

Chapter 74: Jamal Al-Din Al-Afghani

A: Introduction

While Europe was disengaging herself from the spiritual hold of Rome and embarking upon the hazardous yet challenging road of freedom, the Arab world was being isolated from and insulated against almost all outside influences and changes. This process of isolation and insulation continued unabated till it came to an abrupt end at the time of the Napoleonic expedition against Egypt in 1213/1798.

This was indeed the first serious external stimulus that the Arab and the Muslim world had received since the Ottoman conquest in 922/1516. The episode of French occupation of Egypt was quite significant as it ushered a new era for the Muslim world, an era in which the Western nations began to penetrate into the lands of the Muslims at a breakneck speed.

The story of this penetration is very painful to narrate but it proved to be a blessing in disguise since it awakened the Muslims from their slumber. The Muslim society, which was a medieval and ossified society, when it faced a relentless and superior power that subjected its people and exploited its wealth, fully realized the enormity of the danger.

The method by which the policy of the Western imperialists was executed and the resistance crushed, and the way in which the culture of the conquerors was imposed, did not foster either understanding or friendship, but rather created doubts and promoted fears with regard to the intentions of the rulers. The Muslims were alarmed at the situation that not only their political freedom was in peril, but their institutions, culture, and even their faith, the bedrock of their life, were also being threatened.

The advent of the modern Christian missionary movement at about the same time confirmed this belief. Islam as a result became a rallying call for existence and an instrument of protest against foreigners. The foreigners in turn arrived at the conclusion that unless this potent instrument was dubbed, their position in Muslim lands would not become stable. They, therefore, besides tightening their political control, tried to change the outlook of the younger generations of the Muslims by encouraging Christian

missionary activity and foreign educational efforts.

“Throughout the Muslim world in general and the Arab world in particular this relentless political penetration galvanized Muslims into a reaction consonant with Islam's politico-religious structure. This structure being both a religion and a State at the same time, weakness in one was deemed by the Muslims weakness in the other and *vice versa*” (Nabih Amin Faris).

This feeling culminated in a form of movement that aroused the Muslims on the one hand to defend their lands against the inroads of Western imperialism and on the other to save their faith against the aggression of the Christian missionary. That is how the Muslims came to realize that they could not, even if they wanted to continue to live as they had hitherto lived, be complacently secure in the illusion that the pattern of life accepted as valid in the past must for ever remain valid, for that complacency, that security of convictions and illusions, was shattered to pieces by what had happened to them in the last few decades.

It was the realization of this time-lag between the demands of a new situation and their traditional ways of thinking and living which inspired them with a strong desire to cast off their fatal inertia. The Muslims were, thus, awakened to the need of taking stock of their cultural holdings. They observed that only paying lip-service to their ideology could not help them to solve the problems which had cropped up as a result of the penetration of Western Powers in their respective lands.

If they really wanted to defend their freedom without obliterating Islam as a basis of their civilization, they must make a fresh start in terms of Islamic programme and thus resurrect their society from the old ashes of convention and decay. In case they did not realize the gravity of the situation and simply clung to old notions and conventions in their entirety, they would be playing the game of the proverbial ostrich that buries its head in the sand in order to escape the necessity of making a decision.

If Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab of Arabia (Chap. 72) and Shah Wali Allah of the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent (Chap. 79) be considered to be precursors of the modern awakening in Islam and their movements the signs of the coming dawn, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1254/1838–1314/1897) must be taken to be the foremost leader of this awakening and his movement the first glow of the dawn.

He was the greatest Oriental thinker of the thirteenth/nineteenth century. It has rightly been said that the message of al-Afghani burst through the reigning obscurantism as a splendid lightning. He was a thinker and at the same time a man of action, endowed with a penetrating intelligence and a great heart. His rare intellectual gifts and his high moral qualities gave to his personality the magnetism peculiar to all great leaders and drew to him many followers.

Al-Afghani was for the Muslim world a comprehensive personality, being at the same time a great thinker, a religious reformer, and a political leader. Among his contemporaries he was regarded as a remarkable writer, a charming and eloquent speaker, and a dialectician endowed with great powers of persuasion. According to Muhammad Abduh, he was also a man of heart and strong will, ever ready to

undertake actions requiring the greatest courage and generosity, and devoted to the things of the spirit.

This “wild man of genius,” as Blunt called him, always refused to consider money or honours, and preferred, without doubt, to preserve his liberty of action in order to serve better the ideal to which he devoted his whole life, namely, the rebirth of the Muslim world.

During his stay in Paris in 1301/1883, al-Afghani met Ernest Renan on whom he made such an impression that the illustrious French writer could not but express his enthusiasm in these terms: “The freedom of his thought, his noble and loyal character made me believe during our conversation that I had before me, brought to life again, one of my old acquaintances, Avicenna, Averroes, or another of those great infidels who represented during five centuries the tradition of the human spirit.”

B: Life

Problems touching the origin of Jamal al-Din are far from having been solved. The biographers of diverse Islamic lands—Turks, Persians, Indians, and Afghans, still claim the honour of being his compatriots. In reality, although he was named al-Afghani, i.e., coming from Afghanistan, his activities and influence were widespread; every Islamic land was home to him; and, besides, he was no stranger to the capitals of Europe. He made the acquaintance of scholars, theologians, and politicians both from the East and the West.

His early studies were pursued in Persia and Afghanistan where, by the age of eighteen, he had acquired an exceptionally thorough mastery of Islamic studies, philosophy, and science. The next year and a half, spent in India, introduced him to European teachings. He then made a pilgrimage to Mecca.

On his return to Afghanistan, there followed for him a decade of political career, interrupted by the vicissitudes of civil war. His liberal ideas and his popularity with the people led to the covert hostility of the English who were supporting Amir Shir Ali. On this Amir's accession in 1286/1869, Jamal al-Din left the country.

For a short period, he visited India again. The Indian Government honoured him, but also imposed restrictions on his activities. So he proceeded to Constantinople by way of Egypt where he made his mark at al-Azhar. In Constantinople he was well received but eventually his advanced views brought him the disfavour of the Shaikh al-Islam, and the resulting controversy was so heated that he was asked to leave the country in 1288/1871.

This was the prelude to an important period of his life, his stay in Egypt, where the warm reception given him by intellectual circles induced him to prolong his visit. There he spread his new ideas—notably influencing the future reformer Muhammad Abduh, and did much to awaken the young Egyptians to the dangers of foreign domination. Finally, however, his advanced religious views offended the conservative theologians and his political opponents, the British, and he was expelled from Egypt in 1297/1879.

Returning to India, he wrote "The Refutation of the Materialists," a defence of Islam against modern attacks. While he was in India, the Arabi Rebellion broke out in Egypt, whereupon the British detained him until the defeat of Arabi.

Then followed a period of three years in Paris, fruitful for the publication of his ideas. In 1301/1883, he carried on a controversy with Ernest Renan on "Islam and Science," and in 1302/1884, published with his disciple Muhammad Abduh, exiled from Egypt for his complicity in the Arabi uprising, an Arabic weekly *al-Urwat al-Wuthqa* (The Indissoluble Link) aiming at arousing the Muslims against Western exploitation. The British soon banned the paper in Egypt and India; nevertheless, in its short life it did exercise some influence in these countries.

From Paris, al-Afghani went to London to discuss the Mahdi uprising in the Sudan but was unable to obtain an agreement with the British. Thence, interrupted by a four years' stay in Russia, followed a period of service under the Shah of Persia, ending in his expulsion in 1308/1890 or 1309/1891 when his reforming zeal antagonized the Shah.

Then followed another brief visit to England where Jamal al-Din started his campaign against the Shah and published his "Splendour of the Two Hemispheres" (*Dia al-Khafaqain*) ending in his ill-fated acceptance of the Sultan of Turkey's invitation to be his guest at Constantinople for there he had to remain in "gilded captivity" till his death in 1315/1897.

C: Philosophy

The life of al-Afghani corresponded exactly with his thought; in him theory and practice were closely linked. In this respect one might compare his mission in the modern Muslim world with that of Socrates in Hellenic antiquity. His life and thought were both marked by three characteristic traits: a subtle spirituality, a profound religious sense, and a high moral sense that influenced very strongly all his actions.

1. *Spirituality*: This trait manifested itself clearly in his detachment from physical pleasures, in his pursuit of spiritual things, and in his devotion to the ideals to which he had dedicated himself.

As Abbas al-Aqqad has said, Jamal al-Din was opposed to the propaganda made among the Muslims in favour of materialism; with his natural perspicacity he exposed the characteristic traits of materialism. He published a book entitled "The Refutation of the Materialists" (*al-Raddala al-Dahriyyin*). "Sometimes the materialists," says al-Afghani, "proclaim their concern to purify our minds from superstition and to illuminate our intelligence with true knowledge; sometimes they present themselves to us as friends of the poor, protectors of the weak, and defenders of the oppressed.... Whatever the group to which they belong, their action constitutes a formidable shock which will not fail to shake the very foundations of society and destroy the fruits of its labour.... Their words would suppress the noble motives of our hearts; their ideas would poison our souls; and their tentacles would be a continual source of

disturbance for the established order.” Jamal al-Din had denounced the sophism and practices of the partisans of the materialistic interpretation of history before it became well known in Europe.

2. *Religious Sense*: This trait found its expression in almost all of al-Afghani’s writings and is notably manifest in his views about the function of religion in society. “Religion,” he wrote, “is the very substance of nations and the real source of the happiness of man.”

Moreover, true civilization, he held, is that which is based on learning, morality, and religion, and not on material progress such as the building of great cities, the accumulation of great riches, or the perfection of the engines of murder and destruction.

3. *Moral Sense*: His acute moral sense subjected him to the famous accusation that he addressed himself against the imperialistic colonial policy of the Western powers, a policy based upon their intention to exploit the weak. He was of the view that what the Occidentals designate as “colonization” is in reality no other than what is its opposite in meaning, “decolonization,” “depopulation,” and “destruction.”

It was this view that made al-Afghani make a distinction between “the Holy Wars” of Islam, which aimed at the propagation of faith, and the economic wars of Europe, which always ended in the subjugation and enslavement of the vanquished peoples.

He clearly distinguished between “Muslim socialism,” which, according to him, is based on love, reason, and freedom, and material communism,” which is erected on hatred, selfishness, and tyranny.

Al-Afghani was a true Muslim and a rationalist. He appealed to the Muslims of all sects to make use of the principle of rationalism that is a special privilege of Islam. “Of all religions,” he says, “Islam is almost the only one that blames those who believe without having proofs, and rebukes those who follow opinions without having any certainty.... In whatever Islam teaches, it appeals to reason ... and the holy texts proclaim that happiness consists in the right use of reason.”

In the same spirit, al-Afghani advocated the Mutazilite doctrine of free will against fatalism; this latter is an attitude commonly but wrongly attributed to the Muslims by the Western people. According to Jamal al-Din, there is a great difference between the Muslim belief in *al-qada wal-qadar* (predestination) and that in *al-jabr* (fatalism).

Al-qada wal-qadar is a belief that strengthens the faculty of resolution in man, builds up his moral stamina, and inculcates in him courage and endurance. *Al-jabr*, on the other hand, is nothing but an evil innovation (*bidah*) that was introduced maliciously into the Muslim world for political purposes.

D: Political Thought

Al-Afghani made himself the champion of what Western writers call political “Pan-Islamism,” preaching the union of all Islamic peoples under the same Caliphate for the purpose of emancipating themselves

from foreign domination. He used to say that “the European States justify the attacks and humiliations inflicted by them upon the countries of the East on the pretext of the latter’s backwardness.

Nevertheless, the same States try to prevent by all means in their power, even by war, all attempts at reform or renaissance of the Islamic peoples. From all this arises the necessity for the Muslim world to unite in a great defensive alliance, in order to preserve itself against annihilation; to achieve this it must acquire the technique of Western progress and learn the secrets of European power.”

He propounded these ideas in *al-Urwat al-Wuthqa*, under the title “Islamic Unity.” He maintained that Muslims were once united under one glorious empire, and that their achievements in learning and philosophy and all the sciences are still the boast of all Muslims. It is a duty incumbent upon all Muslims to aid in maintaining the authority of Islam and Islamic rule over all Muslim lands, and they are not permitted under any circumstances to make peace with and be conciliatory towards anyone who contends their mastery over their lands, until they obtain complete authority without sharing it with anyone else.

The bonds holding the Muslims together, al-Afghani maintained, began to fall apart when the Abbasid Caliphs became contented with their titular powers ceased to encourage scholars and those trained in religious matters, and stopped the exercise of *ijtihad* (free thinking). He said, “Today we see Muslim rulers giving a free hand too foreigners in managing the affairs of their States and even of their own houses and fastening the yoke of foreign rule upon their own necks. Europeans, greedy for Muslim lands, seek to destroy their religious unity and, thus, take advantage of the inner discords of Muslim countries.”

However, as it has been rightly pointed out, al-Afghani did not intend to substitute religious zeal for national patriotism; he wished the efforts of the Muslim countries to converge independently of one another towards a common goal—political liberation. And it was in order to regenerate Turkey, Persia, India, and Egypt that he worked for the resuscitation of Islam, a religion that exercises such profound influence on the political and social life of those who profess it.

In advocating the defence of one's own country, Jamal al-Din wrote in the *Urwat al-Wuthqa*: “To defend one's homeland is a law of nature and a precept of life bound up with the demands made by nature through the instinctive urges for food and drink.” About traitors he says: “By the term ‘traitor’ we do not refer to the individual who sells his country for money and gives her over to an enemy for a price, whether it be great or small, no price for which one’s country is sold can ever be great; the real traitor is one who is responsible for the enemy's taking one step on his land and who allows the enemy to plant his foot on his country's soil, while he is able to shake it loose. He indeed is the real traitor in whatever guise he may appear. Anyone who is capable of counteracting the enemy in thought or action, and then acquits himself poorly in this, is a traitor.”

He goes on to say: “There is no shame attached to any small and weak nation, if she is vanquished by

the armed might of a nation larger and stronger than she. But the disgrace which the passage of time will not erase, is that the nation, or one of her individuals or a group, should run to put their necks under the enemy's yoke, whether through carelessness in the management of their affairs or out of desire for some temporary benefit, for they become thus the agents of their own destruction.”

The Occidentals, according to al-Afghani, adopt in the East strange methods for suppressing the patriotic spirit, stifling national education, and destroying Oriental culture. Thus, they incite the Orientals to deny every virtue and every value in vogue in their respective countries. They persuade them that there is not, in the Arabic, Persian, or Indian languages, any literature worth mentioning, and that in their history there is not a single glory to report.

They make them to believe that all merit for an Oriental consists in turning away from the understanding of his own language and in feeling proud of the fact that he cannot express himself well in his own language, and in maintaining that all he can attain in human culture resides in the jargon of some Occidental language.

The Orientals, exhorted Jamal al-Din, must understand that there cannot be a sense of being one community in a people who do not have their own language; that there cannot be a language for a people who have no literature of their own; that there can be no glory for a people who have no history of their own; that there cannot be history for a people who have no attachment to the heritage of their country or recognition of the great achievements of their men.

E: Conclusion

Al Afghani died in exile in Istanbul on the 9th of March 1897. His short life had been full of persecutions and vexations which were the natural result either of despotism or of ignorance, but it was a life of heroism, full of noble thoughts and lofty notions, a life which exercised on the succeeding generations of the Muslims a lasting influence which has not been surpassed.

In fact, the secret of his personality and of all his activities was his love of freedom and independence and his antagonism to any oppression whether internal or external.

Self-dignity was the ideal of his life. The Muslims have to set up as a maxim, as they did in the past, the fine principle so well expressed in the verse: “Live in dignity and die in dignity; among the blows of swords and the waving of flags.”

But, unfortunately, the Muslims have for long disregarded this principle. Having accepted a life of submission and servitude, they have fallen so low that others who have adopted their maxim as an ideal of life have been able to attain higher degrees of perfection and glory.

It is now necessary to proceed without delay on a new enterprise aiming to inspire the Muslims with a new spirit and to create a new generation. It is necessary, finally, to form associations of “salvation,” led

by men of faith and sincerity who would swear never to seek favour from the holders of power, never to be deceived by promises, never to flinch before threats, and ever to continue their efforts till they obtain the removal, from positions of authority in their country, of all the timorous hypocrites and charlatans.

More than sixty years have elapsed since the death of al-Afghani, but his illustrious name will rest engraved in all memories and his attractive personality will remain dear to all Muslim hearts. As was pointed out by Mustafa Abd al-Raziq, al-Afghani was in the history of modern Orient the first defender of freedom as he was also its first martyr. Indeed, he is the father of modern renaissance in Islam.

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