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## Islam and Modernity

Perspectives of Jamal ad-Din “al-Afghani” (1838-1897)

According to one account Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani was the “true originator of Liberal religious reform” who “sought to convert the religious intellect of the countries where he preached to the necessity of reconsidering the whole Islamic position, and, instead of clinging on to the past, of making an onwards intellectual movement in harmony with modern knowledge.”<sup>1</sup> This article examines the intellectual interactions on which al-Afghani founded his thought: Islam and modernity are compatible.

The hegemonic claims of western secular modernity are a historical Janus head. On the one side, based on modern discourses on inequality – theories of historical progress/development, capitalism, racism, sexism, and orientalism – the West<sup>2</sup> proclaims itself as the apex of modernity and the teleological outcome of human history, while pushes the non-western world into “the waiting room of history”. This “advance” and its underlining discourses are the core of western colonialization and imperial rule to this day. This power structure is often sustained by westernizing local elites desperately trying to leave “the waiting room”.<sup>3</sup>

On the other side, the modern discourses on equality – natural rights, individual freedoms and representative democracy – strongly appeals to many non-western critical intellectuals as such that they negotiate its meaning in relation to their own indigenous cultural/religious heritage. As a result, these intellectuals develop alternative formulations of modernity that challenge the hegemony of western secular modernity with the honorable aim to strengthen their local societies and resist western imperialism.<sup>4</sup>

This article shines light on the first attempt of this kind in the western Islamic world (Egypt, the Ottoman Empire, Persia and India) from the 1850s

onwards, known as Islamic modernism. The spotlight turns in particular to one of its founders, the Persian intellectual and anti-imperial activist Jamal ad-Din “al-Afghani” (1838-1897)(see image 1).<sup>5</sup> Although his advocacy of pan-Islamism, a form of proto-nationalism, and his influence on twentieth century Islamism and Salafism are often highlighted, al-Afghani’s main objective until the early 1880s was liberal reform. Furthermore, al-Afghani was a restless traveler who, as



Image 1. Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani" witnessed various important historical events that were of great importance in shaping Islamic modernism: the Sepoy rebellion of 1857 in British India; the last phase of the Ottoman reform movement, known as the Tanzimat (1839-1876) during the late 1860s in Istanbul; and the political tensions in Egypt which culminated in the ‘Urabi revolt of 1881-82.<sup>6</sup> Al-Afghani would become an international public figure and, in my opinion, can therefore be considered the best embodiment of Islamic modernism.

### Historical Context

The great geopolitical powers of the nineteenth century – Austria-Hungary, France, Russia, Great Britain and later Germany – centered on the western Islamic world each with their own objectives legitimized by the supposed protection of the rights of (religious) minorities.<sup>7</sup> Despite conservative resistance (the ‘*ulema*, or the religious leaders, and the provincial rulers), this sparked programs of modernization *a la Franca*, or along the western model, by Muslim rulers to resist western encroachment. Although not a homogeneous process, the subsequent intensified diffusion of modern ideas ignited a transformation throughout the western Islamic world: modern secular states with a centralized bureaucracy and conscripted army were developed, a supporting modern educational system was established, the economy was incorporated into the world capitalist structure, modern legal and tax systems were introduced, and modern forms of media emerged. As a result, newly formed socio-political elites arose who made the traditional Islamic-based socio-political order decline.<sup>8</sup>

However, modernization failed to deliver what it promised. The most looming problem could be found in the total costs of the programs, especially economic projects (railroads, paved roads, ports, telegraph lines, markets), new schools, and government offices. These costs exceeded government revenue, even with the introduction of direct taxes, and having outsourced the construction of these projects to western companies, foreign financial debt to western investors increased dramatically. Shortly after, some states went bankrupt and were subjugated to western financial control: Tunisia in 1866, the Ottoman Empire in 1875, and Egypt in 1876. Ironically, the more Muslim states modernized to maintain independence, the more they became dependent on the West, which left them vulnerable to imperial rule.<sup>9</sup>

In response, from the 1860s onwards a growing number of disenchanted Muslim intellectuals throughout the western Islamic world began to criticize modernization for its economic failure, its top-down application which had resulted in an authoritarian state, and its unintended consequence of further western control. In addition, they were convinced that secular state institutions, especially law and education, had caused a shock in the religious consciousness of the Muslim population and had destabilized the religious authority of the state. Influenced by western liberalism, they argued the main weakness of the reforms was the lack of popular approval. To obtain this, the western vocabulary had to be adapted to that of Islam. Thus, instead of blind adoption, these intellectuals were convinced that in order to strengthen the western Islamic world an Islamic basis for modernity was needed.<sup>10</sup> A new discourse was born: Islamic modernism.

At the heart of this discourse lay the strong conviction that reform and reason are an inherent part of Islamic tradition. Muslims worldwide could reform (*islah*) their societies by applying the practice of a rational (re-) interpretation (*ijtihad*) of the principles found in the Islamic sources, the Quran and the Hadith.<sup>11</sup> These principles should be (re-)interpreted in such a manner that they provided guidance in confronting the challenges Muslims encountered in relation to their autonomy and identity due to the impact of modernity in the wake of western imperialism.<sup>12</sup>

This exercise of *ijtihad* resulted in various *interactions* between Islamic and western intellectual thought culminating in a distinct and new formulation of modernity. Focusing on al-Afghani, this article discusses three main interactions: Islamic philosophy and modern science; Islamic and western political thought; and the philosophical utility of Islamic orthodoxy and the theory of civilization of François Guizot (1787-1874). In formulating

his views, al-Afghani challenged three dominant positions within the western Islamic world: modernity as uniquely western; Islamic orthodoxy as the only way to obtain knowledge; and the legitimacy of western imperialism and the enabling authoritarian Muslim states. Because of his tactical use of the written and spoken word, al-Afghani is characterized by ambivalence towards these dominant positions. However, a deeper understanding of his intellectual endeavor can provide more insight in al-Afghani's thought.

### Interaction One: Islamic Philosophy and Modern Science

As a Persian, al-Afghani was raised and educated in the Twelver Shia religious tradition, which was traditionally more tolerant towards heterodox traditions, such as Islamic philosophy.<sup>13</sup> Although far more complex, the Mu'tazili school (roughly eight to tenth century) basically maintained the belief in reason and demonstrative proof as a way to explain humankind and the universe. Based on ancient Greek philosophy, their challenge was, however, to reconcile this with a scriptural revelation. The Mu'tazalites argued that the Islamic sources, especially the Quran, provided positive instructions for reason and demonstrative proof. They even went so far as to claim that when the Quran contradicted this, it had to be reinterpreted by exercising *ijtihad*.<sup>14</sup>

Scholars agree that al-Afghani encountered modern science for the first time around 1855 in India, where he continued his education.<sup>15</sup> Nikkie R. Keddie, author of the political biography of al-Afghani, provides an account of Salim al-'Anhuri, who claimed that al-Afghani began to hold an evolutionary view of religion meaning the objects which humans worshipped "corresponded with the stage of his intellectual progress."<sup>16</sup> The highest stage of worship was the belief in natural laws which led to the conviction that all other beliefs had "no truth and no definition."<sup>17</sup> However, it is unlikely that modern science invoked this view altogether since this encounter was less "traumatic" and "fundamental" for al-Afghani than it would have been for an orthodox schooled Muslim due to his philosophical background.<sup>18</sup> Thus, his time in India probably contributed to, or maybe even strengthened, his already skeptical ideas on religion.

After travelling for some years, al-Afghani arrived in 1869 in Istanbul, the heart of the Tanzimat. Mainly concerned with the need for Muslims to adopt modern science, he acquainted himself with reform-minded men in the field of modern education and subsequently became involved with the newly opened university of Istanbul, the Darülfünun-i Osmani. However, in

this atmosphere of growing criticism of modernization, educational reformers felt the need to provide their project with an Islamic basis.<sup>19</sup> They considered al-Afghani as an Islamic scholar, or ‘*alim*, who – already dressed in a gown and a Turkish turban – was able to help them by adopting the role of what historian Niyazi Berkes calls “pseudo-ulema”.<sup>20</sup>

As “a man of excellence and perfection from Afghanistan”, al-Afghani gave a lecture titled *The Progress of Sciences and Arts*, in which he boldly equated philosophy and prophecy as sources of knowledge, calling them the two highest crafts. Referring to prophecy as a craft and putting philosophy at the same level of importance, he implied that philosophy was a legitimate alternative source of knowledge.<sup>21</sup> Considered heretical in orthodox Sunni Islam, the Ottoman ‘*ulema* used it as a pretext to make a move on the university: al-Afghani was expelled and a year later the university was closed.<sup>22</sup> Although some educational reformers held even more extreme views than he did, it was al-Afghani who, for the first time, underpinned modern science with an Islamic basis and simultaneously challenged Islamic orthodoxy in public.<sup>23</sup>

Al-Afghani’s novelty was extending Islamic philosophy to include modern science. He expressed this in more detail in his *Lecture on Teaching and Learning*. There is no doubt that al-Afghani held modern science in high regard. However, by invoking Islamic philosophy, he insisted that the ways to acquire scientific knowledge, reason and demonstrative proof, were not uniquely western since they were also traditional elements of Islam. In fact, they were universal because, according to al-Afghani, science “has no connection with any nation, and is not distinguished by anything than itself.” The West was not innately stronger than the western Islamic world, rather every dominant power owed its strength to its application of scientific knowledge since “there was, is, and will be no ruler in the world but science.” In relation to religion al-Afghani remarked, whereby he challenged Islamic orthodoxy as the only way to obtain knowledge, that Islam “is the closest of religions to science and knowledge, and that there is no incompatibility between science and knowledge and the foundations of the Islamic faith.”<sup>24</sup>

### Interaction Two: Islamic and Modern Political Thought

Al-Afghani witnessed in India an Hindu-Muslim rebellion against Great-Britain in 1857, known as the Sepoy Rebellion. Some of the Muslim leaders were influenced by earlier reform movements whom promoted a return to early Islam. Despite a lack of evidence that al-Afghani had any contact with

these leaders, it could be that his later emphasis on a return to early Islam and his lifelong aversion against the British originated here.<sup>25</sup>

In the early 1870s, when al-Afghani resided in Istanbul, the ideas of the Young Ottomans, critical towards the Ottoman Tanzimat, gained political weight. In their line of reasoning, exercising *ijtihad*, for example, the Quranic text “So Pardon (your brothers) ... and take counsel with them in affair”(Q.3:153) and the Hadith “difference of opinion within my community is an act of divine mercy” were (re-)interpreted to mean constitutional government and representative democracy respectively.<sup>26</sup>

In addition, Islamic concepts were reconciled with liberal ideas: *ijtihad* itself was (re-)interpreted as freedom of thought; both *umma* (the Islamic community) and *milla* (people) with nation; *shura* (mutual consultation) with parliamentary democracy; *ijma* (consensus) with public opinion; *ahl al-hall wa al-‘agd* (prominent individuals in a society) with elected representatives, and so on.<sup>27</sup> According to historian Anthony Black it were the Young Ottomans, rather than al-Afghani, who broke the door of *ijtihad* wide open and “became the first true Islamic modernists.”<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, Berkes states that al-Afghani was “perhaps the best international representative.”<sup>29</sup>

After his expulsion from Istanbul, al-Afghani arrived in Egypt in 1871, where he acted as such a representative. Similar effects of top-down modernization – economic failure, an authoritarian state, increasing financial debt, further western control and diminishing religious authority – in nineteenth century Egypt sparked large-scale disenchantment among young Arab intellectuals in 1870s. They too were convinced it was time for an Islamic-based ideology which promoted liberal reforms to strengthen Egypt.<sup>30</sup> They were attracted to al-Afghani as an informal teacher, partly because of his personal charisma, but mainly because of his extensive knowledge of both Islamic and western intellectual thought. The most prominent among them was the later Grand Mufti of Egypt, Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905).<sup>31</sup>

To express their ideas and discuss political issues al-Afghani encouraged them to set up newspapers, a medium which gained popularity in the Islamic world during the nineteenth century and contributed to a growing public opinion among Muslims. Therefore, al-Afghani decided to become a more visible public figure in 1877.<sup>32</sup> In an article, “Despotic Government”, which appeared in *Misr* on February 15th, 1879, al-Afghani discussed various forms of government, including Enlightened Government, republican government, and constitutional government.<sup>33</sup> However, al-Afghani

considered practice more important than theory.<sup>34</sup> Thus, to understand al-Afghani's political views, the supposed actions of all three forms of government need to be examined.

In accordance with Islamic philosophy, al-Afghani argued that the "wise leaders" of the Enlightened Government were comparable to a "provident and discerning father" who does everything to prepare "the conditions which will ensure the happiness of his children". This meant the establishment of well organized schools, in which "the true beneficial sciences and the useful arts" can be educated, the provision of the necessary tools and machinery to engage in agriculture and industry, and the facilitation of the means for communication in commerce.<sup>35</sup>

The Enlightenment Government's legitimacy was only maintained through "a just[system]of law", achieved via "a policy based on justice and equity", and needed to be safeguarded by custodians, notaries, scholars, judges, rulers and their agents. Since the happiness and well-being of the people and the prosperity and independence of the country was only preserved via political relations and commercial ties with other countries, the above mentioned men "are to be schooled and experienced in administration, discerning events before their occurrence, and familiar with commercial affairs."<sup>36</sup> In practice, these men thus had to levy equitable taxes, spent this on the public good and establish a fighting force in order to repulse foreign enemies. To do so, they needed to "weigh all their deeds, actions and movements and constantly appraise their views and morals."<sup>37</sup>

In relation to the republican government al-Afghani stated in "Despotic Government" that when "Easterners" will discuss this form of government, they will "reveal its true nature, its merits, the happiness of those who have achieved it, and the fact that those governed by it enjoy a higher state and loftier position than other members of the human race." And constitutional government "would set forth its beneficial results and show how those governed by it have been aroused by [their] original human nature and stimulated to emerge from the lowly estate of animality, to ascend to the highest degree of perfection and to cast of the burdens which despotic government lays upon them."<sup>38</sup> In a speech he gave in Alexandria, published in *Misr* on May 24th, 1879, al-Afghani encouraged his audience to support parliamentary rule in Egypt by saying "I hope you will support the cause of the fatherland and will strengthen its parliamentary rule, through which the cause of justice and equity may be established, and you may no longer need any foreign protection."<sup>39</sup>

Comparing al-Afghani's descriptions of these three forms of government, we find several similarities: the obligation to ensure happiness and well-being of the people; stimulate people to achieve the highest degree of perfection; maintain the rule of law, or justice; to be based on a policy of equity; and the ability to confront foreign enemies. In comparison, we find that al-Afghani's appreciation of modern political thought was probably due to their familiarity with Islamic political thought. However, he did not equate them and deemed republicanism and constitutionalism as the best, thus stressing the importance of representative democracy.<sup>40</sup>

With his advocacy for liberal reform grounded in Islamic political thought, al-Afghani continued to challenge modernity as uniquely western, but simultaneously challenged the legitimacy of western imperialism and the authoritarian Muslim states. As a result, al-Afghani was expelled in 1879 by the newly British-backed Egyptian Khedive Taufiq (1879-1892). Nonetheless, his agitation had contributed to the 'Urabi revolt (1879-1882), in which Egyptian military units and nationalists tried to dispose Taufiq and end western domination. The revolt failed in 1882, after a bombardment of Alexandria by the British, and Egypt subsequently became a British protectorate. The constitutional movement in Egypt, which had pressed Khedive Ismail (1863-1879) to create the first Consultative Council of Deputies in 1866<sup>41</sup> and which al-Afghani had tried to strengthen in 1870s, lost momentum with the end of the 'Urabi revolt.<sup>42</sup> In Istanbul, the Young Ottomans gained political success when in 1876 the Ottoman constitution and the first Parliament came into effect. A defiant Abdül Hamid II (1876-1908) quickly pushed back these gains in 1878 to strengthen his authoritarian rule.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, al-Afghani would support the Ottoman sultan in the 1880s and 90s.

### Interaction Three: The Philosophical Utility of Islamic Orthodoxy and Modern Civilization

The turmoil in Egypt and Istanbul was part of broader geopolitical developments. The increasing instability of the Ottoman Empire – national and religious tensions in the Balkans and Russian advancement in Central-Asia culminating in the Ottoman-Russian war of 1878 – formed the risk of destabilizing the entire balance of power in the region. It was safeguarded by the Treaty of Berlin (1878), but at the cost of an even more humiliated and weakened Ottoman Empire.<sup>44</sup> This sparked a growing urgency among



Muslim intellectuals towards solidarity and unity between the Islamic people to resist imperialism, known as pan-Islamism. Although al-Afghani kept stressing the need for reform, his first priority in the 1880s and 1890s became the unification of the Islamic world as well.<sup>45</sup>

Al-Afghani returned to India, where he in 1881 wrote his first and major defense of Islam, “The Refutation of the Materialists”, with the aim to unite the Muslim masses. However, two year later in France, al-Afghani wrote his “Reply to Renan”, directed at a European intellectual elite, in which he condemned Islam as being hostile to science and in constant struggle over domination with philosophy.<sup>46</sup> It goes without saying that al-Afghani held an ambivalent position towards Islam.<sup>47</sup>

Historian Margaret Kohn argues that in order to achieve a deeper understanding of this ambivalence, al-Afghani’s concept of civilizational progress is crucial.<sup>48</sup> In this light, “The Refutation of the Materialists” was the fruit of an intellectual interaction between the philosophical utility of Islamic orthodoxy and the theory of civilization of French historian and politician François Guizot (1787-1874). As a result, al-Afghani pushed the utility of Islamic orthodoxy in a “novel” and “distinctly modern” direction.<sup>49</sup> According to historian Albert Hourani, “it is through al-Afghani above all that it [the modern idea of civilization] reaches the Islamic world.”<sup>50</sup>

Al-Afghani’s ambivalence towards Islam is first and foremost a result of the Islamic philosophical distinction between the intellectual capacity of the elite and the masses: the former was capable of understanding a rational interpretation of Islam, the latter was not. The masses needed Islamic orthodoxy instead, stressing unity of God, a Day of Judgment and an Afterlife, to ensure their loyalty to the community and the morality in their actions. Practically, it enabled one to adjust its argument to the intellect of the respective audience.<sup>51</sup> As we have seen above, al-Afghani applied this as well. François Guizot’s *The History of Civilization in Europe* (1828), translated into Arabic in 1877, stressed the importance of religion in stimulating morality and intellectual development, which were according to him the foundations of civilizational progress. He argued that the Christian clergy in Europe maintained the practice of science in the Dark Ages, Christian theology encouraged people to behave morally and the autonomy of the Catholic Church resulted in the separation of powers.<sup>52</sup> In “The Refutation of the Materialists” al-Afghani also emphasized religion as a driving force for civilizational progress.

Al-Afghani argued that Islamic orthodoxy produced three beliefs and

three qualities which instilled morality into people's actions and produced incentives for intellectual development. In relation to morality, the third belief maintained "man has come into this world in order to acquire accomplishments worthy of transferring him to a world more excellent, higher, vaster and more perfect than this narrow and dark world that really deserves the name of the Abode of Sorrows." This belief would refrain people from dishonest and deceitful behavior and thus instilled "refined morals". The first quality, shame, prevented people from acting in ways that would "cause foulness and disgrace". Shame was essential because it instilled in humans the need to be faithful to their words and deeds, it was the source of pride and zeal and encouraged humans to be virtuous. "It thus becomes clear that this quality has been and is the basis of all virtues and excellence, the motive force of all progress", al-Afghani stated.<sup>53</sup>

The best incentives for intellectual development were the first and second belief. The first belief entailed that "there is a terrestrial angel (man), and that he is the noblest of creatures" and the second belief underlined "the certainty that his community is the noblest one and that all outside his community are in error and deviation." Al-Afghani argued that these beliefs led to "rivalry and competition with other communities in the arena of virtues", to the quest of being "superior to and above all other communities in all human virtues, whether intellectual, spiritual or material", and therefore encouraged people "to compete in civilization."<sup>54</sup> And of course, in competition with western civilization, "Above all it [Islam] will be the cause of material and moral progress. It will elevate the banner of civilization among its followers."<sup>55</sup>

However, "The Refutation of the Materialists" was much more than merely a defense of Islam. It stressed the need for reform as well. Both Guizot and al-Afghani were convinced that religion, if left unchecked, would eventually stifle civilizational progress. Guizot argued that the Catholic Church was in general hostile to freedom of action and thought but was checked by the inherent human quest for freedom and the inherited Roman political institutions. It were, in fact, the tensions between these forces that created the conditions for progress. However, Guizot maintained the view that if it was not for the Protestant Reformation, or a return to the religious origins, the Catholic Church would have stifled civilizational progress even further and thus have prevented the Enlightenment.<sup>56</sup>

In "The Refutation of the Materialists" al-Afghani made the same argument about the Reformation and even referred to Guizot's work by quoting "One of the greatest causes for European civilization was that a

group appeared, saying: 'Although our religion is the Christian religion, we are seeking the proofs of the fundamentals of our beliefs.'<sup>57</sup> Al-Afghani even argued that Martin Luther had followed the example of his philosophical ideal of Islam by rejecting the mere imitation (*taqlid*) of the Catholic Priests and had exercised a Christian form of *ijtihad*.<sup>58</sup>

Many scholars agree that in analogy of the Protestant Reformation, al-Afghani argued for a return to the Islamic origins to reset the Islamic world towards its path of civilizational progress. And that, in line with Guizot, the tensions between Islamic orthodoxy and philosophy stimulated this progress.<sup>59</sup> With his concept of civilizational progress al-Afghani complemented his liberal inspiration for reform with a religious one. According to historian Henry Laurens, this entailed a gradual shift from Islamizing reforms to reforming Islam.<sup>60</sup> If al-Afghani considered himself to be an Islamic Martin Luther as well is more questionable. According to Keddie, there is evidence for this claim,<sup>61</sup> although Kohn argues "this is only true in the most general sense that he hoped to foment an Islamic Reformation."<sup>62</sup> Historian Christopher de Bellaigue argues that the nineteenth century western Islamic world in fact did undergo "a Reformation, an Enlightenment and an Industrial Revolution all at once."<sup>63</sup> In any case, it is a deeper understanding of al-Afghani's concept of civilizational progress which provides more insight in his ambivalence towards Islam.

Not a great admirer of Abdül Hamid, al-Afghani regarded the Ottoman sultan – as the Caliph and one of the few independent Muslim rulers left – the most suitable leader for the pan-Islamic movement. In his last days in Egypt al-Afghani sent him a letter requesting him to take up this leadership position and offered to be his representative in India and Central Asia. It would take more than a decade though – during which al-Afghani was highly productive publishing articles and plotting political schemes in India, Europe, Russia and Persia – before Abdül Hamid invited him to Istanbul in 1892.<sup>64</sup> However, instead of being a political top adviser, the sultan only used al-Afghani to write letters to Shia religious leaders in Persia convincing them to support his pan-Islamic claims. Confined as a virtual prisoner, al-Afghani was nonetheless able to encircle himself with intellectuals of any kind, who came to seek his advice. As one his last political schemes he encouraged Mirza Riza to assassinate the Persian Shah, Nasser al-Din in 1896 at a shrine near Tehran.<sup>65</sup>

In one of his last letters, al-Afghani expressed his regrets for supporting Abdül Hamid instead of pursuing his dreams of reform. He wrote: "Would

that I had sown all the seed of my ideas [on reform] in the receptive ground of the people's thoughts! Well would it have been had I not wasted this fruitful and beneficent seed of mine in the salt and sterile soil of that effete Sovereignty!"<sup>66</sup> At the end of his life, al-Afghani grew bitter. Lamenting on the cause of the "measureless decline" of the western Islamic world, he could not provide an answer except that "God changes not what is in a people, until they change what is in themselves."<sup>67</sup> In 1897 al-Afghani died of cancer of the chin in Istanbul. After his death he was considered as a national figure both in Afghanistan and Iran (see image 2).



Image 2. Post stamps of al-Afghani after his death

### Conclusion: A Note on Historiography

Western historiography has been dominated by the hegemonic claims of secular modernity as well. As stated in the introduction, the West had appointed itself as the apex of modernity, which the non-western world theoretically only could reach by adopting the western trajectory towards modernity. While observing the history of the modern western Islamic world, some influential historians drew a very stubborn and long-lasting conclusion: the western Islamic world has failed to successfully go down the trajectory towards modernity set forth by the West. Therefore something has gone wrong.

Asking the question "What went wrong?" – which the recently deceased Orientalist Bernard Lewis (1916-2018) popularized after 9/11,<sup>68</sup> but dates back to the 1950s – is, however, very problematic. According to historian Richard Bulliet this question "stands history on its head" because it implies

a comparative perspective and thus assumes that there is a western model to which the western Islamic world needs to be compared. To subsequently suggest that it had fallen out of course and failed to follow the “road map” towards modernity is “erroneous” for the simple fact that such a road map never existed. Bulliet argues with confidence that this because “no one in Europe and North America knew where the ship they were sailing on was heading.”<sup>69</sup>

In Lewis’ Eurocentric perspective – based on the idea that modernization leads to secularization – the persistence of Islam as an important factor in contemporary Muslim societies is what went wrong. Bulliet, asking rather “What went on?”, offers an alternative perspective. What went on was that modernization did lead to a diminishing role of Islam in the western Islamic world, but subsequently resulted in tyranny. He argues that it is the historical role of Islam, in particular the Islamic law (*sharia*), as defender of (legal) justice in the face of increasing tyranny in traditional Islamic political culture, that amounts to the important role Islam continue to play in resisting modern tyrannical dictators, royal houses and western imperialists.<sup>70</sup>

This leaves me wondering what – if he would be alive today – al-Afghani would have answered to both questions. Because of his ambivalent position towards Islam, I think, al-Afghani would probably have found common ground in both Lewis’ and Bulliet’s perspective. According to al-Afghani, Islam, however rightly interpreted, contained – both scientific and morally – everything the modern West had to offer. However, it was its development that had been curtailed by the dominance of orthodoxy. I believe that, on the one hand, al-Afghani therefore would still have rejected the literalist interpretation of today’s orthodoxy and Salafism – both violent and non-violent – as the only way forward for the western Islamic world. On the other hand, Islam provided the ingredients for morality, unity and intellectual development. Thus, al-Afghani would agree with Bulliet that Islam in all its modern formulations remains a powerful counterforce to resist tyrannical dictators, royal houses and western imperialists.

Al-Afghani’s formulation of modernity did not, unlike Lewis, reject religion altogether as an obstacle to modernity. Rather, his intellectual endeavor resulted in a new and distinct formulation in which “there is no incompatibility between science and knowledge and the foundations of the Islamic faith.” Thus, instead of a singular western path, we find an alternative Islamic path towards modernity or what the late sociologist S.N. Eisenstadt (1923-2010) has defined as “multiple modernities.”<sup>71</sup>

## Noten

1. Nikki R. Keddie provides an account of Muhammed Khalil, a disciple of al-Afghani. Nikkie R. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani": A Political Biography* (Los Angeles: Near Eastern Center University of California, 1972), 126.
2. Instead of a geographical area (the western part of the world), the West is commonly considered to have originated in Enlightenment Europe and from there expanded throughout what is now known as the US, Canada, Australia and New-Zealand. In the nineteenth century context it refers mainly to Western Europe.
3. Siep Stuurman, *De uitvinding van de mensheid: korte wereldgeschiedenis van het denken over gelijkheid en cultuurverschil* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2009), 249-253.
4. S.N. Eisenstadt, *Multiple Modernities: A Paradigm of Cultural and Social Evolution* (Frankfurt am Main: Preyer, 2007), 20-24.
5. Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani claimed to be a Sunni Afghan, hence the name "al-Afghani". However, historical research has shown that he was in fact a Shia Muslim born in Persia. He made this claim when he arrived in Istanbul in 1869 and it was spread by his disciples afterwards. He did this in accordance with the practice of *taqiyya*, or precautionary dissimulation of one's true beliefs, which Shi'ism, as a persecuted minority, legitimized. In this it was of course for al-Afghani, as a Sunni, much easier to travel through Arab and Turkish lands and to engage within their intellectual circles. Nikkie R. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani"* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), 5-9; Gerard Bowering, ed., *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 18.; Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1789-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 108.; Pankaj Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire: The Revolt Against the West and Remaking of Asia* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 53.
6. Nikki R. Keddie, "Pan-Islam as Proto-Nationalism," *The Journal of Modern History* 41.1 (March 1969), 26.; Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire*, 54-56. Christopher de Bellaigue, *The Islamic Enlightenment: The Modern Struggle between Faith and Reason* (London: The Bodley Head, 2017), 203-210.
7. Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: A History* (London: The Penguin Group, 2012), 111.
8. In India, due to the decline of Mughal power and the subsequent outbreak of conflicts between local rulers, the British East India Company was able to subdue all the major Indian states by the 1820s. In this way, it removed the institutional barriers and thus facilitated the influx of modern ideas. In Egypt and the Ottoman Empire, Muslim rulers became convinced that in order to resist French, British and Russian encroachment, they had to initiate change by modernizing along the western model. Thus, in these cases the state itself facilitated the diffusion of modern ideas. In Iran, despite the growing domination of its domestic market by the British and the Russians, the diffusion of modern ideas was slow due to the tight grip on society by the Shia establishment. John Tolan, Gilles Veinstein and Henry Laurens, *Europe and the*

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9. Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire*, 53. Şükürü M. Hanjoğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008), 103-104 Rogan, *The Arabs*, 127 and 130-131.
  10. Tolan, Veinstein and Laurens. *Europe and the Islamic World*, 313.
  11. The Hadith are the sayings and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad.
  12. Moaddel, *Islamic Modernism, Nationalism, and Fundamentalism*, 2-3 and 7 Tolan, Veinstein and Laurens. *Europe and the Islamic World*, 310-312.
  13. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, 8 and 41-42.
  14. Ibidem, 21-32 and 48.
  15. Ibidem, 11 Antony Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought: From the Prophet to the Present* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), 302 Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 108. Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire*, 53.
  16. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, 13.
  17. Ibidem, 14.
  18. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani"*, 29.
  19. Ibidem, 41.
  20. Ibidem, 61-62. In a footnote Keddie provides an excerpt of a private letter from Professor Niyazi Berkes in which he elaborates on the role of al-Afghani as an 'alim.
  21. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani"*, 70-72.
  22. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani"*, 77-79.; Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (London: Hurst & Company, 1964), 185.; Hanjoğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 102.
  23. Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey*, 184. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani"*, 79.
  24. Al-Afghani, "Lecture on teaching and learning", 107.
  25. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, 11-12 and 48. Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought*, 301.; Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire*, 37 and 56-57.
  26. Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought*, 293.
  27. Youssef M. Choueiri, *Islamic Fundamentalism* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1990), 34.; Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought*, 293.
  28. Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought*, 294.
  29. Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey*, 222.
  30. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, 18.
  31. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani"*, 86.
  32. Ibidem, 95. Several other Arab intellectuals preceded al-Afghani, most prominent the Egyptian translator and teacher, Rifa'a al-Tahtawi (1801-1873), and the Tunisian politician and writer, Khayr al-Din al-Tunsi (1820-1890), in expressing Islamic modernists ideas.
  33. The article "Despotic Government" of al-Afghani is translated in L.M. Kenny, "Al-

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9. Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire*, 53. Şükürü M. Hanjoğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008), 103-104 Rogan, *The Arabs*, 127 and 130-131.
  10. Tolan, Veinstein and Laurens. *Europe and the Islamic World*, 313.
  11. The Hadith are the sayings and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad.
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  13. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, 8 and 41-42.
  14. Ibidem, 21-32 and 48.
  15. Ibidem, 11 Antony Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought: From the Prophet to the Present* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), 302 Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 108. Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire*, 53.
  16. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, 13.
  17. Ibidem, 14.
  18. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani"*, 29.
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  21. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani"*, 70-72.
  22. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani"*, 77-79.; Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (London: Hurst & Company, 1964), 185.; Hanjoğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, 102.
  23. Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey*, 184. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani"*, 79.
  24. Al-Afghani, "Lecture on teaching and learning", 107.
  25. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, 11-12 and 48. Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought*, 301.; Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire*, 37 and 56-57.
  26. Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought*, 293.
  27. Youssef M. Choueiri, *Islamic Fundamentalism* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1990), 34.; Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought*, 293.
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  29. Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey*, 222.
  30. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, 18.
  31. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani"*, 86.
  32. Ibidem, 95. Several other Arab intellectuals preceded al-Afghani, most prominent the Egyptian translator and teacher, Rifa'a al-Tahtawi (1801-1873), and the Tunisian politician and writer, Khayr al-Din al-Tunsi (1820-1890), in expressing Islamic modernists ideas.
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34. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din “al-Afghani”*, 108.
  35. Al-Afghani, “Despotic Government”, 25.
  36. *Ibidem*, 26.
  37. *Ibidem*, 25-27.
  38. *Ibidem*, 21.
  39. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din “al-Afghani”*, 110.
  40. *Ibidem*, 108.; Kenny, “Al-Afghani on Types of Despotic Government”, 19.
  41. Rogan, *The Arabs*, 128-129.
  42. De Bellaigue, *The Islamic Enlightenment*, 209-216.
  43. Rogan, *The Arabs*, 129.
  44. Tolan, Veinstein and Laurens, *Europe and the Islamic World*, 316-321.
  45. Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire*, 88-89.; Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, 40.
  46. Al-Afghani, “Reply to Renan”, in: Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, 187.
  47. This ambivalence caused much academic debate: Ellie Kedourie argues al-Afghani was irreligious and only used Islam to gain more influence and advance his career. Hisham Sharabi concludes this incoherence was an inherent part of Islamic modernism because it lacked systematic expression in general. With more nuance, Keddie argues al-Afghani’s condemnation of Islam meant the prevailing Islamic orthodoxy of his day and, in contrast, in his defense portrayed his philosophical interpretation of Islam. Margaret Kohn agrees, however, it provides no sufficient explanation. She argues to understand this ambivalence al-Afghani’s concept of civilizational progress is crucial. Ellie Kedourie, *Afghani and ‘Abduh: An Essay on Religious Unbelief and Political Activism in Modern Islam*. (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1966), 45.; Hisham Sharabi, *Arab Intellectuals and the West: The Formative Years, 1875-1914*. (London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), 24-52.; Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, 38 and 89.
  48. Margaret Kohn, “Afghani on Empire, Islam, and Civilization”, *Political Theory*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (June 2009), 408-409.
  49. *Ibidem*, 403.
  50. Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 114.
  51. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, 38.
  52. Kohn, “Afghani on Empire, Islam, and Civilization.”, 411.
  53. Al-Afghani, “The Refutation of Materialists”, 141-145.
  54. *Ibidem*, 143.
  55. Al-Afghani, “The Refutation of Materialists”, 171.
  56. Kohn, “Afghani on Empire, Islam, and Civilization”, 413.
  57. Al -Afghani, “The Refutation of Materialists”, 172.
  58. Kohn, “Afghani on Empire, Islam, and Civilization”, 403.
  59. Tolan, Veinstein and Laurens, *Europe and the Islamic World*, 312.; Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din “al-Afghani”*, 95.; Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 114-115.; De Bellaigue, *The Islamic Enlightenment*, 207.

60. Tolan, Veinstein and Laurens, *Europe and the Islamic World*, 311-314.
61. Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani"*, 95.
62. Kohn, "Afghani on Empire, Islam, and Civilization", 413.
63. De Bellaigue, *The Islamic Enlightenment*, xvi.
64. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, 21-30.
65. *Ibidem*, 30-32.
66. *Ibidem*, 40.; Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire*, 123.
67. Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire*, 115.
68. Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Responses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)
69. Richard Bulliet, *The Case for Islamo-Christian Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 49.
70. *Ibidem*, 90-93.
71. S.N. Eisenstadt, *Multiple Modernities: A Paradigma of Cultural and Social Evolution*, 20-24.
72. See Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Umma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004)