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The Oriental and the Orientalist: Al Afghani and the Construction of Pan-Islamism

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in History

by

Ali Ahmad Olomi

Thesis Committee:  
Professor Touraj Daryaee, Chair  
Professor Mark Levine  
Associate Professor Kavita Philip

2014



# **DEDICATION**

To

my family and friends

for their unwavering support.

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## **ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS**

The Oriental and the Orientalist: Al Afghani and the Construction of Pan-Islamism

By

Ali Ahmad Olomi

Master of Arts in History

University of California, Irvine, 2014

Professor Touraj Daryaei, Chair

Scholarship on Jamal ad-Din Al Afghani focuses on the apparent contradiction in his writings between those addressed to a European audience and those addressed to an Islamic audience. This paper resolves that contradiction by placing Al Afghani within the discourse of orientalism and pan-Islamism. My conclusions illuminate the gendered and constructed nature of Al Afghani's pan-Islamic state and how he imagined his state within the contextual history of Islamic rationalism. This paper highlights the creative way in which he draws from multiple discourses, appropriates ideas, and transforms them within the context of his political ideology.





## Introduction

In 1921 audiences enthralled by the moving images of the motion picture gathered to watch “The Sheikh” based on the novel of the same name. They were delighted with a story of a head-strong, independent European woman who piques the interest of a lustful, exotic Arabian sheikh (who turns out to be of British and Spanish descent). The portrayal of the sheikh as an exotic, alluring, and yet menacing individual who is entranced with the rebellious, independent, and strong European woman struck a chord with the Western audience and the movie went on to be quite a success. This depiction of the orient springs from the nineteenth century discourses of Europe and were often engaged with by the very people they depicted. This type depiction and discourse is something directly addressed by famed scholar, Edward Said in his foundational book, *Orientalism*. In this essay I propose to look at those very same discourses, but through a different lens, that of the Orientals themselves. I shall focus specifically on Ernest Renan, who is considered one of the founding figures of orientalism and is directly critiqued in Said’s book, and I shall focus on Jamal ad-Din Al Afghani who writes a response specifically to Ernest Renan. Returning briefly to the sheikh from the eponymous movie, it is through his lens I look at orientalism. Through the eyes of the orient that sees a rebellious and tempting West.

“What distinguishes the Muslim is the hatred of science...”<sup>1</sup> With these words, Ernest Renan expressed his views on the intellectual capabilities of the “oriental” and “Semitic” mind and contributed to a set of discourses that would go on to shape orientalism and the response from the so-called orient itself. Chief among the responders was the famed Islamic political thinker and scholar, Sayyid Jamal ad-Din Al Afghani who engaged with Ernest Renan and the orientalist through his writings and activism. The result is a discourse, sometimes contradictory,

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<sup>1</sup> From Ernest Renan’s famous lecture at Académie française the text of which was published in May 13<sup>th</sup> 1883 by *Journal des Débats*

but always illuminating the character of the orient and the oriental man. These discourses produced questions and knowledge about modernity and masculinity with competing visions of both. It is the aim of this paper to explore the ways in which the so-called oriental man engaged in orientalist dialogues and how this in turn resulted in the construction of the orient specifically found within the writings of the nineteenth century intellectual, Al Afghani. Of particular interest will be the ways in which Al Afghani aligns with orientalist thought and the points where there are contestation and how this fits into the wider dialogues of the Islamic world.

Sayyid Jamal ad-Din Al Afghani was born in 1839 and lived a life shrouded in mystery and complexity. His name alludes to him being from Afghanistan, however several scholars, including Nikki Keddie, argue that he is likely from the small Iranian village of Assadabad.<sup>2</sup> He traveled extensively around what would be called the Middle East and South Asia. He is famously known for his activities in Egypt and later in Ottoman Constantinople where his political activism is highlighted by a defiance against British and European influence in the Middle East and championing a pan-Islamic polity. He is a figure shrouded in a great deal of enigma, much of which was his own doing. One of the scholars who has attempted to unravel much of the mysteries behind the man is Nikki Keddie, whose biography of Al Afghani is considered the standard in the field, yet there is much that is still unexplored in the life and work of Al Afghani. He is often referred to as a religious reformer and at other times he is believed to be only nominally religious. He openly resisted British imperial influence and was frequently accused of being a Russian spy.<sup>3</sup> Even Al Afghani himself was aware of the confusion regarding

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<sup>2</sup> Nikki Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal al-Din "Al Afghani": A Political Biography*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 10.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

him. In a rhyming verse translated by Nikki Keddie from a collection of photographed documents, Al Afghani woefully remarks:

“The English people believe me a Russian  
The Muslims think me a Zoroastrian  
The Sunnis think me a Shi’i  
And the Shi’is think me an enemy of Ali  
Some of the friends of the four companions have believed me a  
Wahhabi  
Some of the virtuous Imamites have imagined me a Babi  
The theists have imagined me a materialists  
And the pious sinner bereft of piety...<sup>4</sup>

He served as advisor to some of the powerful rulers of the Middle East from the Emir of Afghanistan to the Ottoman Sultan. He was also exiled from several countries. While much of his history remains contradictory, confusing, or obfuscated what can be said is that his words and actions were highly influential and caused powerful ripples throughout the region. He garnered a circle of devoted students who carried on his legacy like the famed Muhammad ‘Abduh. Muhammad ‘Abduh went on to become a prominent activist in Egypt and was involved in the political and religious reforms of the nineteenth century Middle East. ‘Abduh translated much of Al Afghani’s writings and transcribed his speeches and conversations.<sup>5</sup> In this essay I use the term Middle East and Islamic world interchangeably to refer to the region of the world from North Africa to parts of South Asia like Afghanistan that are nominally connected historically, culturally, and religiously and which are the arena where Al Afghani and his fellow Islamic thinkers were most active.

Al Afghani is one of the forefathers of the Islamic modernism movement of the nineteenth century along with Muhammad ‘Abduh. I use the term Islamic Modernism to refer to

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 54

<sup>5</sup> Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 120-125.

the intellectual and political discourses revolving around questions of Islam and its role in modernity. Specifically these discourses involve Islam, democracy, science, technology, and rationalism. These conversations were part of a larger set of dialogues going on in Europe where questions of religion and rationalism were being examined through the lens of the Enlightenment. Among the many discourses that took place during this time were debates about what constituted the modern man and his connection to rationalism, progress, and science. This paper will focus on the varying constructions of the modern man in the conversations that are taking place, specifically the construction of that modern man in the writings of Al Afghani. Previous scholarship on Al Afghani has tried to make sense of his seemingly contradictory positions on these topics. Specifically, the contrast between Al Afghani's "Response to Ernest Renan" versus his "Refutation of the Materialists." In "Response to Ernest Renan" he challenges the famed orientalist's claim that the Islamic world is inferior to Europe, but simultaneously agrees with the argument that religion stunts and stifles progress and science. In the "Refutation of the Materialists" he takes up the mantle of champion of Islam, in an apparent reversal of his previous arguments against religion. Is the modern man rational and inclined towards science, or is he an upright Muslim devoted to the preservation of his faith? Are these two mutually exclusive? Attempts have been made to reconcile Al Afghani's writings and to pinpoint his stance and perspective.

Scholars working on this subject have fallen into three camps. Nikki R. Keddie, the preeminent scholar of Iranian history and whose contributions to the study of Al Afghani's works are incomparable, puts forth the idea that Al Afghani tended towards secularism and the cause of rationalism while employing religious rhetoric.<sup>6</sup> Elie Kedourie takes this further by

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<sup>6</sup> Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal Ad-Din Al Afghani: A Political Biography*, 90-91

claiming that Al Afghani was completely a non-believer and his religiosity was merely theater. Margaret Kohn on the other hand argues that Al Afghani recognized religion's usefulness in establishing solidarity, its role in furthering the progress of science, and relied on the utility of religion. Each of these stances provides valuable insight and has been significant in the study and understanding of Al Afghani, Islam, and modernity in the Middle East. In each case though we are confronted with complications that trouble the waters.

In the case of Nikki R. Keddie's proposal where she postulates that Al Afghani is ultimately inclined towards reason, but couches his language in religion the complication is one of privileging. Firstly, it privileges reason over religion. Her own bias may shade her understanding of Al Afghani's arguments by granting importance to reason over religion. It assumes that reason and religious devotion are mutually exclusive to one another. Secondly, it privileges one writing over the other. There is no logical explanation for why Al Afghani's argument to Ernest Renan is taken as his true intent rather than what he writes in the "Refutation of the Materialists". This seems to imply that Al Afghani is telling the truth when he speaking to Europeans, but to fellow Muslims he conceals his real beliefs. Because of this privileging Keddie's interpretation of Al Afghani leaves a great deal unanswered. It is unsatisfactory to assume one response is truer than the other without logical evidence or conclusion to support the claim.

Kedourie's interpretation is more radical than Keddie's in its conclusion and is based specifically on reports of Al Afghani's behavior. For Kedourie, Al Afghani was an outright non-believer. He argues, the inconsistency of behavior and inconsistency of words points to Al Afghani as likely being an atheist.<sup>7</sup> Kedourie claims that Al Afghani did not exhibit any

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<sup>7</sup> Elie Kedourie, *Afghani and 'Abduh: An Essay of Religious Unbelief and Political Activism in Modern Islam* (London: Cass, 1966).

outwards religious tendencies, nor did he seem to partake in traditional Islamic orthopraxy. This proposal fails to acknowledge the complicated nature of personal beliefs and presumes that all beliefs translate ideally into words and actions. But reality is hardly so simple. Plenty of religious people act in nonreligious ways. Nor does inconsistency between belief and action automatically translate to insincerity. An individual can sincerely believe something, but that does not mean it will always translate into action. Kedourie is setting up an impossible standard. If the same standard he applies to Al Afghan is applied to any religious figure, I am sure the results would be quite interesting. He also fails to take into consideration that most of Al Afghani's writings have a decidedly religious tone and reveal a man versed in the nuances of Islamic theology. On the other hand, Margaret Kohn takes a more measured approach to understanding Al Afghani.

Margaret Kohn's proposal focuses on the political ideology of Al Afghani. Rather than seeing a contradiction in the two texts by Al Afghani, Kohn attempts to reconcile them by focusing on Al Afghani's political ideology which she links to Guizot's theories on the evolution of civilization.<sup>8</sup> By linking Al Afghani to Guizot, Kohn manages to reconcile the texts successfully and argues that Al Afghani ultimately sees the utility of religion and specifically its usefulness to his political cause. However, while Guizot's evolutionary approach to civilization is useful to understanding Al Afghani, it assumes Europe as the model for the Middle East, when in his own writing, Al Afghani takes a decidedly harsh approach to imitation. Certainly Al Afghani thought that Islamic world could learn from Europe and he was inspired by European thinkers like Guizot, but he was not interested in following Europe's footsteps or transforming the Middle East into Europe. The entirety of the "Refutation of the Materialists" addresses this and he frequently clashes with individuals who are too pro-Europe for Al Afghani's tastes.

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<sup>8</sup> Margaret Kohn, "Afghani on Empire, Islam, and Civilization," *Political Theory* vol. 37 no. 3 (2009): 399

My approach closely resembles Kohn's as I recognize the evolutionary argument within Al Afghani's writing, but I break with her findings in significant ways. Namely, I approach both texts not as separate, but as a whole pointing towards Al Afghani's thought. By acknowledging the shifts and variations in his writings not as contradictions, but part of the constructed nature of his ideology I am able to illuminate Al Afghani's stance and aims. Secondly, I place Al Afghani within the historical discourses of the Islamic world itself. Most scholarship has situated Al Afghani within European thought, or attempted to trace his inspirations to Europe. I propose to resituate Al Afghani within the discourses of the Middle East, both contemporary to his time as well as the wider historical discourses. By doing this I uncover the roots of Al Afghani's ideas which in turn further illuminates the specifics of his argument. I do not deny or ignore the importance of European thought in Al Afghani's work, or the ways he engages with them, but I attempt to present a balanced approach that examines both his European connection while simultaneously situating him within the wider discourses of the Islamic world. I have divided up my research into sections exploring the intersection of Al Afghani with Europe, Al Afghani with the Islamic world, and finally putting Al Afghani's argument together. Engaging with the modernist discourses of both Europe and the Islamic world, Al Afghani's writings focus on the construction of the modern man and the Pan-Islamic state.

### **Al Afghani and Europe**

Through his conversation with Ernest Renan, Al Afghani engages with the orientalist discourses of Europe. In the "Response to Ernest Renan" Al Afghani defends Islamic civilization by rejecting Renan's racial claims while simultaneously engaging orientalist representations, adopting the evolutionary approach to civilization which Margaret Kohn linked to Guizot, and



ultimately coaches his response with a subtext of anti-imperialism. Understanding the orientalist discourse of the era is essential to understanding Al Afghani's response.

Edward Said wrote his seminal work, *Orientalism* in 1978 as a harsh critique of the orientalist studies of Western Europe. In his book he defined orientalism with several factors constituting the study of the orient. Its simplest definition is the study of the "orient" as a construction of the imagination of the European mind which envisioned it as opposite and other to themselves and always in connection with European imperial interest.<sup>9</sup> The imperial component of orientalism is of particular importance for Al Afghani who spent much of his political life resisting what he saw as the imperial encroachment of European powers in the Islamic world. In describing the role of exhibitions and representation in orientalism, Timothy Mitchell notes that orientalism is often defined by lack. This concept of lack is central for understanding orientalism in this current study. In order to understand how orientalism becomes formulated intellectually in the discourses of the nineteenth century, we have to look at how lack is used to describe the orient. The orient is defined as the other and in direct opposition to the West. If the West is characterized as having a particular attribute then the orient is characterized by the lack of that attribute.<sup>10</sup> To fully understand how these notions and discourses came to be conceptualized intellectually, the cultural underpinnings would first have to be examined.

Works like Jennifer Morgan's book, *Laboring Women* have demonstrated how even before a physical encounter takes place representations shape the discourse and ideas about the people in question. In the case of Jennifer Morgan the role of travel journals and visual depictions shaped the colonists' vision and image of the Africans before any physical encounter

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<sup>9</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1979),

<sup>10</sup> Timothy Mitchell, "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order," in *Colonialism and Culture* ed. Nicholas B. Dirks. (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 289-290

took place.<sup>11</sup> Representations that shape cultural ideas about other people became important for the way people thought and justified their actions towards those people. Similarly, orientalism did not appear in a vacuum but rather its cultural underpinnings can be found in a long tradition and history of writings and depictions by so-called Westerners describing and studying the orient. The earliest of historians, Herodotus wrote of Persian practices as contrasting completely with those of the Greeks when he stated:

They raise no altar, light no fire, pour no libations; there is no sound of the flute, no putting on of chaplets, no consecrated barley-cake; but the man who wishes to sacrifice brings his victim to a spot of ground which is pure from pollution, and there calls upon the name of the god to whom he intends to offer. It is usual to have the turban encircled with a wreath, most commonly of myrtle. The sacrificer is not allowed to pray for blessings on himself alone, but he prays for the welfare of the king, and of the whole Persian people, among whom he is of necessity included. He cuts the victim in pieces, and having boiled the flesh, he lays it out upon the tenderest herbage that he can find, trefoil especially. When all is ready, one of the Magi comes forward and chants a hymn, which they say recounts the origin of the gods. It is not lawful to offer sacrifice unless there is a Magus present.

Herodotus is describing practices that were entirely foreign and unusual to the Greek. The contrast would have been clear to any Greek. Here, Persia, which would become part of the orient in orientalism, was the opposite of Greece, a land which orientalists would claim to be the intellectual forefather of Western Europe. This notion of the orient as exotic, other, and lacking is a consistent theme throughout cultural depictions. For Herodotus, the Persians lacked the usual trappings of Greek religion. However, Herodotus' writings do not constitute as orientalism, nor is there a direct link between the ancient historians and orientalism. It would be a mistake to think all writings about "other people" is orientalism. Rather I include Herodotus here to

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<sup>11</sup> Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*. (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2004)

describe a culture and history of representation that often viewed the orient as other. What sets orientalism apart is its post-Enlightenment pseudo-scientific attempts at racializing the difference described and depicted and the imperial component intimately tied to the imaginings of the orient. The nineteenth century orientalists continued a long tradition of placing the orient in opposition to Western Europe. Orientalism went from description and depiction to intellectualizing and racializing the difference. The intellectual study of the orient by individuals like Ernest Renan should be seen within the context of the wider cultural understanding and representation of the orient. Orientalists would have encountered travel journals, novels, and even visual depictions that would have influenced them and in turn they would add their own influence. The study of the orient goes in hand with its depictions. Artists supplied the visual component to the writings done by orientalists.

On March 29<sup>th</sup> 1883, Ernest Renan delivered a series of powerful lectures on the orient entitled “Islam and Science.” In it he states, “All who have been to the Orient or Africa are struck by what is the inevitably narrow-mindedness of a true believer, of that kind of iron ring around his head, making it absolutely closed to science, incapable of learning anything or of opening itself up to any new idea.”<sup>12</sup> The central thesis of his argument is that the oriental as the other is intellectually different from the Westerner or European. The key to the difference is a sense of lack. The oriental was religious, a true believer, and narrow-minded because it was lacking the rationalism of the Western mind. He makes this difference clear when he states, “The Muslim has the deepest contempt for education, for science, for all that which constitutes the European spirit.”<sup>13</sup> With this statement, Renan sets up the orient as the other and characterized it

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<sup>12</sup> From Ernest Renan’s famous lecture at Académie française the text of which was published in May 13<sup>th</sup> 1883 by *Journal des Débats*

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

specifically for lacking those things that make up the “European spirit.” For Renan this difference was fundamentally racial. In his lecture entitled, “Islam and Science” the culprit of stilted education and stunted scientific progress is Islam itself. The religion is described as a “terrible gale” that stifles and stops science and philosophy. However, in another of his works, Renan characterizes the Semitic mind as the source of the problem. While religions stifle science, it is the Semitic mind that clings to religion for it is a superstitious mind.<sup>14</sup> This is contrasted with the European and their Aryan minds. Indeed, in his theories about the origins of Christianity and Jesus Christ, he goes so far as to say that Christianity is a purification of Judaism. Where Judaism is a Semitic religion, Christianity is Aryan and a purification of the former.<sup>15</sup> The difference is intellectually described as racial. For Renan, the orient is different because of its backwardness and because of its incapability of sustaining science. It is incapable of sustaining science because of its religious—namely Islamic—nature and it is religious because it is racially inclined toward dogmatism and superstition. The emphasis on racial difference was connected to new scientific ideas regarding race. In 1825, Bory de Saint-Vincent wrote an article on “Man” for a dictionary of natural science where the Arab was categorized as a separate species from European and was categorized as Semitic. This racial difference was reflected in popular culture as well. An image from Eusèbe De Salle’s *Ali le Renard : ou, La conquête d’Alger (1830), roman historique* depicts Arab raiders descending upon a bare-breasted white woman protecting a captured Frenchman.<sup>16</sup> The Arabs are dressed in long, fluttering Bedouin robes, with angular faces, dark tangled beards, and hooked noses. Their bodies are depicted in motion, armed with sabers and rifles, and they are given the appearance of vultures or predatory

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<sup>14</sup> Ernest Renan. *Life of Jesus*. 1863.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Salle, Eusebe De. *Ali le Renard : ou, La conquête d’Alger (1830), roman historique*. Paris, 1832.

birds. While a crude depiction, it evocatively demonstrates the racial difference depicted in the cultural discourses of Europe and the intellectualization of those racial differences found in writers like Renan. The image is not too dissimilar of even modern entertainment depictions. What is striking about these depictions is the gendered ways in which the orient is represented. They reveal ideas about gender from the perspective of the ones doing the studying which are then projected upon the studied. The gendered language used to describe and depict the orient construct ideas of European masculinity and femininity. These ideas speak more to Europe's conceptions of gender rather than the orient's specifically. However, the orient is consistently described in gendered ways. In the case of Eusèbe De Salle's depiction, the orientals with their predatory looks carried overt menace and threat of rape. Before them was a bare breasted European woman exposed and vulnerable. The difference is seen through an intersection of gender and race. Racially the orient is described as other, whether by phenotype or other pseudoscientific descriptions. While normally cast in the role of other, the orient was constructed in varying gendered ways that drew upon European ideas about gender and sexuality. In the case of Eusèbe De Salle the oriental men represented the threat of rape which was a masculine and violent menace, but a masculinity that contrasted with that of the European. But the sexual and gendered depictions of the orient were not always one of threat, they simultaneously represented a place of allure where the orientalist would project their erotic imagination. In this fashion, the orient was associated with the feminine and all that femininity represented to the European.



Figure 1

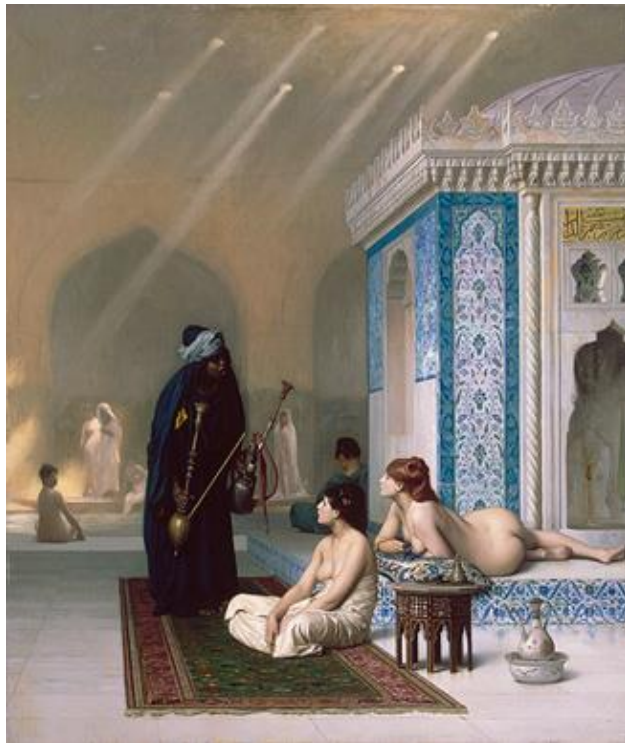


Figure 2

The intersection of gender and race constructed Europe and the orient into a set of shifting opposites. At one time Europe was the vulnerable female threatened by the dangerous male oriental, like in the case of Eusèbe De Salle depiction. Yet in other instances, Europe was the rational and restrained masculine to the orient's religious and alluring feminine. The association of the rational with the masculine and the religious with the feminine is not a novel idea. In Daniel Huntington's 1868 *Philosophy and Christian Art* (figure 1) a sagacious man is shown juxtaposed with a young woman. He is sternly pointing at a textbook with the words "Scientia." The young woman is holding up a Christian religious painting. The play between reason and masculinity with religion and femininity is artfully conveyed. This idea of religion belonging to the feminine mind in contrast to reason belonging to the masculine is seen in the depictions of the orient which is restricted generally to three types of imagery; that of savage menace like in De Salle's work, that of languid and erotic harems, or that of mosques and prayer. The gendered quality of representation enters through all three forms of depiction with femininity clearly depicted in the latter two. There is a plethora of French and English paintings of the orient that fixate quite strongly on the imagery of the harem. The academic artist Jean-Léon Gérôme's *Pool in a Harem* (figure 2) is a perfect demonstration of this fascination. The painting portrays the exotic scene of the harem complete with voluptuous nude women, arabesque architectures, and an oasis-like pool. The painting captures a sense of the exotic and otherness which the orient is defined by. This eroticization of the orient is deeply tied to its gendered definition as feminine. The orient was a place of harems and of dark and erotic beauties who were oppressed by ravaging barbarous men. Men were almost always depicted either in religious activity or holding weapons like scimitars or rifles. The orient was imagined as a place of savage threat, erotic and tantalizing harems, or foreign religiosity.



Figure 3

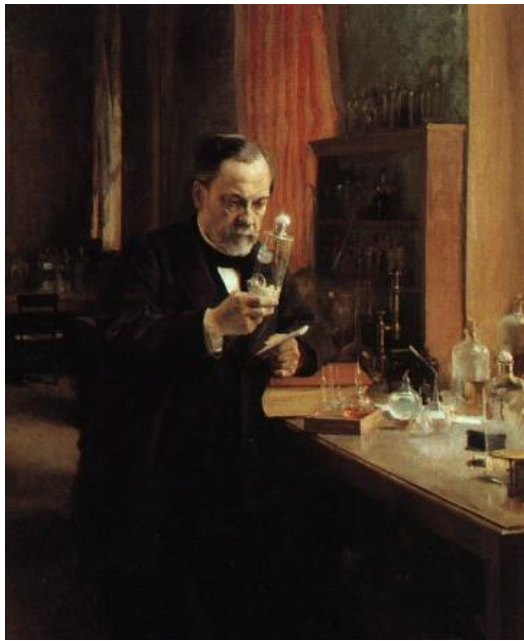


Figure 4



In another of his paintings called, *Young Greeks at the Mosque*, (Figure 3) Jean-Léon Gérôme depicts three young Janissaries in prayer. Two are garbed in female attire and kneeling in supplication while a man stands behind them bowing—both poses being part of the usual ritual actions taken in the Islamic daily prayer called *salaat*. Jean-Léon Gérôme typifies a style of academic painting that was quite popular in the nineteenth century and demonstrates how the orient in representation was generally shown; in terms of otherness, religiosity, and ultimately as feminine. This is especially illuminating in contrast to paintings depicting the European “pure scientist.” A great example of this can be found in Albert Edelfelt’s *Portrait of Louis Pasteur* (Figure 4) who is depicted in dark colors, sharply dressed in a suit from his era, leaning on a heavy tome as he examines the scientific container in his hand. He is surrounded by a lightly cluttered laboratory. The contrast is quite clear; the European is shown as rational, scientific-minded, and masculine where the oriental is shown as exotic, religious, and feminine. This connection between the orient and the feminine mind is invoked in writing when Renan states, “The Muslims are themselves the first victims of Islam.”<sup>17</sup> He uses the word “victim” to describe the oriental mind and invokes a sense of being helpless against religion due to their own racial shortcomings and proclivities. Helpless, the orient needs the aid of the paternalistic European. The emerging discourse is an intersection of Aryan versus Oriental, rational and scientific-oriented versus religious and incapable of sustaining science, and an intersection of notions of masculinity and femininity. It is into these discourses that Al Afghani enters and produces alternative constructions of masculinity; at times seeming to associate and align himself with European intellectualism and other times demonstrating clear contestation and resistance.

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<sup>17</sup> From Ernest Renan’s famous lecture at Académie française the text of which was published in May 13<sup>th</sup> 1883 by *Journal des Débats*

Authors like Nikki Keddie and others have noted the sometimes contradictory messages in Al Afghani's writings and speeches. He is a paradoxical figure who at times appears to be a religious reformer and yet at other times only nominally religious and dedicated instead to a political message. Similarly, when exploring his relationship with Europe a contradictory and somewhat paradoxical connection emerges. There are clear instances of Al Afghani speaking out against the imperial power of Europe, especially that of Great Britain. He seemed inclined to violence at points even spending two years in Russia where he attempted to instigate hostilities against Great Britain.<sup>18</sup> Yet to categorize his relationship with Europe as wholly hostile does not take in the full complexity of Al Afghani's thought. While clearly opposing the imperial power of Europe, he engaged intellectually with Ernest Renan, partook in the discourses about modernity, rationalism, and religion and even encouraged Islamic rulers to adopt the scientific and technological advancements of Europe. The West for Al Afghani becomes both a menace as well as a place that had achieved some of the attributes and characteristics he attempts to foster in the Islamic world. Just as the European saw the orient as simultaneously a menace and alluring, Al Afghani saw Europe in the same manner. While Keddie notes that Europe becomes both menace and model for Al Afghani this claim assumes that Al Afghani sees Europe as inherently superior to the orient. Margaret Kohn makes a similar argument vis-à-vis Al Afghani's understanding of Guizot. In her argument, Al Afghani sets up Europe as a model to explain how Europe and the Islamic world were simply at two different evolutionary stages in their civilization. This again assumes that Al Afghani looks to Europe as a model. Certainly there are qualities and attributes in Europe that Al Afghani admires, but his goal is not emulation. He does not, after all, desire the Islamic world to be Europe. Instead Al Afghani is engaging in a set

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<sup>18</sup> Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal Ad-Din Al Afghani: A Political Biography*, 27.

of discourses which produce ideas that compete with the orientalist notions of modernity, rationalism, and religion. These ideas flow through the discourses of Europe, but are not a mere imitation of Europe. It is through these discourses that an alternative masculinity is constructed; a competing vision of the modern man living in the orient seen through the eyes of the oriental.

The slide between points where Al Afghani seems to be associating himself with certain European intellectual discourses while contesting and resisting other points varies depending on the audience he is speaking to and his goal. When Ernest Renan gave his public lectures, Al Afghani was quick to respond. The very same *Journal des débats* which originally published the lectures of Renan also published Al Afghani's response in May 1883. In his response, Al Afghani puts forth what seems like a defense of Islam by making the claim that all religions stifle the progress of science, not just Islam. Yet, his response is not a complete defense of Islam, but rather an argument against the racial claims of Renan and Renan's singling out of Islam as the religion most vehemently opposed to science and reason. He takes issue with Renan's racial argument in respect to the inferiority of the Arab with their Semitic mind. Al Afghani takes an interesting approach to this when he states:

I will say that no people at their origin are capable of letting themselves be led by pure reason. Haunted by terrors that they cannot escape, they are incapable of distinguishing good from evil, of distinguishing that which could make them joyous from what which might be the undeniable source of their unhappiness and misfortune. It does not know ultimately, either how to trace back causes or to discern results.<sup>19</sup>

For Al Afghani, the Arab is no different than any other people. This implies a sort of evolutionary approach and telos. His evolutionary approach to civilization is rightly noted by Margaret Kohn as being inspired by Guizot, something she recognized from Albert Hourani's

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<sup>19</sup> Al Afghani, Jamal ad-Din. "Exchange with Ernest Renan." *Journal des Débats*, May 18<sup>th</sup> 1883.

mention of Al Afghani's interest in Guizot's writings.<sup>20</sup> For Al Afghani, all people start at a place where they are incapable of being led by reason and logic. His use of "cause" and "results" and the ability to trace both appeals to Aristotelian logic, a type of logic that was prevalent in European thought during this era. He argues that while people start off in such a state, that they progress forward until they reach the point where they are capable of being ruled by reason. He goes on to say:

If it is true that Islam is an obstacle to the development of sciences, can one affirm that this obstacle will not disappear someday? How does the Muslim religion differ on this point from other religions? All religions are intolerant, each on its own way. The Christian religion, I mean the society that follows its inspirations and its teachings and is formed in its image, has emerged from the first period to which I have alluded; thenceforth free and independent, it seems to advance rapidly on the road of progress and science, whereas Muslim society has not yet freed itself from the tutelage of religion. Realizing, however, that the Christian religion preceded the Muslim religion in the world by many centuries...<sup>21</sup>

Al Afghani challenges Renan's argument that the orient, specifically the Arab, is somehow unique from the European. He challenges the racial difference put forth by Renan and instead argues that all people had their start in the same place; a place where reason and rationality was not possible. In postulating an idea of society that is evolutionary or progressive, he is explaining how Western Christendom led to post-Enlightenment Europe and also arguing against the notion that Islamic society is backwards. Rather, Islamic society is one step behind on the trajectory of progress. Just as Europe went from Western Christendom to the Enlightenment, Al Afghani hopes that the Islamic world would forge its own route towards reason, science, and progress.

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<sup>20</sup> Kohn, "Afghani on Empire, Islam, and Civilization," 412.

<sup>21</sup> Al Afghani, "Exchange with Ernest Renan."

There are three aspects of Al Afghani's exchange with Renan that stand out. First, in referring to "causes" and "effects" he is appealing to a specific form of reason, namely Aristotelian whose four types of causes were central to Western philosophy and linked to scientific inquiry. This invocation of Aristotle presents Al Afghani as well-read and more importantly as working within the rationalist discourses Renan and orientalists were familiar with. Secondly, the response places the Orient on a parallel trajectory to that of Europe. This particular maneuver is quite interesting for it implies a sort of familiarity between the two cultures and appeals to a sense of solidarity—both cultures had to deal with the yoke of religion which stifled progress and both are throwing off that yoke, albeit Europe is ahead on the trajectory. Positioning the orient in such a fashion, reorients it to Europe; it goes from being the other and opposite to the equal and related. The tone of the entire piece is non-religious. While there is a nominal defense of Islam in that it is no different than any other religion, it concedes the point that religion stifles progress and science and that reason should be the eventual goal of progress. The audience that Al Afghani's response was intended for is quite specific. The audience is European intellectuals and scholars especially of the orientalist bent. Indeed, the irreligious tone of his response along with his idealization of rationality could be deemed impious to many in the Islamic world. Finally, the mere fact that he responded at all is significant. He read and understood Renan's points and put up an eloquent defense. The fact that he was able to offer up strong counter points made quite an impact on Renan himself who praised Al Afghani as a man of reason, showing that Renan's ideas about the oriental mind may not be fixed. By praising Al Afghani as an enlightened thinker there is a shift between the orient as representation and the orient in actuality vis-à-vis Al Afghani. The response also shows that discourse was certainly not a one-way street. It was not orientalists who alone were writing about

the orient, but the so-called orientals were responding and in surprising ways. Al Afghani's response aligns him with European ideas of reason, science, and progress, not because he is emulating Europe, but because reason, science, and progress are universal and Europe is simply further along the line in the evolutionary trajectory. His exchange with Renan, however, contrasts rather strongly with his other writings, especially those written for the Islamic world.

### **Al Afghani and the Islamic World**

Like his exchange with Renan, "The Refutation of the Materialist" is actually a response, in this case to a specific Islamic reformer known as Sayed Ahmad Khan.<sup>22</sup> Sayed Ahmad Khan was an Indian Muslim who was a British loyalist and who argued for the adoption of European ideas as a means of modernizing Islam.<sup>23</sup> He and his followers were derisively named, *neicheri* or "naturists" or "materialists." In his response, Al Afghani champions Islam against the pro-European-modernist aim of the Materialists. He states:

Islam is the only religion that censures belief without evidence and that follows these ideas: rejection of blind submission, and attempts to show the evidence of something to its followers, always appeals to reason, believes all happiness to come from wisdom and clarity, links suffering to ignorance and lack of knowledge, and establishes proofs for each fundamental article of faith so that it may be of use to the people. Indeed, when the Holy Quran mentions its rules it states their purpose and benefit.<sup>24</sup>

This response is very different than the response he gave to Ernest Renan. In this argument, Islam is not like all other religions in that it stifles reason and progress, but rather is unique in that it is the only religion that supports reason. To Renan he argues Islam was a religion like all the others, but to the Materialists he argues Islam is unique. It is interesting to note that the word

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<sup>22</sup> Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal Ad-Din Al Afghani: A Political Biography*, 53-54.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 54-55

<sup>24</sup> Al Afghani, Jamal ad-Din. "The Materialists in India." *Al- 'Urwah al-Wuthqa*. August 28<sup>th</sup> 1884.

he uses, *din*, translates to “religion,” but also carries the alternative connotation of “right path” offering an alternative—that is right—path to the one offered by the Materialist. Al Afghani’s response may be seen as apologetic by some, but taken in the context as a response to a particular group of Indian Muslim modernists, it reveals a subtle and nuanced stance. Al Afghani is certainly championing Islam, though perhaps not orthodoxy, but in his argument Islam already is inherently tied to reason and logic. This rejects the idea that Islam needs to look to Europe as a model to adopt from or emulate. Rather, Islam inherently has all the characteristics and capabilities for reason and progress. This nuance of the argument is particularly poignant when understood alongside the idea of imitation. When referring to emulating the Muslim ancestors he writes, “In their faith they must avoid submitting to conjecture and not be content with an imitation of their ancestors.” The word that he uses is *taqlid* in Arabic and *kalagh* in Persian. Both words carry similar meanings but *kalagh*, in addition to “imitation” can also translate to “crow” and “mockery.” Applying this to the idea of Europe as a model which he was arguing against, any replication of Europe would be a mockery and fake rather than real reform. What Al Afghani is doing is to set up an alternative to the reforms proposed by Sayed Ahmad Khan. Rather than look to Europe as the model, Islam itself has an inherently rational tradition. The discourse of imitation is not new and invokes one of the central points of dispute during the Mutazili and A’shari debates where similar questions regarding Islam’s relationship to reason, imitation, and modernity took place. The Mutazili stance upheld reason as an ideal where the A’shari argued for an emulation of the righteous ancestors.<sup>25</sup> Al Afghani’s stance against imitation covered all imitation. The Islamic world should not become an imitation of Europe and

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<sup>25</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 87-94; It may be worthwhile to attempt a genealogy of imitation, reason, and modernity in Islamic discourse which may actually have its roots in Islamic-Persian protonationalism and the Abbasid period.

instead look to its own tradition of reason, but similarly the Islamic world was not to merely imitate its own ancestors.

Al Afghani's response illuminates the discourses prevalent in the Islamic world during the nineteenth century. Al Afghani was one of the thinkers who rejected the idea that Islamic world needed to mimic its glorified ancestors. This stance was a direct response to the conservative ulema who opposed the idea that the Islamic world needed to modernize through progress vis-à-vis science. Instead they aimed to revive an ancestral golden age epitomized by the *sahaba* and *tabi'un* or the first and second generation Muslims who were collectively known as the *salaf*.<sup>26</sup> During the nineteenth century the conservative ulema were influenced by the thinking of Wahhabism, which originated from the writings and actions of the eighteenth century reformer and puritan, Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. Wahhabism was a religious reform movement that revived the conservative and traditionalist interpretations of Ibn Hanbal and Ibn Taymiya who called for a purist view of Islam. Wahhabism relied on literalist interpretations of scripture and a rejection of the legal authority of the Islamic schools of law. The movement transformed the traditional meaning of taqlid from following a legal scholar to emulating the ancestors, who were the salafs.<sup>27</sup> The Wahhabi appropriation of taqlid is very important to Al Afghani's writing. The ultraconservative reform of Wahhabism gained popularity in the Islamic world and with conservative ulema who were wary of the champions of reason and science which they saw as being European influenced. For them, the key to resisting European imperialism and recapturing the glory of Islam was to return to a "purer" vision of Islam enshrined in the simple religious community of the first and second generation of Muslims. Just

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<sup>26</sup> Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal Ad-Din Al Afghani: A Political Biography*, 79

<sup>27</sup> Rahman, *Islam*, 197.



as Al Afghani rejected the outright emulation of Europe proposed by the Materialists, so too did he reject a blind imitation of the Muslims ancestors. He writes to the ulema:

Why do you not raise your eyes from those defective books and why do you not cast your glance on this wide world? Why do you not employ your reflection and thought on events and their causes without the veils of those works? Why do you always utilize those exalted minds on trifling problems? Yet you spend no thought on this question of great importance, incumbent on every intelligent man, which is: What is the cause of poverty, indigence, helplessness, and distress of the Muslims and is there a cure for this important phenomenon and great misfortune or not?<sup>28</sup>

For Afghani, the ulema's focus on the past was a refusal to deal with the present. Though Afghani also was inspired by the past, he did not seek to return to it. Unlike the ulema who saw new innovations in science and philosophy with suspicion, Al Afghani argued that a spirit of innovation and change was necessary for Islamic civilization. He states:

Is it not a fault for a percipient sage not to learn the entire sphere of new sciences and inventions and fresh creations, when he has no information about their causes and reasons, and the world has changed from one state to another and he does not raise his head from the sleep of neglect? He splits hairs over imaginary essences and lags behind in the knowledge of evident matters.<sup>29</sup>

Interestingly, the debate between individuals like Al Afghani seeking to bring progress and modernity to the Islamic world versus conservative thinkers who sought a return to purer times reflects older debates and discourses of the medieval era over the role of *faylasaf* or Islamic philosophy, alternatively known as *hikmah* during the Mutazili and Ash'ari debates. And like the earlier debates, Al Afghani and the ulema contested which interpretation was the authentic Islam.

For the conservative ulema inspired by Wahhabism, the key to returning to a purer vision of Islam was *taqlid* or imitation of the ancestors. In this case *taqlid* does not imply mockery, but

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<sup>28</sup> Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal Ad-Din Al Afghani: A Political Biography*, 165

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

rather emulation. In contrast to *taqlid*, Al Afghani uses *asli* or alternatively *asil* to speak to what is real. Both words come from the same tri-literal root of *alif*, *saud/seen*, and *lam*. While literally translated to “authentic,” it also carries a connotation of legitimacy connected to lineage. Someone who is an *asil* Muslim is someone with a pedigree, whose ancestors were notable Muslims. The term is often used in genealogies. Similarly, competing religious and political leaders would claim they were *asil*. While *asli* is authenticity itself, a person who is authentic is *asil*. Again this invokes much older discourses within the Islamic world as it was used by caliphs who wanted to emphasize their legitimacy—the *asil* caliph of Islam would be the legitimate ruler of the Islamic world. For Al Afghani, the *asli* was a rationalist manifestation of Islam and the *asil* progress was one that recognized Europe’s progress, but which drew upon Islam’s own internal capacity for rationality and science to achieve that progress. For the conservative ulema the *asil* Islam focused on imitation of the *salaf* or the ancestors. The focus on the *salaf* would produce the Salafiyah movement that would eventually merge with Wahhabism. Al Afghani rejected this view of Islam and rejected the notion that in order to resist European hegemony Islam needed to return to a purer past state. He said of the ulema, “The ulema of our time are like a very narrow wick on top of which is a very small flame that neither lights its surroundings nor gives light to others. A scholar is a true light if he is a true scholar. Thus, if a scholar is true he must shed light on the whole world.”<sup>30</sup> He uses the word *asil* to great effect here. Additionally his metaphor of light is something that appears later on in his discussion of learning. Interestingly, while Al Afghani rejects the blind mimicry of the spiritual ancestors, he simultaneously finds inspiration in the past and instead supports his own vision of ancestors. Where the conservative ulema upheld the *salaf*, Al Afghani upheld the rational philosophers of the Islamic world. For him, they

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<sup>30</sup> Jamal ad-Din Al Afghani “Teaching and Learning,” November, 8<sup>th</sup> 1882.

were the ideal representation of what Islamic civilization was capable of. It was not to the religious leaders he looked to, but philosophers like Ibn Sina.<sup>31</sup> In his own innovative way, Al Afghani appropriates and redefines the ancestors and the emulation of them. In other words, Al Afghani rejected—though not wholly—the Materialists as well as the ulema in favor of what he viewed as *asil* Islam, or the legitimate religion. Al Afghani defends the real or authentic Islam by setting it up as the ideal and authentic model for progress.

For Al Afghani, reason is an ideal. Reason is the tool and standard for progress and reform, something that Al Afghani and the Materialists agree upon. Where they differ is what they see as the source of that reason. For the Materialist, they model themselves after Europe, where for Al Afghani everything can be found within the language of Islam itself. So while he defends Islam, he is defending a specific type of Islam: rational Islam. Or alternatively, an upholding of reason and religion as they go together. This is in contrast to the notions of religion as feminine and reason as masculine that formed the cultural ideas underpinning the writings of the orientalist. Al Afghani's construction of an oriental masculinity is both religious and rational. There is no indication that religion is inherently feminine. Rather the community itself is gendered feminine. The Islamic community is referred to as the *ummah* which is related to the Arabic word for mother, *umm*. The female mother is protected by her sons, the *ibn*. The son is to strive to live up to the ideal of Ibn Sina, known as Avicenna in Europe. Ibn Sina becomes the ideal of oriental or Islamic masculinity who blends religion and reason.

Al Afghani invokes Ibn Sina when he refers to “virtuous men whose life with brothers have reached this step of civilization is based on love, wisdom, and justice. This is the aim of the wise and the peak of human joy in the world.”<sup>32</sup> The idea of a fraternity of elevated philosophers

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Jamal ad-Din Al Afghani, “The Materialists in India.” *Al- 'Urwah al-Wuthqa*. August 28<sup>th</sup> 1884.

and wise men is characteristic of Ibn Sina who popularized the idea with the notion that the prophets of Islam were the highest of philosophers. The nod to Ibn Sina is an interesting parallel to his appeal to Aristotle in his “Response to Ernest Renan.” In his argument against the Materialists, he is not holding up Aristotle, but Ibn Sina, not a “Western” thinker but an Islamic thinker. In the *Mu'allim-I Shafiq* he is more explicit in his praise of the philosophers of rational Islam; he states, “Is complete satisfaction to be found in the works of Al Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Bajja Shihab ad Din, Mir Baqir, Mulla Sadra, and other treatises and works concerned with philosophy, or is it not?”<sup>33</sup> He upholds the philosophers of Islam as ideal men to be emulated.<sup>34</sup> The existence of these men challenge the orientalist notion of a backwards orient and offer an alternative model to that of the Materialists. The Islamic world need not look to Europe, but rather already had models of their own. The reference to a fraternity of elevated philosophers also reveals the gendered construction of the Islamic community in Al Afghani’s writings. If the community was feminine and mother, than the male fraternity was its protector. Additionally, Al Afghani finds the reconciliation of religion and reason in Ibn Sina and the philosophers. Unlike the gendered demarcation of reason and religion found in orientalist discourse, Ibn Sina is both a religious thinker as well as a philosopher who wrote on theology, metaphysics, and medicine. In Al Afghani’s writing the gendered division between reason and religion is rejected. Ibn Sina and the philosophers represent the ideals to which the modern Muslim was to strive for: men of reason and religion. Striving to be like Ibn Sina is not like imitating the European. To strive to be like Ibn Sina is to be among the people found on that step of civilization alluded to in the above quote. Ibn Sina and the rational philosophers represent the ability of the Islamic world to partake in European discourses on modernity and reason without becoming an imitation. Furthermore it

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<sup>33</sup> Jamal ad-Din Al Afghani, “The Benefits of Philosophy,” *Mu'allim-I Shafiq*,

<sup>34</sup> Hourani, *Arabic Thought In a Liberal Age*, 108.

shifts the location of the discourse on modernity entirely. Looking to past Islamic philosophers means looking within the boundaries of the Islamic world for an example rather than looking outwards to Europe. That he chose a figure from Islam's past to set up as model for progress and modernity challenges the ulema who also looked to the past, but in order to return to it rather than move forward. It also indicates that the keys of Islamic modernity may lay in older discourses than that of the nineteenth century. Indeed, it may not be far off to consider Islamic discourses of modernity not being unique to the nineteenth century but flowing through various manifestation, ruptures, and shifts in thought. If we take Bruno Latour's principles of modernity in which there is a consistent, if failed, attempt at purification of the world into social and natural, then this same impulse can be found in an earlier period in the Islamic world.<sup>35</sup> Since, in reality, such laboratory purifications can never been attained and what we are left with are hybrids, then perhaps we can alter Latour's central thesis from we have never been modern to that there has always been a modernity and multiple ones—unique to regions, eras, and with characteristics of their own. Therefore, the Islamic world was not only capable of being modern and scientific, but has had attempts at modernity in its past. Al Afghani alludes to this in his piece to Renan when it states, "The Arab people, while it was still in the state of barbarism, rushed into the road of intellectual and scientific progress with a rapidity only equaled by the speed of its conquests... One might say that in all this period the sciences made astonishing progress among the Arabs."<sup>36</sup> To Al Afghani, the modernity of the Islamic world lay in reviving the impulses seen in its past inclinations towards science and reason. Furthermore, using Ibn Sina and other great Islamic philosophers like Al Farabi as a symbol becomes a means of demonstrating the compatibility of reason and religion, but also invokes his earlier stance with

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<sup>35</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 10-11.

<sup>36</sup> Afghani, "Exchange with Ernest Renan."

Ernest Renan: that the Islamic world is capable of modernity and already has the qualities of modernity existing within its fold—in this case found in its past intellectual spirit. To bring about that modernity a rival of that spirit was needed. He states, “The Islamic faith is the closest of religions to science and knowledge and there is no incompatibility between science and knowledge and the foundation of the Islamic faith.”<sup>37</sup> This may seem like a completely different stance than the one he took with Renan, but there is a theme that reconciles his shifting stance and that is the role of rational Islam. It is through the figure of Ibn Sina and similar philosophers of rational Islam that reconciliation between Al Afghani’s writings is found.

The difference in the language, tone, and even the seemingly contradictory stance between the two responses, the “Response to Ernest Renan” and “Refutation of the Materialist” is something that is taken up by scholars studying Al Afghani. He seems to go from irreligious or impious to taking up the role of champion of Islam. This contradiction is explained away in unsatisfactory ways. Nikki Keddie, to whom a great debt is owed to for her work in demystifying a great deal of Al Afghani’s life, implies that in writing to Renan he was able to put forth his real agenda whereas in “Refutation of the Materialist” he conceals his real meaning.<sup>38</sup> This implies two things: first that Al Afghani did not sincerely hold to any religious notions and secondly that he was only honest to Europeans. The former assertion presupposes a knowledge of Al Afghani’s personal beliefs that is troubling. Why should there be a contradiction between Al Afghani’s idealization of reason as well as his Islamic sentiment? It would seem that presupposing that his rationalist inclinations as part of a “real” Al Afghani assumes the

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<sup>37</sup> Jamal ad-Din Al Afghani, “Lecture on Teaching and Learning,” *Maqalat-I Jamaliyyeh*

<sup>38</sup> Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal Ad-Din Al Afghani: A Political Biography*, 90-91; Keddie also theorizes that Al Afghani’s connection with rationalism stems from him being a Shia which is where the Mutazali movement survived as opposed to wider Sunni adoption of Asharite theology. Unfortunately this completely ignores the long line of Sunni post-Abbasid rationalists like Ibn Sina, Ghazali, Tahtawi etc.

superiority of reason and rationality and that is a fallacy. Similarly, assuming that what Al Afghani said to Europeans was the reality of his stance versus the obfuscation of his stance when he converses with Muslims privileges Europe. While the interconnection between European intellectual discourses and those going on in the Islamic world is clear, there is no indication of the centrality of European discourses for Al Afghani. Indeed, implications of placing Europe in such a place—where truth and reason take place—and the Islamic world—the place of obfuscation and religion—parallels the very same orientalist claims of individuals like Renan. Keddie puts forth these ideas before the publication of Said's *Orientalism* and since there has been a shift in scholarship. The explanation that Al Afghani holds two points of view, while ultimately wrong, is understandable in that superficially it seems that Al Afghani is making contradictory claims. However this contradiction is resolved when it is taken into the context of what Al Afghani is ultimately trying to accomplish: the construction of a pan-Islamic state strong enough to oppose the increasing imperial encroachment of British forces in the Islamic world. To understand this construction further, we would have to examine his activism and teaching while he was in Egypt.

Al Afghani was active in Egypt during a time of great international political maneuvering. In the 1870's the modernizing attempts of Khedive Ismai'il left the country bankrupt, unable to fulfill its debts, and increasingly under British imperial influence. British forces were keenly interested in the government and finances of Egypt and there were early signs of imperial encroachment.<sup>39</sup> It was in this political backdrop that Al Afghani taught and worked. While in Egypt he wrote a series of articles published in *Misr*. Much of his writings revolved around reformist ideas, calling upon the Islamic world to cast aside its divisions, reform Islam by

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 82.

restoring its past rationalist inclinations, and to establish itself as a power strong enough to oppose the increasing influence of Europe that he was witnessing in Egypt. He states:

Oh, sons of the East, do you not know the power of those in the West and that their domination over you comes through their advancements in learning and education and your own decline in these domains? Are you content after your past accomplishments after you had reached the peak of glory through knowledge and education that you now remain in a state of wretchedness cast into by your ignorance and error. Rise up brothers and make the effort to gain knowledge and [once more] become enlightened with the light of truth so that you may recover the glory and gain true independence.<sup>40</sup>

His intention here is quite clear in that he is calling for a pan-Islamic society which is able to recover a perceived sense of glory. Simultaneously he is also constructing the notion of the East. He uses the phrase, “ya ibn sharq” which has been translated into “oh sons of the East.” The structure of this phrase is one that is quite familiar to Muslims as it is used often in religious speeches and is even found in the Qu’ran where you find the phrase, “ya ayyuhal ladhina aminu” which translates to “Oh you who believe”.<sup>41</sup> While Arabic does not have a formal vocative case, the use of “ya” serves the same function as the vocative. He adopts the orientalist notion of the “East” by referring to the “sons of the East.” He does not call them believers, or Muslims, but specifically calls them the “sons of the East,” constructing an idea of a homogenous and unified East. Essential to understanding Al Afghani’s East and to reconcile his seemingly contradictory stances is understanding the shared history he invokes. In Al Afghani’s formulation there was a time when the East was the pinnacle of learning. He describes this notion of learning and knowledge as *nur* and *hoq* or “light” and “truth” both of which are Names of Allah in the Islamic tradition. Light and truth also are powerful allegories and symbols found in religious writings

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<sup>40</sup> Sayyid Jamal Ad Din Al Afghani. *Misir*. Alexandria, 1878.

<sup>41</sup> Qur’ran 5:51.



like in the Qur'an in Surah Nur.<sup>42</sup> In this verse God is called a light through the analogy of a lamp that illuminates the world. In his lecture on teaching and learning, Al Afghani transforms the scholar into the lamp and light that illuminates the world.<sup>43</sup> The language in his writing clearly invokes a religious sense of the East, but also appeals to a sense of learning and knowledge that is tied to reason. Specifically, Al Afghani invokes the Abbasid period as a sort of golden age of Islam. This is evident through Al Afghani's use of Ibn Sina, who lived during the Abbasid period, as a model and through his debates over taqlid which invoke the Mutazali and A'shari debates as well as his idealization of Islamic rational philosophy. He also frequently makes mention of the success of the sciences during the reign of Caliph Mansur.<sup>44</sup> For Al Afghani, the rational form of Islam that reached its peak in earlier years was the ideal of Islam. By setting up this era as his ideal, he shifts significantly from the conservative ulema. He rejects the earlier period of the sahaba and tabiun as the ideal and rejects the need to return to a purer Islam. Instead, he argues for the revitalization of rational Islam. Al Afghani's East, unified under rational Islam, is a political force in opposition to Europe. He exhorts the "sons of the East" to rise up and reclaim their glory. His writing serves as both a rallying cry as well as construction of the Orient. The Orient, or the "East" as Al Afghani calls it, challenges the gendered notions of orientalism which viewed the Orient as a place of harems and barbarism and of religious backwardness associated with the feminine mind. Al Afghani affirms to some degree the religious characteristic of the Orient, but simultaneously challenges its notion of being backwards. True, the Orient had fallen into "wretchedness" but it has a history of glorious learning and could once more attain that.<sup>45</sup> By recognizing the type of Islam that Al Afghani

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<sup>42</sup> Quran 24:35

<sup>43</sup> Afghani, "Teaching and Learning"

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Al Afghani, *Misr*.

champions, the contradictions in his writings are reconciled and his formation of pan-Islamism emerges.

### **Al Afghani and Pan-Islamism**

Al Afghani envisioned an Orient unified by a rational Islam that encourages progress and science. When he refers to the past glory and learning and the current state of decline, he seems to imply that Islam was ahead in the trajectory of progress, but had now fallen behind. In other words, reaffirming the idea that the roots of Islamic modernity already lay in its past and all that was needed was to revive it. Central to this idea is the use of reason as a standard for progress and modernity. Al Afghani's imagines the East as a pan-Islamic state, unified and capable of resisting European hegemony.

Benedict Anderson defines nations as “imagined political communities—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”<sup>46</sup> Anderson is undoubtedly influenced by the works of Ernest Renan who put forth similar ideas of the nation in his 1882 article, “Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?” In it he writes:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form.<sup>47</sup>

Al Afghani's construction of the orient, or the Islamic East fits into these ideas. He grafts his Islamic view onto Renan's French *la patrie* and nation. In addition to the *ummah* or

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<sup>46</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1983), 6.

<sup>47</sup> Renan, “Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?”

community, Al Afghani also makes frequent reference to *watan*.<sup>48</sup> Some scholars like Nikki Keddie have translated *watan* as “fatherland” likely drawing from European tropes. However, *watan* is an Arabic and Persian word that is gendered feminine. It would accurately be translated as “motherland,” or a feminine-gendered beloved. Traditionally, *watan* carried mystical meaning and referred specifically to the land that bore you and the land to which you return when you are buried. There is a very clear allusion to the womb that bears you and the womb to which you return. *Watan* is also used in premodern Sufi poetry to refer to a world beyond often described as a beloved state to be yearned for.<sup>49</sup> By the nineteenth century *watan* had come to be entirely a female beloved, but Afsaneh Najamabadi rightly notes the homoerotic undertones of the idea of the beloved. Gender was not always directly tied to sexual divisions and the feminine included beautiful men and boys in addition to women. She argues that by the nineteenth century, the Islamic world absorbed European heteronormativity in representations of the beloved.<sup>50</sup> While the *watan* as mother was always female, as a beloved its gender was more ambiguous. Traditionally, *watan* referred to a place of one’s birth, often a home city, in the nineteenth century it was reimagined during nationalist discourses as a motherland, undoubtedly grafting the feminine *watan* to the French concept of *la patrie*. Al Afghani also employs *watan* in this fashion, as a unified territory; the beloved motherland of the Islamic East protected by a fraternity of brothers.<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, this is a reversal of the image depicted in orientalist discourse. Al Afghani transforms this by making Europe the place of menace, the orient as the place needing protecting. By the time of Al Afghani’s writings, *watan* had come to adopt the

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<sup>48</sup> Jamal ad-Din Al Afghani, “Hakim ash-Sharq.” *Misr*, Vol 2 no. 47, May 24, 1879.

<sup>49</sup> Najamabadi, Afsaneh, *Women With Mustaches and Men Without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California, 2005), 98.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Al Afghani, *Misr*.

gender norms of Europe and motherland and beloved homeland were both feminine. Central to the formation of the watan was a territory unified and joined together in community.

Al Afghani imagines a unified Islamic world that shares communion horizontally due to their shared heritage of Islamic rationalism. He bases this principle of Islamic rationalism as a memory from Islam's past and uses it as a means to unify the present through shared heritage. The unification of the East through its shared heritage and consequent revival of Islamic rationalism would create a progressive, scientific, and modern alternative polity that could successfully oppose and resist European imperial hegemony. Some scholars like Albert Hourani, Nikki Keddie, and others view Al Afghani as a reformer, but he is more a revivalist. He sees Islamic civilization as already capable of the modernity and progress taking place in Europe. Invoking the shared past, unifies the Islamic world and reviving that past spirit restores the Islamic world to the trajectory of progress. In this area, Al Afghani and the conservative ulema share common ground. Both the ulema and Al Afghani turned to Islam itself as a means of countering the growing threat of European influence, but they diverged on the particulars. The ulema focused on returning Islam to a purer time, namely the era of the first and second generation Muslims. Al Afghani on the other hand, while also acknowledging a golden age in the past, does not seek to return to the past, but rather to use that past as a point of unity and to revive the characteristics and the spirit of that past. Where the ulema focused on the first and second generation Muslims, Al Afghani focused on the Abbasid period with its philosopher-Muslims. Where the ulema sought to return to a "pure" Islam, Al Afghani sought to revitalize rational Islam, one that bridged differences and unified the Islamic world.

In his genealogy of secularism, Talal Assad states that secularism "is an enactment by which a political medium (representation of citizenship) redefines and transcends particular and

differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender, and religion.”<sup>52</sup> In the same way, Al Afghani’s construction of pan-Islamism functions as a means of transcending difference in the East; it transcends differentiations in language, customs, and even sects to unify and join together an imagined community sharing in communion of its heritage. If one remembers that Al Afghan himself may indeed have been Shia and was speaking to a primarily Sunni audience, this idea of transcending even religious sects through Islamic rationalism becomes particularly significant. Though some speculate as to whether he was Shia or Sunni, he remains quite tight-lipped about the matter. Most of his writing focuses on Islam as a unified social and political force. That is not to say he did not engage in theology, but rather avoided sectarian differences. His ambiguous religious affiliations in addition to his focus on rational Islam attempts to transcend religious sectarian difference.

When Al Afghani established reason and rationality as the standard of progress, he called up the figure of Ibn Sina as a model on how the achievement of that ideal was already part of the Islamic heritage that was to be revived in the present time. When it came to Islamic rationalism as a means by which to transcend territorial, linguistic, and religious boundaries in the formation of the pan-Islamic state, Al Afghani himself serves as the ultimate symbol. He speaks Farsi and claims to be from Afghanistan, though writes and teaches in Arabic—the language of Islam and the major thinkers of the Islamic world—he wears Turkic robes and a North African head piece.<sup>53</sup> It is not a stretch to think that a man who deliberately obfuscated parts of his life and who enjoyed playing the role of trickster from time to time, would dress in a deliberate manner. In a way, he is constructing his own identity alongside the Pan-Islamic state. While it may seem

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<sup>52</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, and Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 5.

<sup>53</sup> Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal Ad-Din Al Afghani: A Political Biography*, 2.

disparate and contradictory, it can be taken into context as a construction of identity that transcends divisions. Al Afghani himself becomes the first citizen of the pan-Islamic civilization, inheritor of the Islamic rationalism of the glorified past. Though he inherited that past, he does not seek to return to it for progress is essential in Al Afghani's vision of Islamic civilization.

The aim of reviving a rational brand of Islam was to unify the east and bring about progress. A hallmark of that progress was education and learning that transcended gender. Just as rational Islam as a unifying force aimed at transcending religious and ethnic divisions, education transcends gender. In "Hakim ash-Sharq" which translates to "Wisdom of the East," Al Afghani writes:

I am warning you gentlemen against thinking that you will attain the qualities of civilization, acquire knowledge, and advance toward progress and happiness if knowledge among you is confined to men; I am warning you that you should ignore that it is impossible for us to emerge from stupidity, from the prison of humiliation and distress, and from the depths of weakness and ignominy as long as women are deprived of rights and ignorant of their duties, for they are the mothers from whom will come elementary education and primary morality.<sup>54</sup>

The East, in order to attain the qualities of civilization had to ensure learning and education transcended gender divisions. There is no clear indication that Al Afghani fought ardently for gender equality as there are scant passages about women and his lectures and writings were mostly directed at men. However, knowledge and learning were equated with light and truth, religious qualities, and therefore transcended divisions. In orientalist discourses, the oppression of women was an evident sign of the orient's backwardness. Al Afghani's call for equality in education is a challenge to address this sign of backwardness in order to bring about progress. Again, this contrasts strongly with the conservative ulema who were preoccupied with

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<sup>54</sup> Al Afghani, "Hakim ash-Sharq" *Misr*, Vol. II no. 47, May 24, 1897

preservation and purification for which separation of genders and clear gender boundaries was the hallmark. Interestingly, Al Afghani casts females in the roles of mother. Unlike men who were part of a fraternity of the ibn Sharq, women were the mothers of the pan-Islamic state. The sons and brothers were to protect the mother, but it was the mother that bore them and instructed them in morality and elementary education. The education of women was both a sign of progress and the means by which the sons of the new state were to begin their education. It was education and progress that was the hallmark of civilization. If rational Islam was to unify the ummah, then education would spark progress and civilization.

The focus on Islamic civilization is central for Al Afghani's vision of a unified East that bridges differences of creed, ethnicity, and makes headway in differences in gender. Unlike the conservative ulema who envision a religious community emulating sacred ancestors, Al Afghani envisions a nation of citizens unified by Islamic civilization. His focus on the Muslim philosophers of the Abbasid period is significant in this regard; it reveals his vision of rational Islam as a force for civilization that encourages science, philosophy, and the arts. That is not to say that Al Afghani was irreligious or his vision of Islam was stripped of the sacred and was entirely secular. Rather he emphasized its rational characteristics as capable of producing civilization and overcoming sectarian and ethnic divisions. Recognizing Al Afghani's focus on rational Islam alongside education and their role in pan-Islamism illuminates the subtleties in his arguments and reconciles the difference in tone between his two responses while constructing the modern Muslim man and the political state to which he belonged to.

## **Conclusion**

While the tone and language between the "Response to Ernest Renan" seemingly contrasts rather strongly with some of his other writings, there is a common thread that is being

woven. In his exchange with Ernest Renan he is attempting to restore the orient as the equal of Europe, if one step behind on the evolutionary trajectory, but equal nevertheless in that they both have a tradition of reason and science. In his other works, he argues for a religious revival through reason and learning. This reformation is not to be an imitation of Europe, but to be instigated through the inherent capacity of the Muslim religion to reconcile its faith with reason. Through this discourse an Orient is constructed as an alternative to that of the one imagined by the orientalist. Where for the orientalist, the Orient was backwards, exotic, other, and religious as a result of its feminine character. Al Afghani's construction of an orient or *ash-Sharq* is unified under Islamic rationalism. Reason and religion coexist as equally modern traits among the men of the East. When he engages with the orientalist Ernest Renan, he defends the Islamic world, but takes a seemingly irreligious tone. However, as this work has shown, when the works are put in conversation with one another and into the context of the relevant discourses of modernity and traditionalism taking place in the Middle East, then the difference is resolved. Al Afghani is not taking an irreligious tone or showing his inner secularist. Rather he agrees with Renan that religion hampers progress and science, but only a specific type of religion. For Al Afghani it was the traditional purist religion of the conservative ulema that stifle religion and progress. He agrees with Renan, but simultaneously uses the argument to further his own agenda when he reminds Renan of Islam's rational past. It is that rational brand of Islam that becomes the thread that connects his two responses together, just as it was to also to unify the Islamic world. When speaking to Renan he rejects the Islam of the conservative ulema. When speaking to the Materialists he rejects the outright imitation of secular Europe and instead champions Islam—that is rational Islam—as the adhesive that binds society together and the moral force that makes



man upright. It is this rational Islam that Al Afghani hoped would unify the Islamic world into a pan-Islamic state capable of resisting European imperialism.

This pan-Islamic society governed by reason and religion together represented for Al Afghani the only means by which to combat the imperial influence of Europe. In order to challenge those European powers, Al Afghani engaged in an intellectual discourse that constructed the very notion of a pan-Islamic East in opposition to the Orient imagined by Europe. This construction accepted some of the orientalist notions like that of the religious quality of the orient and its homogeneity while rejecting others like the orient's inability to sustain reason. It is one of the most striking qualities of Al Afghani's pan-Islamic state; that it is constructed by drawing from multiple discourses and grafting onto those threads new meaning. It absorbed the European ideas of state and fatherland and grafted them onto the gendered ideas of ummah and Islamic community. It took watan from a place of birth and fused it with European notions of state and fatherland to transform it into a motherland. And like the nation, the watan was populated by devout sons educated by dutiful mothers who stood ready to defend the motherland. From the Islamic world he drew from the discourse between the modernists and the conservative ulema. Al Afghani's pan-Islamic state drew upon the idea of a glorified past, but focused not on the early period of the religious Islamic community, but on Persian Islamic civilization as a golden age. It transformed the idea of glorified ancestors from the salaf to the Muslim philosopher. Similarly, it rejected the outright secularist and overly rational perspective of the neicheri while at the same time upholding reason and learning as ideals and hallmarks of progress. Together with rational Islam, learning and education became central for Al Afghani's pan-Islamic state.

In 1897 Al Afghani succumbed to cancer, but his influence continued after his death. He quickly became the forefather of the Islamic modernist movements of Muhammad Abduh as well as the pan-Islamic movements of the religious literalists like the Salafiyya movement. The ruptures in the discourse flow into these two different movements. While reformers and modernist adopt Al Afghani's stance on reason and science as markers of modernity and progress, the puritanical movements like the Salafiyya capitalize on the notions of a glorious past golden age and a pan-Islamic political state. They fuse the conservative ulema's ideal religious community with Al Afghani's anti-imperial pan-Islamic state in opposition to Europe. The impulses for both can be found in the writings of Al Afghani. To each of these groups, Al Afghani's writings means something else. Due to the constructed nature of the pan-Islamic state, it becomes reinterpreted to fit new models and aims that at times seem entirely contradictory to Al Afghani's own stance. Though he continues to remain mostly a mystery what does become clear from a study of Al Afghani's engagement with orientalists and orientalism is that the orient took part in its own construction and in innovative and interesting ways. Understanding this, we can shake off the imagined geography of the orient as merely an orientalist construction, or European imposed representation, and instead look at how the Middle East partook and continues to partake in its own construction; to examine its contradictions, its imaginings, and the meaning they continue to hold. By looking at Al Afghani and the way in which he rejected the orientalist's imaginings, the ulema's sermons, and the neicheris calls, while simultaneously drawing from them and grafting his own interpretation and meaning, we can see the way the intellectual discourse of the Middle East flow through him into the movements that follow and how they shape the modern Middle East and Islam. Returning to the figure of the sheikh from the

1921 movie, it is through Al Afghani that we see through the eyes of the sheikh and how he saw Europe and himself.

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