ISSN 2412-9771 (Print)
ISSN 2412-897X (Online

Scholars Bulletin
(A Multidisciplinary Journal)



Scholars Middle East Publishers
Dubai, United Arab Emirates
Website: http://scholarsmepub.com

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A Multidisciplinary Monthly Journal

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Scholars Bulletin-A Multidisciplinary Monthly Journal.
ISSN 2412-897X (online), ISSN 2412-9771 (Print)

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Scholars Bulletin
(A Multidisciplinary Journal)
An Official Publication of "Scholars Middle East Publishers",
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Website: http://scholarsbulletin.com/

ISSN 2412-9771 (Print)
ISSN 2412-897X (Online)

A Search of Alternative Modernity by Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani

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Abstract: We are going through a time period in which scholars have been developing different modernity discourses. For example, one can readily see how modernity was formed as a discourse by the thinkers of "the West". That is why several scholars from "the rest" of world have always criticized the Western single path to modernity. Without a doubt, Sayyid Jamal al-Din al Afghani was one of the leading figures of his time criticizing West-centric modernity discourse in his works. However, one should be careful about the conditions of his time, worldview, interest, and demand. That is because there is always a risk of misunderstanding if one isolates a scholar from his or her maturing social conditions. Therefore, this article is going to examine a possibility of alternative modernity searched by Sayyid Jamal al-Din al Afghani by focusing on his major works and the social context from which he run his studies.

Keywords: Modernity, Alternative Modernity, Pan-Arabism, Pan-Islamism, and Westernization.

INTRODUCTION

This study does not aim at ending the debates about the birth place, nationality and religious sect of Sayyid Jamal al-Din al Afghani. Instead, it will focus on his alternative modern Islamic responses to the dominant West-oriented modernist discourse. That is because he is one of the first scholars developing a modern Islamic discourse to respond the consequences of west-oriented modernity in the Islamic World. He believed that it is possible to develop alternative modernity by referring to original sources, Quran and Sunnah, instead of following a different Western path to modernity. As it is well known, these fundamental sources have not been changed by any peaceful Islamic movements yet. Therefore, although the reaction to modernity has been changed from scholar to scholar, the original sources have still kept their center position. So, what makes al-Afghani important is his first trial in keeping this goal while responding West-oriented modernity in a political language. It was nothing than this political standing giving him an additional power among the scholars of his time.

"What does lead al-Afghani to draw a new horizon?" and "Which historical condition helped his new vision to mature?" are important questions to be answered. I strongly believe that the answers to these questions are going to provide some clues for the questions asked by al-Afghani and his successors. Therefore, this study will provide a way to understand the differences in his religious understanding contemplating modernity.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The history of human being went into a new process or project with certain development in the Western World. Scholars name this process or project as modernity spreading all around the world with different practices after building its agents known as nation-state, economy, and mass media. In other word, our planet was turned into a "global village" by these widespread political, economic and cultural apparatuses of modernity.

The traditional social order and local ties declined with modernity. In particular, Eastern countries are facing many difficulties in adaptation to modernity due to their traditional structures. In fact, since West-oriented modernity was built as a discourse, there is an inclination to apply it from above [1].That is why al-Afghani tried to develop an alternative modernity from below by making the residents of the Islamic World active.

There has always been a hot debate about social change in the Eastern societies in two different ways either following Western path or reviving core texts of Islamic thought. Both of them are for answering "What should be done?" In the former category, Westernization and secularization are inevitable process to follow, whereas there is a belief in the possibility of non-western modernity in the latter one. However, the latter argument was still criticized with the idea of whether or not it borrowed its ideas from the West. Therefore, it is argued that it opens a new way of Western hegemony paradoxically[2].

The decline in the power of the Islamic societies affected Islamic scholars to work on some solutions. That is because it was urgent to find rooted solutions to the pouring problems. The first thing to do was to activate passivated Islamic societies. The role of al-Afghani can be displayed in this context because he is a critical figure trying to unite Islamic societies and developing Islamic thought. Therefore, it will be better to know his ideas and examine what he tried to do differently from the scholars of his time.

THE QUESTIONS ASKED BY AL-AFGHANI AND THE FUNDAMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS OF HIS THOUGHT

There were many questions asked by al-Afghani as well as other Islamic scholars. Some of them can be listed as follows: Why did Islamic society recede? Is there any way to revive again?, Who or What were responsible for the historical defeat?, etc. One can readily give al-Afghani's answer to all these questions as the deviation from Islam[3]. Therefore, one can also simply argue that al-Afghani see the liberation of Islamic societies in the revitalizing of basic Islamic texts.

Some studies of al-Afghani give an idea about his thought. The journal called *al-Urwa al-Wuthqa* (The Firmest Grip) is one of his famous pioneering Islamic works. I was published in 1883 by him and his student, Muhammad Abduh, in Paris. It affected entire Eastern countries, especially Islamic societies by its first issue [4]. The journal brought many issues of Eastern world on the table. In particular, a peaceful resistance to the Imperial attempts was strongly criticized. That is why some scholars associated him with different poles of imperial movement due to his changing political position in respect to benefits of Islamic societies[5].

The notion of pan-Islamism was strongly mentioned in the several issues of *al-Urwa al-Wuthqa.* Therefore, he looked for the reasons of Islamic layover after the historical developments. They can be listed as follows: (1) The diminishing of religious leadership, (2) The decline in religious and local ties, (3) The spread of fake believe systems, (4) The rise of completely fatalistic (cebr) understanding, (5) The trickle of mixing different religious believes in spite of holy books, (6) Historical damage of Mongols and Crusades and (7) The separation of *'ılm* (theory/knowledge)from *'amal* (action) even among Islamic scholars [6]. Furthermore, *al-Urwa al-Wuthqa* focused on the strong states in the Islamic World. Therefore, it suggested them to develop in a better way. In general, al-Afghani believed the internal power of the Islamic countries. That is why he mentioned their potentials in each issue of the journal. However, he accepted non-use of these potential powers due to Western hegemony.

If a society uses its potential, it will be more stable whether it is religious or not. In fact, language is a basic element to be a stable society. Therefore, al-Afghani stated if the Ottoman Empire accepted Arabic as its official language, it would be possible to be a more strong state of its time[7].

Al-Afghani's critic of Ernest Renan gives another clue about his thought. He strongly opposed the idea of Renan about incapability of Arab in developing philosophy. What al-Afghani said as response is that it is not about Islam or Arab only to be against philosophy, but also all religions reject the human-made evidences of pure reason, science and philosophy. Also, he argued that even a sort of science and philosophy were developed by Arabs first in the past but on the basis of Islamic thought and then they were improved by the West on the basis of pure reason[8].

The last work in which one can find the characteristic of al-Afghani's thought is *El-Reddale'l-Dehriyyin*(Response to Materialists). In this work, he criticized the different arguments of Western thinkers, especially Democritus and Darwin, for not believing in God as the transcendental power due to their materialistic understandings. He opposed them by mentioning that the materialist dissolved the structure of society by leaving *ħaya*(shame), *amāna*(safety) and *sıdk*(truth) behind[9].

THE INFLUENCE OF AL-AFGHANI ON THE SCHOLARS OF HIS TIME

The impact of al-Afghani went beyond the Islamic societies. He was a forerunner of both several religious movements in addition to Western secular ones. One can list them as follows: Islamic liberalism with his student Muhammad Abduh, the revitalizing of Islam by Reşid Rıza, the formation of Muslim Brotherhood, the theoretical background of pan-Arabism, the rise of first Egypt revolt known as Urabi Revolt, the formation of Wafd Party by his student Sa'dZaghlul and so on.

Although al-Afghani was not the founder of pan-Islamism, he had a great influence on its development after 1881. He started to show himself as a vanguard defender of pan-Islamism after writing *El-Reddale'l-Dehriyyin*. He supported the Sultan Abdülhamid II's pan-Islamism in order to reach his goal[10]. Therefore, one can see his influence on the Ottaman Empire, too. It is possible that al-Afghani affected the Sultan Abdülhamid II's view of pan-Islamism in addition to his plan of uniting Sunnis and Shi'a. Some scholars having different worldviews were influenced by his writings and speeches even in the Republic of Turkey. Some nationalist such as Mehmet Emin Yurdakul, Yusuf Akçura and Ahmet Ağaoğlu and some Islamist such as Mehmet Akif Ersoy, Ahmet Hamdi Akseki, Said Nursi were inspired by his thought. Furthermore, one can even see his impact on the Young Ottomans and Young Turks movements[11]. In a nutshell, one can readily see his big effect on pan-

Turkism if he or she looks at the journal of *Türk Yurdu* (Turkish Homeland). That is because several articles were about the thought of al-Afghani in this journal.

CONCLUSION

One can review al-Afghani's view in two ways: The requirement of development in the Islamic societies and the conciliation of religious belief and reason. The former one is known as alternative modernity. It means the Islamic societies should develop a different path to modernity by referring to their original texts. The latter one is about the balancing religious belief and reason to reach the reality. It was the area made him as a political figure, too. This can easily be seen in the political movements following his way.

It is possible to argue than Al-Afghani tried to develop an alternative modernity discourse because the reformation of Islamic thought and re-reading of tradition were always on his table. The realization of them provided a motivation of a sort of holy work to him. As a result, he and his followers had a different paradigm criticizing the Western-oriented modernity discourse.

Al-Afghani had always given references to the basic texts of Islam, but he was not a supporter of a religious fundamentalism or extremism. Instead, he tried to build good relationship with the sultans and kings by travelling almost entire Islamic countries. The practices of *Asr-I Saadet* (Golden Age) were among his dreams to come true again. Therefore, he strongly believed that it is reachable goal if Muslims stop copying other religious practices known as *Israiliyat.* The bottom line came about here is that Islamic societies need to have their own modern history in the future instead of getting lost into their pure traditions.

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