a century, and when Westerners tended to denigrate Muslim intellectual and cultural achievements, the pure Westernizers in the Islamic world were open to the charge of collaboration with the Muslims' main enemy. Every people tries to find indigenous roots for needed innovations, and the desire to do so is strongest when the main outside source of innovation is a military and religious enemy. The Islamic philosophical tradition provided something that was clearly indigenous and Islamic but could at the same time be used to open the doors of science and innovation.

There were thus elements in the Muslim philosophical tradition that could be adapted to Afghānī's major goals of arousing both the élite and the masses to resist Western encroachments and to reform and strengthen Muslim society. The idea of varying one's arguments to accord with the nature of one's audience, which accounts for many of the contradictions between Afghānī's various writings, allowed him with a clear conscience to say or write whatever might be the most effective in a given situation. To an Indian audience, when arguing in favour of using national languages, he said that linguistic ties were much more powerful than religious ones; while shortly afterwards to a general Muslim audience he argued that Muslims had superseded the more primitive state of concern with language or nationality.⁸ In the *Refutation of the Materialists*, aimed at a mass audience, he argues for the superiority of religion in general and Islam in particular to any system that might tend to cast doubt on religious dogmas. In his Answer to Ernest Renan's lecture on "Islam and Science", however, Afghānī expresses to an élite European audience a far more sceptical and philosophical view of religion. Religion is seen as having had the positive function of leading mankind from savagery to civilization. This was accomplished when prophets, here called "educators", imposed obedience on mankind. "This obedience was imposed in the name of the Supreme Being to whom the educators attributed all events, without permitting men to discuss its utility or its disadvantages."⁸ Subsequently, however, religion became a bar to progress. The conclusion of this article sums up Afghānī's views on the relations between religion and philosophy:

It is permissible . . . to ask one's self why Arab civilization, after having thrown such a live light on the world, suddenly became extinguished, why this torch has not been relit since, and why the Arab world still remains buried in profound darkness.

Here the responsibility of the Muslim religion appears complete. It is clear that wherever it became established, this religion tried to stifle science and it was marvelously served in its designs by despotism.

. . . Religions, whatever names they are given, all resemble each other. No agreement and no reconciliation are possible between these religions and philosophy. Religion imposes on man its faith and its belief, whereas philosophy frees him of it totally or in part. How could one therefore hope that they would agree with each other? . . . Whenever religion will have the upper hand, it will eliminate philosophy; and the contrary happens when it is philosophy that reigns as sovereign mistress. As 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

⁷ This point is made in "The Benefits of Philosophy", *Maqālāt-e jamāliyyeh* (Tehran n.d.).

⁸ These contrasting articles have been translated: "Pages peu connues de Djamāl ad-dīn al-Afghānī", tr. Mehdi Hendessi,

Orient 6 (1958), pp. 123-8; "Pages choisies de Djamāl ad-dīn al-Afghānī: La Nationalité (djinsiya) et la religion musulmane", tr. M. Colombe, *Orient* 22 (1962), pp. 125-30.

understood by some intelligences of the élite, 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 which the philosophers and scholars can neither perceive nor explore.⁹

This article contains within itself the explanation of why Afghānī chose to put on an orthodox religious guise when speaking to a mass audience. The masses are moved only by religious arguments, while the more truthful rational and scientific arguments can appeal only to a small élite. Afghānī expresses the hope that the Muslim religion can be reformed, as was Christianity, to lessen the stifling power of dogma, while the masses presumably will be left with enough religious faith and injunctions to satisfy their cravings and keep them in order.

This is not to say that Afghānī was entirely consistent. Even within the *Answer to Renan* there is variation between the optimism of the reformer or revolutionary in the early passages, and the pessimism of the medieval philosophers about the masses at the end. But contradictory tendencies in a complex individual facing almost insoluble problems and exposed to a host of traditional and modern influences are not to be wondered at. If Afghānī thought the masses would respond warmly only to a religious appeal, this helps explain why he made what were essentially political appeals in the name of religion. Defence of Islam was the main theme of his widely-known writings like the *Refutation of the Materialists* and the 'Urwa al-Wuthqā articles; but a study of these works in the context of his life and activity shows that his concern was not at all to strengthen admiration for Islam, as is the case for some modern apologists, but rather to harness Islamic sentiment in an anti-imperialist political struggle.

With Afghānī, as with 'Abduh and Iqbāl after him, the methods of the philosophers were thus used for ends the philosophers would never have accepted—to appeal to men beyond the restricted élite to change their ideas and to engage in political activity. With later generations of political thinkers in the Muslim world new combinations of traditional and modern ways of thought were found, and the Islamic philosophers became no more the source of direct inspiration, but rather an object of generalized admiration together with other Islamic cultural leaders. One has the impression that the traditional distinction between the religious and political ideas that should be stated to the masses and the truth to be reserved for the élite, which in Afghānī had a philosophical basis, but which is also found in non-philosophic Muslim traditions, retains its force in the Islamic world today. This may be one of the sources of Afghānī's continued popularity among Muslims.

• A complete English translation of this article is in my forthcoming *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*: . . . The French is in

Jamāl ad-Dīn al-Afghānī, *Réfutation des Matérialistes*, tr. A.-M. Goichon (Paris 1942), pp. 174–85.