

Islamic Political Thought and the Critique of Imperialism

**A paper presented at the
Western Political Science Association Meeting
San Diego, March 20-22, 2008**

**Margaret Kohn
University of Toronto
kohn@utsc.utoronto.ca**

Abstract: This essay provides an interpretation of Sayyid Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, a key figure in nineteenth century Islamic political thought. His work has been the source of controversy. One aspect of this controversy is the tension between “Refutation of the Materialists,” Afghani’s well-known defense of religious orthodoxy, and a short newspaper article entitled “Reply to Renan,” which dismisses prophetic religion as dogmatic and intellectually stifling. In this essay I argue that close attention to Afghani’s theory of civilization helps resolve this apparent contradiction. Afghani’s interest in the French historian Guizot is well-known, but its significance has not been fully explored in the literature. Understanding Guizot’s distinctive approach to the concept of civilization illuminates Afghani’s writings on the political utility of religion. Afghani was an ardent anti-imperialist and his goal was to encourage reform in Islamic countries while resisting Western hegemony. He concluded that both prophetic religion and critical thought were necessary for Islamic civilization to flourish.

The relationship between religion and politics has not been a prominent theme in contemporary political theory. Given the strong consensus in favor of secularism, theoretical work has tended to focus on refining and balancing the two dominant principles: the separation of church and state and the right to freely exercise one’s religion. Framed as part of the issue of multicultural accommodation, these on-going debates illuminate questions such as whether Sikhs should be exempt from requirements to wear motorcycle helmets, whether French school girls can don the *hijab*, and whether kosher and hallal butchers practice animal cruelty.¹ Recently, however, political theorists have begun to pay renewed attention to the broader question of whether religious doctrine is a valid source of public reason and whether religious law should

¹ See for example, Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Nancy Hirschmann, “Rethinking Feminist Universalism, Western Feminism, Eastern Veiling, and the Question of Free Agency,” *Constellations* 5 (3), 345–368; Nancy Rosenblum, *Membership and Morals: The Personal Uses of Pluralism in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

play a role in modern legal systems.² The renewed interest in these questions may reflect the visibility of the religious right in the United States and the influence of political Islam across the globe.³

This paper turns to modern Islamic political theory to deepen our understanding of the arguments in favor of linking religion and politics. Rather than providing a schematic overview of a vast and complex literature, however, it focuses on “Refutation of the Materialists,” one of the most famous works by the influential Islamic modernist Sayyid Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani.⁴ Afghani’s essay starts with a basically Hobbesian account of endemic conflict and then explains why religion is the best method for creating social order. His main argument is that religion provides the conditions for societal advance and general well-being. Secular sovereignty is inadequate because it incorporates no mechanism short of revolution for ensuring that the rulers as well as the ruled follow the law. In spite of his frequent references to the Koran, Afghani’s critique of secularism and heterodoxy is pragmatic and political rather than theological.⁵ For

² See Simone Chambers, “How Religion Speaks to the Agnostic: Habermas on the Persistent Value of Religion,” *Constellations* vol. 14, no. 2 (2007): 210-223; Juergen Habermas, *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*, ed. Eduardo Medieta (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

³ See Susan Buck-Morss, *Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left* (London: Verso, 2003).

⁴ Sayyid Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, “The Truth about the Neicheri Sect and an Explanation of the Neicheris,” in *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani*, trans. Nikkie Keddie and Hamid Alger (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

⁵ This is similar to the interpretation provided by Roxanne Euben in *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University

Afghani, whose own orthodoxy was a matter of some controversy, Islam was a necessary source of unity, identity, and mobilization against imperialism.⁶ His writing about Islam as a source of political identity and mobilization provides insight into the factors behind the revival of Islamic orthodoxy today.

Afghani's explanation of the political utility of religion may illuminate contemporary politics, but it also raises some difficult interpretive questions. In "Refutation of the Materialists" Afghani forcefully defended religious orthodoxy but in a short article entitled "Reply to Renan" he criticized Islam as dogmatic and intolerant. These two contradictory texts draw attention to an ambivalence about reason and revelation that runs throughout his work. This interpretive puzzle forces us to look more closely at the motifs of progress, historical development, and civilization that underlie his analysis. In this essay, I suggest that understanding Guizot's distinctive approach to the concept of civilization illuminates Afghani's writings on the political utility of religion.

Scholarly studies of Afghani have been controversial, in part because of his status as an iconic founder of pan-Islamism and Egyptian nationalism.⁷ In this paper, I focus less attention on Afghani's role as a political actor and instead treat Afghani's writing as political theory, in other words, as a set of texts that systematically and provocatively explore enduring political problems. Afghani tackles core disciplinary questions: what type of government promotes human flourishing? how should we live? what sources can guide us in answering these questions? Yet

Press, 1999).

⁶ For an interpretation emphasizing this argument, see Elie Kedourie, *Afghani and 'Abduh: An Essay on Religious Unbelief and Political Activism in Modern Islam* (London: Cass, 1966).

⁷ For an excellent overview of the contemporary scholarship on al-Afghani in the Arabic world, see Rudi Matthee, "Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and the Egyptian National Debate," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (1989), vol. 21, issue 2: 151-169.

his work is probably unfamiliar to most political theorists. As a discipline, political theory is extremely Eurocentric and this impoverishes our understanding of important theoretical issues.⁸ Many political theorists probably agree that the discipline would be much richer if it incorporated more non-Western sources, but there are barriers to this type of project. For political theorists from Europe and North America, our graduate training (including languages, history, and intellectual history) focuses entirely on European sources. Scholars are usually cautious about interpreting works outside their area of expertise. This tendency is exacerbated when the unfamiliar area involves non-Western sources and the fear of reproducing discredited orientalist approaches or representational practices.⁹ Although there are no easy solutions to these difficulties, they should be treated as challenges rather than insurmountable barriers.¹⁰ The

⁸ There are important exceptions to this generalization, most notably Roxanne Euben's influential books *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) and *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). See also Fred Dallmayr's pioneering efforts to introduce non-Western text into political theory: *Beyond Orientalism: Essays on Cross-Cultural Encounter* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996). There is also a rich literature in on Medieval Islamic political philosophy that was influenced by Leo Strauss. In addition to the works cited below, see Charles Butterworth, "Rhetoric and Islamic Political Philosophy," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 3 (1972): 187-198.

⁹ See Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Representations of the Orient* (New York: Penguin, 1985); Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice," *Wedge* 7/8 (1985): 120-130.

¹⁰ This paper relies on several excellent secondary sources written by area studies experts as well as primary texts that are available in translation. The primary sources include six important essays that are translated by Nikki Keddie in *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*; two dozen newspaper articles and letters by Afghani as well as reports about Afghani, translated into French by Homa Pakdaman in her book *Djamal-ed-din Assad Abadi dit Afghani* (Paris: G. P. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1969); 13 additional newspaper articles translated by Marcel Colombe

intellectual rewards to be gained from engaging global perspectives are too great.

I: Afghani's Anti-Imperialism

Sayyid Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani (1839-1897) was a prominent figure who lived in Turkey, Egypt, Iran, France, and Afghanistan, working as a political advisor, teacher, and writer. His thought influenced both the reformist and radical strands of political Islam. He was an early mentor of Mohammed Abduh, who is considered one of the founding figures of liberal Islam. Afghani's ideas were appealing to Muslim reformers because he extolled the virtues of Western science. He also insisted that rationalism and science were not Western imports but traditional elements of Islamic culture. This position, however, was viewed with suspicion and hostility by the more traditional elements of the religious establishment. In 1871 Afghani was exiled from Turkey because of a speech embracing Western science and defending philosophy as equal to prophecy.¹¹ Although this later position had roots in the Islamic philosophy of the 10th to 13th centuries, it was considered a heterodox view that had been repudiated by theologians.

Despite Afghani's activities as a reformer, he also inspired movements usually associated with the term radical or fundamentalist.¹² Afghani was a radical in so far as he embraced

into French. These appeared in the journal *Orient*, issues 21 – 25 (1962). One of the classic secondary sources is Albert Hourani's *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1798-1939* (London: Cass, 1962).

¹¹ See Nikki Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani," : A Political Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

¹² In this paper, I will use the term radical instead of fundamentalist for two reasons. First, following Bobby Sayyid I think that the term fundamentalist primarily marks that which seems alien, threatening, and unassimilable to the West. Second, scholars have suggested that the term is confusing and imprecise because many Islamic radicals employ novel and allegorical readings of scripture that depart from traditional interpretations. The term "radical" communicates two

Islamic principles as a way of bringing about a distinctive political logic: modernization without Western hegemony. Over the course of Afghani's career, he increasingly emphasized the importance of Islam as a framework for mobilizing resistance to European imperialism in the Middle East. He tried to forge an alliance between anti-Western reformers and traditional figures in the Islamic religious establishment. He laid the intellectual foundations for a coalition that would ultimately prove pivotal to the success of the Iranian Revolution in 1979: an alliance between reformers and the *ulama* (Islamic scholars). Afghani was living in Iran in 1890 when the Iranian government granted a British company a monopoly on the purchase, sale, and export of all tobacco grown in Iran.¹³ This concession directly affected the majority of the population and made the extent of foreign economic control apparent to everyone. Afghani, who had become a passionate anti-imperialist during his years living in British occupied India, used religious appeals to convince Iranians to resist this economic domination by un-believers. He wrote a letter to the head of the Shi'i *ulama*, who issued a *fatwa* (ruling) calling for a boycott on the sale of tobacco. This boycott was successful and the Shah was forced to rescind the British concession. Even though some scholars have concluded that Afghani's role may have been exaggerated,¹⁴ this outcome is strong evidence in favor of his view that Islamic identity could be a powerful force capable of motivating people to participate in the struggle against imperialism.

key elements of contemporary Islamist movements: a return to roots and also a sense of dramatic change. See Bobby Sayyid, *A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1997); Evrand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*, (London: IB Tauris, 1993).

¹³ See Nikki R. Keddie, *Religion and Rebellion in Iran: The Tobacco Protest of 1891-1892* (London 1966), 15-27.

¹⁴ Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*.

This paper focuses on Afghani's work not because of his influence as a political actor (a topic which is contested in the secondary literature) but because of the way that his writings struggle with the political significance of religion in the modern world. The modern world, for Afghani, was a place where European science, military power, and economic development had undermined the political autonomy and threatened the cultural identity of the Islamic world. Modernity and imperialism were integrally linked and it was difficult to separate the technical innovations and culture from the military domination and economic exploitation that were key elements of the new global system. To the subjugated people of the Middle East, the West signified not only a geographical entity (Europe) but also a religious system, a history of geopolitical rivalry, and a set of values. To its detractors, these values were primarily negative: materialism, hedonism, secularism, and atomism. Others associated the West with science, rationality, critical thinking, and material progress.¹⁵ Some political leaders and intellectuals responded by arguing that the only way to reassert political independence was to adopt the Western practices that had ensured military superiority.¹⁶ This approach was realized most fully in Turkey under Ataturk (1923-1945) and was based on an integrated approach that included secularism, nationalism, and modernization.¹⁷ It was emulated to varying degrees by other Muslim nations in the early twentieth century, especially Reza Khan in Iran (1925-1941). The alternative was to reject Western society altogether and promote strict adherence to traditional

¹⁵ See Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of its Enemies* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004); Stuart Hall and Bran Giebe, eds. *The Formation of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992); Cemil Aydin, "Between Occidentalism and the Global Left: Islamist Critique of the West in Turkey," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 26, no. 3 (2006): 446-461.

¹⁶ One example of this approach was the Tunisian Khayr al-Din. See Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*.

¹⁷ Binnaz Toprak, *Islam and Political Development in Turkey* (Leiden: EJ Brill, 1981).

religious practices, prohibitions, and legal and educational institutions. Afghani was among a small but influential number of thinkers who tried to articulate an alternative. He insisted on the social function of religious orthodoxy and also defended rationalism and critical thinking. His polemic against the *Neicheris* (an Indian group espousing naturalism or materialism) reads like a vitriolic attack on Western values, but Afghani cannot simply be dismissed as an “occidentalists.” In the same period he also wrote several articles and speeches embracing practices such as philosophy, science, and rationalism which were associated with the West. These apparently contradictory positions are a puzzle that has intrigued scholars, who have reached very different conclusions about his true character and agenda.

II: Refutation of the Materialists

Afghani’s best known work is usually translated as “Refutation of the Materialists.” According to Nikki Keddie, the essay was composed in 1880 as an attack on Sayyid Ahmad Khan and his followers, the *Neicheriyya*.¹⁸ Khan was an influential public figure in British occupied India. Like Afghani himself, Khan was a reformer who defended reason and science. Unlike Afghani, however, Khan advocated cooperation with the British rather than nationalist or pan-Islamist opposition to foreign domination. According to Keddie, “Refutation of the Materialists” is a thinly veiled polemic attacking Khan’s movement because Afghani felt that the movement was undermining Muslim unity and Muslim identity.

This political subtext, however, is not readily apparent in the essay. In a separate piece written during the same period, Afghani attacks Khan more directly but the “Refutation of the

¹⁸ Nikki R. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamal ad-Din “al-Afghani,”* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 57-73. See also Aziz Ahmad, “Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Jamal al-din al-Afghani and Muslim India,” *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment* (Oxford 1964).

Materialists” is a theoretical piece with few direct references to contemporary politics. In the essay, Afghani explains the social and political utility of religion, which he defines as a system of laws and practices based on the belief in a transcendent deity. Afghani argues that materialism is a source of corruption that causes social discord. He traces the concept of materialism back to its Greek roots and claims that it is an approach that is antithetical to the philosophy of Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. His examples of materialists (or naturalists) include Epicurus, Diogenes, and Darwin. According to Afghani, the logical consequence of materialism is the denial of the existence of a transcendent deity. Materialism therefore undermines people’s faith in religion. This is disastrous because religion is necessary to inculcate morals, ensure political stability, and foster civilizational advance.

In “Refutation of the Materialists,” Afghani argues that religion teaches three important beliefs that have enormous social utility. First is the idea that man is created in God’s image and is therefore the most noble creature. Second, religion fosters a belief in the superiority of the community sharing one’s faith. Finally, religion teaches that earthly existence provides humans with the opportunity to perfect themselves and gain access to the afterlife. Each of these beliefs encourages humans to control their animalistic side and cultivate their higher capacities for love, justice, and wisdom. Not only does this improve the individual character, but it also establishes the conditions necessary for society as a whole to advance.

According to Afghani, man’s animal nature is an obstacle that prevents him from truly flourishing. He notes that frequently men behave like sheep, for example when they face adversity with passivity and fear. Human beings are capable of actively creating the conditions that protect themselves from misfortune, but in order to do so, they need to control their animalistic side and defer gratification. Sheep-like passivity, however, is not the only threat to

human flourishing. Men also behave like wolves or lions, tearing others to pieces. Religion subdues these vicious urges and valorizes man's higher (more God-like) qualities.

III: The Influence of Islamic Neo-Platonism

This emphasis on controlling our animalistic qualities is a theme in medieval Islamic philosophy. The echoes of neo-Platonism are strong even in Afghani's most orthodox essay.¹⁹ The neo-Platonist opposition between the rational soul and animalistic body runs throughout the text. For neo-Platonists, the goal of philosophical practice was to attain understanding of universal, abstract ideas and loosen the grip of transitory corporeal existence.²⁰ Under the influence of Islam, these goals had to be reconciled with monotheism and prophetic religion. Ibn Sina (Avicenna), for example, argued that Mohammed was a great philosopher who possessed both theoretical and practical wisdom. His practical wisdom gave him the ability to translate philosophical truths and principles of conduct into an idiom that was accessible to the masses. From this perspective, the Koran is a rhetorically powerful pedagogical tool for introducing the common people to lessons derived from higher levels of wisdom. Prophecy is not opposed to philosophy; instead, it reflects the artful combination of theoretical, imaginative, and practical reason.

This method of reconciling neo-Platonism and Islam, however, ran into a number of theoretical problems. Orthodox critics of Islamic philosophy such as al-Ghazali insisted that the Koran provides a detailed account of the afterlife that specifies the resurrection of the body. This cannot be reconciled with the neo-Platonist idea that the rational soul alone attains identity with

¹⁹ On Islamic Philosophy, see Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

²⁰ Mushim S. Mahdi, *Alfarabi and the Foundation of Islamic Political Philosophy* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

the active intellect (God). Al-Ghazali saw this teaching as one illustration of the essentially heterodox and even anti-Islamic character of philosophy. Islamic philosophy had always been controversial and the publication of al-Ghazali's influential "Incoherence of the Philosophers," (c. 1095) strengthened the position of traditional religious opponents. After a period of repression, however, a number of scholars in the Arab-Spanish world rediscovered the tradition of Islamic neo-Platonism. Ibn Rushd (1126-1198, Avveroes) is the best known figure in this renaissance. He wrote extensive commentaries on Aristotle, critiques of Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, and an extended reflection on reason and revelation, entitled "Incoherence of the Incoherence." This latter work was a response to al-Ghazali. It demonstrated the metaphorical character of the Koran and the need for interpretation, as opposed to literal application, of Koranic principles. Even though Ibn Rushd's work never became hegemonic, he continued to exert a subterranean influence on Muslim thought, particularly in the Sh'ite world.²¹ Afghani, who was raised in Iran, was familiar with Islamic philosophy, which informed his struggle to reintegrate reason and revelation into a viable Islamic political philosophy.²²

In his writing on education, Afghani emphasized the importance of studying Islamic philosophy, which he felt fostered a scientific, rationalistic mindset without uncritically imitating European models and strengthening European hegemony.²³ "Refutation of the Materialists" reflects the influence of Islamic philosophy (*falsafa*), but it also evades some of the theoretical

²¹ Antony Black, *The History of Islamic Political Thought: From the Prophet to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

²² Afghani, "The Benefits of Philosophy," in Keddie *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, pp. 109-122. See also Keddie, *Sayyid Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani,": A Political Biography*.

²³ For a discussion of Afghani on education, see Sharif al-Mujahid, *Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-afghani: His role in the 19th century Muslim Awakening* (April 1954), MA thesis, McGill University.

controversies, presumably in order to avoid directly challenging more orthodox views. Afghani's discussion of the afterlife, for example, reflects this strategy. While never denying the possibility of bodily resurrection, Afghani implies that the body is simply irrelevant. Given the incorporeal character of God himself, the pleasures of the after life must be incorporeal. For Afghani, like Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd, God is wisdom therefore the best preparation for the afterlife is attaining wisdom. In "Refutation of the Materialists," Afghani takes the familiar argument that religion, particularly the idea of a reward in the after life, is necessary to teach morality to the masses and gives it a more rationalist character. He insists that people should cultivate wisdom to share in God's qualities both on earth and in heaven.

Afghani also echoed Ibn Sina when he emphasized the social function of religion, but he developed this argument in a distinctively modern direction. For the Islamic philosophers, religious law was necessary to provide guidance for people who were unable or unwilling to deduce the principles of ethical conduct directly from reason. Afghani, however, was also influenced by the nineteenth century European theories of civilization and progress, and pushed this idea in a novel direction.²⁴ As we will see below, he felt that prophetic religion in general, and Islam in particular, civilized barbarous people by teaching them proto-philosophical skills such as self-restraint and abstract thought. The Prophet Mohammed not only introduced a set of eternal truths but also gave birth to a new, progressive Islamic civilization. This helps explain Afghani's somewhat puzzling claim that sectarian pride is a positive side of religion. Other commentators have reached the opposite conclusion, assuming that the rivalry between religious sects is a cause of anarchy and chaos.²⁵ Afghani claimed that communal pride motivates men to seek excellence and thereby fosters civilizational progress. He argued, "the man who believes

²⁴ Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, 114.

²⁵ See for example, Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Penguin, 1982).

this (his group's superiority) will enter into rivalry and competition with the other communities; will compete against them in the arena of virtues; and will seek to be superior to and above all other communities in all the human virtues, whether intellectual, spiritual, or material."²⁶ He adds that someone who has a strong sense of group pride will want to emulate the accomplishments of other groups. This dynamic will also foster the advance of humanity, as each group stimulates the other towards greater accomplishments. This argument helps make sense of Afghani's attitude toward Europe, which involved both admiration and passionate condemnation. He had a deep commitment to the dignity and worth of his own Islamic culture. He also recognized and appreciated the scientific and technical advances in Europe. Instead of rejecting these European accomplishments, he wanted the Islamic world to emulate and surpass Europe so that it would not become subordinate to Europe.

Afghani's third argument in favor of religion is probably the most conventional. It is a version of the familiar claim that morality and obedience are impossible if people do not believe that they will be punished or rewarded for their actions. Afghani, however, provides a distinctively philosophical spin on this argument. He suggests that a belief in an afterlife stimulates "true science and sound knowledge."²⁷ How does this happen? The underlying logic of his argument seems to be that wisdom is the quality that man shares with the divine, therefore preparing for the afterlife involves cultivating wisdom. Since material comfort (which appeals to our animalist side) is not the purpose of human life, religious people have no motive to use deceit and treachery to gain wealth. Since cultivating divinity is the best possible life, religious people do have a compelling reason to choose a life of intellectual excellence. Read in this fashion, Afghani's argument is less a cautionary tale of divine rewards and punishments and more a

²⁶ Afghani, "Refutation of the Materialists," in Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, 142.

²⁷ Afghani, "Refutation of the Materialists," 145.

radicalization of the first principle. Since the afterlife is unity with the divine, a life of godliness (e.g. wisdom) is the best preparation.

In the next section of the “Refutation of the Materialists,” Afghani claims that religion is necessary because it produces three qualities that are essential for the common good: shame, trustworthiness, and truthfulness. According to Afghani, shame is more important “than hundreds of laws” for maintaining the social order.²⁸ He argues that shame is the attitude that binds society together. He explains that, “This quality (shame) is the bond of human alliances, associations, and societies, since an alliance within one group takes place only when rules are maintained, and the maintenance of rules is never achieved except with this noble trait.”²⁹ He seems to be making the sociological point that group solidarity is enhanced when the members agree to the same code of conduct. Inculcating a feeling of shame at violating such codes is the only way to ensure that they are followed and thus to maintain social cohesion. Afghani does not explain exactly what role religion plays in cultivating a sense of shame. There are two things that Afghani may have had in mind, when he suggested that religion encourages a salutary sense of shame. First, he may have believed that the success of Islam in the 7th to the 11th centuries was due to the fact that it provided a uniform code of conduct that facilitated social intercourse between Arab tribes and peoples with different cultures. By creating a general set of guidelines for identifying honorable and shameful behavior, *Shari’a* laid the basis for a strong civilization. Second, Afghani notes that punishment (short of death) is ineffective in regulating the conduct of men who are surrounded by others who share base and corrupt values. In other words, the norms that develop in social life are not effective when there are subcultures that do not share the

²⁸ Afghani, “Refutation of the Materialists,” 142.

²⁹ Afghani, “Refutation of the Materialists,” 142.

dominant values. Afghani implies that religion provides a uniform code that identifies shameful behavior and teaches individuals to internalize widely acceptable values.

Afghani also argues that religion is necessary to ensure that people behave in a trustworthy and truthful manner. Although he does not use the language of the state of nature, he describes an irreligious world in a manner very similar to Hobbes.

Know that man's needs are many and the necessities of his life are innumerable. The things whereby he meets his needs are each hidden under a curtain. Each one is secluded somewhere under a concealing veil, and hidden without a name or sign. Know that thousands of calamities, misfortunes, and disasters lurk in every corner of the world. A deadly arrow aiming at man's destruction is hidden in the bow of ages and in the turns of fortune. Although he may have come to realize the calamities that wait in ambush for him, he is unable to preserve his life.³⁰ The only way to prevent disaster is by relying on the guidance and aid of others. Without truthfulness, solidarity - the only weapon against the ravages of fortune - commodious living would be impossible. Afghani's argument, then, differs from Hobbes' in at least one important way. The adversities of the state of nature are not necessarily caused by other people. They almost seem to be intrinsic to existence itself. Even if the isolated individual was not attacked by other people, he or she would be vulnerable to hunger, natural disasters, animals, disease, etc. Solidarity with other people is portrayed as an essential and positive thing but a precarious achievement. Only when religion ensures truthfulness will individuals be able to rely on other people, their one resource in overcoming adversity. Here and throughout the text, Afghani's defense of religion is distinctly political. He does not say that faith in God or prayer will provide the solutions to terrestrial problems. Instead, he suggests that religion provides the social conditions that allow humans to help each other.

Afghani makes the political dimension explicit in his discussion of "trustworthiness," the other quality produced by religion. He notes that government is necessary in order ensure human

³⁰ Afghani, "Refutation of the Materialists," 147.

flourishing. Someone must interpret revealed law, enact civil law, enforce the law, and settle disputes. The government must also collect taxes to fund projects for the common good (libraries, schools, hospitals, bridges, roads, etc). and pay the civil servants who are responsible for public administration. But any type of government, whether republican, constitutional, or absolute, risks becoming corrupt and pursuing its self-interest at the expense of the common good.

He explains,

The performance of their duties in a manner that keeps corruption from entering the government, by this fourfold group (e.g. religious experts, administrators, civil judges, and finance), who are the four pillars of governments, is based on the quality of trustworthiness. If they are not trustworthy the entire nation will be deprived of its tranquility and security; rights will be nullified, killing and plunder will become flagrant; the roads of trade will close; and the doors of poverty and indigence will open before the people.³¹

Only the moral trustworthiness inculcated by religion is capable of tempering this tendency. For Afghani, no purely political theory can provide the conditions for political order because religion is necessary in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the government.

In the next section of the “Refutation of the Materialists,” Afghani explains how the materialists undermine the capacities for shame, truthfulness and trustworthiness. First, he claims that their teachings weaken ambition and slow progress. The reason for this conclusion is similar to the argument made earlier, e.g. the materialist belief that man is simply another animal encourages him to be satisfied with short-term pleasures. Materialists are unable to defer gratification, which ultimately undermines both intellectual and economic growth. Second, he equates materialism with “license and communism”³² and explains how communism undermines civilization. He defines communism as the idea that each person should possess what he desires regardless of the needs or rights of others. This has two negative consequences: excessive passivity and aggression. For Afghani, communism is an elaborate theoretical defense of the

³¹ Afghani, “Refutation of the Materialists,” 146.

³² Afghani, “Refutation of the Materialists,” 149.

behavior typical of the animal world, where a lion will steal the food of a smaller animal such as a cheetah. While communism opens the opportunity for license, it also breeds passivity. Without property rights to protect wealth, there would be no motive for exceptional exertion and men would live like cattle. According to Afghani,

The real cause of the superiority of man is his love for privilege and distinction. When privilege and distinction are removed, souls are stopped from the movement toward eminence and minds neglect to penetrate the truth of things and to discover the subtleties of life.³³

Although this statement emphasizes individual intellectual growth, Afghani also believed that the love of distinction had positive social consequences. Afghani's critique of communism is basically developmentalist. He concludes that communism is a mode of economic and social organization that is incapable of fostering societal advance. His concept of societal advance, like Guizot's, involved both economic prosperity and moral and intellectual development. Economic prosperity, however, is not an end in itself but rather a precondition for moral and intellectual improvement. Afghani claimed that materialism was responsible for the downfall the Persian empire and the anti-materialist character of Islam was the force that regenerated civilization in the Middle East.

For Afghani, philosophy, like religion rightly understood, is about the pursuit of wisdom. Materialists undermine progress because they eschew the self-discipline that is required in order to attain wisdom and embrace hedonism. The "Refutation of the Materialists," however, is structured around an unusual set of oppositions. Instead of juxtaposing philosophy vs. religion or religion vs. science, Afghani *equates* religion, philosophy and science as modes of rationalism and contrasts them with materialism. In doing so, he was unsettling a set of oppositions that had structured Islamic thought at least since al-Ghazali. Traditional *ulama* rejected Western science as anti-Islamic because science (for example astronomy and natural history) contradicted specific

³³ Afghani, "Refutation of the Materialists," 150.

statements in the Koran, such as the assumption that the sun revolved around the earth. This reinforced the tendency to equate science with Westernization and Islam with traditional jurisprudence (*fiq*). Afghani disturbed this binary opposition by insisting on the Islamic character of reformist politics, philosophy and science.

IV: The Reply to Renan

Afghani's colorful life, polemical writings, and mythical reputation have inspired a number of extremely heated debates; the most prominent controversy stems from a short essay entitled "Reply to Renan." The "Reply" was written in response to a lecture by Ernest Renan that condemned the Islamic religion and the Arab people as backward, intolerant, and hostile to science. In this "Reply," published in the *Journal des Débats* in 1883, Afghani disagreed with some of Renan's analysis, but he also took a very negative view of "Muslim religion," which he called dogmatic, intolerant, and hostile to philosophy. He also concluded that "no agreement and no reconciliation" were possible between religion and philosophy.³⁴ It is difficult to understand why the author of "Refutation of the Materialists" would espouse these views. Given the obvious tension between the two essays, most commentators have concluded that Afghani must have adapted his message for different audiences and even dissimulated his views when he thought it was the best way to advance his broader agenda.³⁵ These scholars differ, however, on the nature

³⁴ Afghani, "Answer of Jamal ad-din to Renan," in Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, 187.

³⁵ See especially Kedourie, *Afghani and 'Abduh*, 45. As evidence, Kedourie cites the following passage from a letter from Abduh to Afghani: "We regulate our conduct according to your sound rule: we do not cut the head of religion except with the sword of religion."

of this broader agenda. Some have characterized him as a religious reformer, others as an ardent anti-imperialist, and still others as a cynical self-promoter.³⁶

Another possible solution to this puzzle is Nikki Keddie's suggestion that Afghani's critical comments were aimed at actually existing Islam but were not meant to apply to his philosophical version of Islam. The problem with this interpretation is that in the "Reply to Renan" Afghani never hinted that the true Islam incorporates both philosophy and prophetic religion. Instead, he insisted that they were irreconcilably opposed. He wrote, "Religion imposes itself on man its faith and its belief, whereas philosophy frees him of it totally or in part. How then could one therefore hope that they would agree with each other?"³⁷ Far from signaling that these critical comments only applied to Christianity or to existing Islamic practices, he used the general term "religion," which suggests a necessary and not contingent opposition between religion and philosophy. Instead of implying that the antagonistic relationship was an aberration, he concluded: "It will always be thus."

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to read Afghani's "Reply to Renan" simply as an attack on Islam. In fact, the essay was meant to challenge Renan's broad condemnation of Islam and Arab society as anti-scientific. Afghani explained how Greek philosophy had flourished in the Arab world at a time when such learning had disappeared from Europe. He noted that the Arabs had "developed, extended, clarified, perfected, completed, and coordinated (Greek philosophy

³⁶ Sharif al-Mujahid, *Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-afghani: His role in the 19th century Muslim Awakening* (April 1954), MA thesis, McGill University. For an overview of Afghani scholarship in Arabic, see Rudi Matthee, "Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and the Egyptian National Debate," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (1989) vol. 21, issue 2 (151-169)..

³⁷ Afghani, "Answer of Jamal ad-din to Renan," in Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, 187.

and science) with a perfect taste and a rare precision and exactitude.”³⁸ He challenged Renan’s claim that the Islamic philosophers were Persian and insisted that the great intellectual accomplishments of the golden age (775 – 1250 AD) were evidence of the “intellectual superiority of the Arabs and of their natural attachment to philosophy.” In the last part of the “Reply” he asked “why Arab civilization, after having thrown such a live light on the world, suddenly became extinguished...” and answered that “the responsibility of the Muslim religion appears complete.”³⁹ In other words, he celebrates the actual and potential achievements of Arab (or Islamic) civilization and identifies philosophy and religion as two competing components.

The concept of Islamic or Arab “civilization” is crucial to understanding Afghani’s willingness to espouse apparently contradictory ideas. He defended both empiricism (Western science) and rationalism (philosophy) because he felt that both were necessary to advance Islamic civilization. Western science was needed to bring about the military and material advances that would make the Middle East competitive with Europe. He thought that wealth and technology were important but only as means to an end; the *telos* of human existence was learning and wisdom. Reason was God’s gift to man, a gift that he had to cultivate carefully in order to improve himself and the world. In “Reply to Renan,” Afghani admitted that religion had frequently been opposed to both science and reason. Why then, would he defend religion so passionately? He supported religion because he felt that it contributed to social development (e.g. intellectual and moral virtue combined with growing control over the natural environment). Throughout his writings, he advanced the view that in the early stages of social development, religion was an important stimulus to learning. He also believed that the tension between religion, philosophy, and modern science could stimulate further social development.

³⁸ Afghani, “Answer of Jamal ad-din to Renan,” 184.

³⁹ Afghani, “Answer of Jamal ad-din to Renan,” 187.

Initially the idea that religion could help stimulate science and philosophy seems counterintuitive. In the typical rendering of European history, the weakening of religious orthodoxy and rise of secularism facilitated the Enlightenment. According to this narrative, religion is based on the principle of authority and science is based on the principle of free inquiry. Gallileo's famous repudiation of the heliocentric model of the universe stands as a paradigmatic illustration of the dogmatic character of religious authority and the resulting tension between religion and science. After centuries of conflict, however, free inquiry emerged victorious and the arts, sciences, and economy flourished. By the nineteenth century, reformed religion, science, and commerce seemed to be component parts of something called civilization. Most Europeans assumed that this should serve as a model for the rest of the world. By embracing European ideas and practices, the Middle East could obtain civilization both in the narrow sense of economic development (e.g. technology and prosperity) and in the broader sense of moral and intellectual improvement.⁴⁰ Commentators influenced by the historiography of the Scottish Enlightenment thought that the latter would follow inexorably from the former.⁴¹ With the development of commerce and industry, barbaric attitudes would become anachronistic and good government, universal morality, and the spirit of free inquiry would emerge.

Although Afghani never analyzed European theories of civilizational progress in detail, his writings contain a different view. Like many nineteenth century Europeans, Afghani had a developmental understanding of historical progress, but he did not think that foreign domination would advance civilization in the Islamic world. In a newspaper article entitled "Unity and

Sovereignty or Concord and Victory," (June 5, 1884) he described the experience of foreign

⁴⁰ For a discussion of these two dimensions of the concept of civilization, see John Stuart Mill, *Essays on Politics and Society* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977).

⁴¹ See *Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. David Broadie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

domination as akin to the relationship between human beings and domestic animals. According to Afghani, under imperialism, the native is exploited in order to benefit the foreigner. Under this system, the native people become like sheep, passive, fearful, and loose their ability to control their own destiny.⁴² The imperialists exercise political and cultural power while the native people are forced to labor for the benefit of others. According to Afghani, foreign domination turns the native people into beasts of burden, who loose their higher human capacities of imagination and wisdom.

Afghani objected to the idea that imperialism advanced civilization in the Middle East, but he did not reject the concept of civilization progress or development altogether. Afghani's "developmentalist" approach to religion is very explicit and consistent throughout his work. In "Refutation of the Materialists," for example, he concluded, "Above all it (religion) will be the cause of material and moral progress. It will elevate the banner of civilization among its followers."⁴³ In "Answer to Renan" he made the same argument about the benefits of prophetic religion in the early stages of social development:

And, since humanity, at its origin, did not know the causes of the events that passed under its eyes and the secrets of things, it was perforce led to follow the advice of its teachers and the orders they gave. This obedience was imposed in the name of the Supreme Being to whom the educators attributed all events, without permitting men to discuss its utility or its disadvantages. This is no doubt for man one of the heaviest and most humiliating yokes, as I recognize; but one cannot deny that it is by this religious education, whether it be Muslim, Christian or pagan, that all nations have emerged from barbarism and marched toward a more advanced civilization."⁴⁴

Afghani consistently held the view that religion promoted the development of primitive peoples by inculcating morals, fostering intellectual development, and (especially in Islam) providing a

⁴² Afghani, "Unité et Souveraineté ou Concord et Victoire," trans. Marcel Colombe, *Orient* 22 (1962), p. 126.

⁴³ Afghani, "Refutation of the Materialists," p. 169.

⁴⁴ Afghani, "Reply to Renan," p. 182.

uniform legal code. He believed that both reason and religion were necessary to reverse the decline of Islamic civilization and promoted the virtues of each in different contexts.

In “Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age,” Albert Hourani suggested that Afghani was attracted to the idea of civilizational progress, which was popular in nineteenth-century Europe.⁴⁵ He noted that Guizot’s extremely influential lectures on the history of Europe had been translated in to Arabic in 1877 (two years before he wrote “Refutation of the Materialists”). Hourani also reported that Afghani encouraged Mohammed Abduh to write a positive review of Guizot’s book. A number of subsequent commentators have made the same connection, usually citing Hourani as their source.⁴⁶ I have only found one direct reference to Guizot in Afghani’s writings. In “Refutation of the Materialists,” Afghani endorsed Guizot’s view that the Protestant reformation played an important role in advancing European civilization. However, there are other, more subtle, points of convergence between Guizot’s lectures and Afghani’s theory.⁴⁷ These commonalities have not been recognized.

IV: Guizot’s Approach to Civilization

In order to understand Afghani’s affinity for Guizot, it is necessary to clarify how Guizot’s approach to the concept of civilization differed from other influential variants, for example the four stages thesis. The four stages thesis is associated with historians of the Scottish

⁴⁵ Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, p. 114. For an interesting discussion of developmental history in relation to imperialism, see Uday Mehta, *Liberalism and empire: a study in nineteenth-century British liberal thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

⁴⁶ See for example Mansoor Moaddel, “Conditions for Ideological Production: The Origins of Islamic Modernism in India, Egypt, and Iran,” *Theory & Society* vol. 30, no. 5 2001, 695.

⁴⁷ I am not using the term “influence” because it is difficult to establish whether Guizot influenced Afghani or if, instead, Afghani endorsed Guizot’s ideas because they reinforced his own pre-existing views.

Enlightenment such as Adam Ferguson and John Millar. According to the this account, societies moved from hunting, to herding, to farming, to commerce, a developmental process that enabled a broader societal transformation from “savagery,” through “barbarism,” to “civilization.”⁴⁸

“Civilization” was not just a marker of material development, but also a normative judgment about the moral progress of society.⁴⁹ Guizot, like the Scotts, saw civilization as a complex, multifaceted concept that described cultural, moral, and material excellence. But he rejected the assumption that civilizational advance was driven primarily by forms of social organization (e.g. hunting, herding, commerce).⁵⁰ In *The History of Civilization in Europe*, Guizot articulated a more complex account that emphasized the impact of morality and political institutions as autonomous forces driving civilizational advance.⁵¹ He particularly stressed the importance of religion in fostering the moral and intellectual capacities that were pre-requisites for civilization.

He credited Christianity with the “regeneration of moral man” during the period of barbarism

⁴⁸ See also Daniel O’Neill, *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate: Savagery, Civilization, and Democracy* (Penn State Press, 2007).

⁴⁹ See Gladys Bryson, *Man and Society: The Scottish Inquiry of the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945); Ronald Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Nicholas T. Phillipson “The Scottish Enlightenment,” in *The Enlightenment in National Context*, ed. Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

⁵⁰ Instead, Guizot argues that the causal arrows go in both directions. In the first lecture, Guizot states, “If we address ourselves to the history of the world, we shall receive the same answer. We shall find that all the great developments of the individual man have turned to the profit of society; all the great developments of the social state to the profit of individual man.” See Francois Guizot, *The History of Civilization in Europe* (New York: Penguin, 1997), p. 20.

⁵¹ For an excellent account of Guizot’s thought, see Aurelian Craiutu, *Liberalism Under Siege: The Political Thought of the French Doctrinaires* (New York and Oxford: Lexington Books, 2003).

and argued that this, in turn, brought about “the regeneration of the social state” in pre-modern Europe.⁵² According to Guizot, the civilizing effect of the Catholic Church worked in a number of ways. The clergy sustained practices of science and learning during the Dark Ages; the theology of the Christian faith encouraged moral improvement; and the autonomy of the Church helped introduce the principle of the division of powers. Guizot concluded, “The fact is evident; the moral and intellectual development of Europe has been essentially theological.”⁵³

Despite these critical contributions to European civilization, Guizot believed that the Church, if left unchecked, would ultimately have stifled civilizational advance. The institution of the Church was hostile to freedom of action and thought; moreover, when any single institution became too powerful, it tended to stifle dissent and bring about stagnation. The key to Europe’s success, for Guizot, was its pluralistic character. The constant, bitter tension between the “barbarian” love of freedom, the municipal structure inherited from Roman political institutions, and the morality of Christian theology had a surprisingly salutary effect. These social forces often worked against one another but the constitutive tensions created the condition for progress: liberty without license.

Guizot, the emphatic Eurocentrist and Afghani, the anti-imperialist, might seem like strange allies but their ideas have a number of important commonalities. First, both saw morality as the key to progress. Afghani was quite clear that he thought that the moral capacities inculcated by Islam were responsible for the military and political success of the Arab tribes. Similarly, Guizot identified religion as the key factor in the moral and intellectual development of Europe. Although Guizot incorporated institutional and material factors in his analysis of European civilization, he concluded that “whatever external events may be, it is man himself who makes the world; it is in

⁵² Guizot, *The History of Civilization in Europe*, 21.

⁵³ Guizot, *The History of Civilization in Europe*, 109.

proportion to the ideas, sentiments, and dispositions, moral and intellectual, of man, that the world becomes regulated and progressive...”⁵⁴

Both Guizot and Afghani recognized the limitations of religion as well as its positive contributions to civilization advance. According to Guizot, the Catholic Church promoted intellectual pursuits, but it also stifled genuinely independent, critical thinking. If it had not been for the Reformation, the Catholic Church would have stifled further progress.⁵⁵ This was precisely the argument that Afghani cited sympathetically in “Refutation of the Materialists.” Afghani also claimed that Islam, like post-reformation Christianity, was premised on critical thinking and rational proof. He wrote, “The Islamic religion is the only religion that censures belief without proof and the following of conjectures; reproves blind submission; seeks to show proof of things to its followers; everywhere addresses itself to reason...”⁵⁶ This was not exactly an accurate characterization of actually existing Islamic practice, but it described Afghani’s ideal, one that had historical roots in the tradition of Islamic philosophy and in the Mu’tazilite movement, an influential theological school that held that all knowledge is available to human reason.⁵⁷ Some commentators have claimed that Afghani imagined himself as a Muslim Luther

⁵⁴ Guizot, *The History of Civilization in Europe*, 156.

⁵⁵ “(the Reformation) was a great movement of the liberty of the human mind, a new necessity for freely thinking and judging, on its own account, and with its own powers, of facts and ideas which hitherto Europe had received, or was held bound to receive, from the hands of authority.” Guizot, *The History of Civilization in Europe*, 203

⁵⁶ Afghani, “Refutation of the Materialists,” 172.

⁵⁷ See Mahdi, *Alfarabi*, p. 45. According to the Mu’tazilites, revelation functions to provide guidance to individuals without the time, ability, or inclination to achieve knowledge through reason.

and this is correct if it means that he hoped to foment an Islamic reformation.⁵⁸ It is misleading, however, if it implies that he tried to accomplish this by nailing his theses to the Mosque door. Sixteenth century Germany was not occupied by foreign infidels, therefore the political context was very different. The unity among Christian people and nations was not so critical in Luther's time. Given the realities of European domination of the Middle East in the nineteenth century, Afghani had to proceed more cautiously than the protagonists of the Reformation; he felt that intemperate reforms or radical theological innovations could weaken Muslim unity, making Islamic areas unable to withstand the hegemonic project of Europe. By calling his heterodox, rationalist and modernist Islam the true Islam, he developed a rhetorical strategy that would be employed by influential twentieth century figures such as Ali Shari'ati. His goal was to promote the theological reforms that would reverse the stagnation of Islamic societies, without unleashing the centrifugal tendencies of religious conflict.

Afghani's emphasis on unity might initially seem to be an important difference between his understanding of the factors promoting civilizational advance and Guizot's. Guizot insisted that the pluralistic character of European society was the real explanation for its success. According to Guizot, the competition between different ideas and institutions created a social order that was open to critical thought and change. A careful reading of Guizot's lectures, however, reveals that he believed that both pluralism and unity played a role in creating this favorable social environment. Each of the key principles – barbarian freedom, Christian morality, etc. – was influential because a unified and powerful group advanced it with single minded tenacity. The precarious synthesis of European civilization would never have emerged had the barbarians simply given up their freedom and embraced Roman institutions. This would have simply

⁵⁸ See Ernest Dawn, "From Ottomanism to Arabism: The Origin of an 'Ideology'," *Review of Politics* vol. 23, no. 3 (1961), p. 386.

prolonged the period of Roman decadence. Similarly, Luther did not fight for religious pluralism but for a different vision of truth, one which unintentionally brought about the conditions for pluralism.

Reading Afghani through Guizot, it is now possible to come up with a novel way of resolving his most troubling contradiction, his negative portrayal of religion in the “Reply to Renan” and his pessimistic conclusion that “no agreement and no reconciliation are possible between religions and philosophy.”⁵⁹ As a political actor, Afghani promoted religion as a critical resource for the renewal of Islamic societies and the struggle against imperialism. But as a scholar, he recognized that there were tensions between reason and revelation, authority and free inquiry, scriptural exegesis and empirical science, morality and materialism. These tensions, however, could be a source of dynamism as well as discord. Perhaps the danger lay less in the tension between these principles and more in the possibility that one would dominate and destroy the other. In “Reply to Renan,” Afghani wrote,

Whenever religion will have the upper hand, it will destroy philosophy; and the contrary happens when it is philosophy that reigns as sovereign mistress. So long as humanity exists, the struggle will not cease between dogma and free investigation, between religion and philosophy a desperate struggle in which, I fear, the triumph will not be for free thought, because the masses dislike reason, and its teachings are only understood by some intelligences of the elites, and because, also, science, however beautiful it is, does not completely satisfy humanity, which thirsts for the idea and which likes to exist in dark and distant regions that the philosophers and scholars neither perceive nor explore.⁶⁰

With a Guizotian sensibility in mind, we could reinterpret this passage in a new light. The irreconcilable tension between philosophy and religion becomes a cause of optimism rather than pessimism and despair. It reflects a tenuous balance that fulfills humans’ contradictory longings and it preserves a space where a degree of non-conformity is possible. If Afghani did want to

⁵⁹ Afghani, “Reply to Renan,” in Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, p. 187.

⁶⁰ Afghani, “Reply to Renan,” p. 187.

preserve this constitutive tension that prevented stagnation, then it makes sense that he would promote philosophy in some contexts and religion in others. If he felt that the balance was tipping towards excessive theocratic dogmatism, he would want to emphasize the virtues of philosophy, like he did in his early speech in Turkey. If he felt that political leaders were becoming too reconciled to European domination, then it would make sense to promote Islamic law as an alternative source of order and identity.

The Guizotian reading is a conjectural solution to an interpretive problem. It provides a coherent but subterranean theoretical framework that helps reconcile the most glaring contradictions in his work. Afghani was a pragmatist who concluded that religion had played an important role in advancing civilization. He also believed that it would be critical in resisting imperialism; nevertheless, Islamic religion had to be reformed if it were to be prevented from stifling science and critical thinking, the other key components of progress. This put the politically motivated reformer in a difficult position. Too much reform would lead to schism and cynicism, which would undermine the faith of the masses, making way for the hegemonic project of European imperialism. Too little reform would cause rigidity and stagnation, which would also lead to the collapse of Islamic civilization. Afghani's apparently contradictory writings remind me of a man walking on a tightrope in the wind, leaning one direction and then another in order to maintain a tenuous balance.

V: Conclusion

Afghani's writings explain some of the reasons why Islam has reemerged as a mobilizing framework in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In many places it is a source of legitimacy, unity, and social order. It can be imagined as the foundation for a distinctive and

superior way of life, which makes its defense an important motivation for resistance to European domination and influence.⁶¹ It is a source of supra-national law in a time and place where the nation state is often seen a site of subordination to the West rather than a framework for autonomy. The political theories of Afghani and subsequent Islamic modernists illuminate the popular appeal of Islam. They argue that the good things in Western culture - critical thinking, science, and democracy - are authentically Islamic, while Islam is the only barrier to the materialism, extreme individualism, moral decay, racism, and exploitation characteristic of Western societies. At least part of the contemporary appeal of Islam is due to the way that it functions as a symbol of resistance to the history of Western imperialism and its repercussions today.

Reading Afghani forces Western readers to rethink some deeply rooted assumptions about the relationship between religion and politics. The conventional wisdom holds that in the Middle East, politics is a tool used to advance religion. The concept of jihad, or holy war to defend and promote the faith, expresses this idea. Afghani, on the other hand, insisted on the need to the use religion as a tool for advancing a political agenda. His short-term political goal was challenging imperialism but this was a part of his long-term agenda of revitalizing Islamic civilization.

⁶¹ For a more detailed version of this argument, see Ann Elizabeth Mayer, "Law and Religion in the Muslim Middle East," *American Journal of Comparative Law* vol. 35, no. 1 (Winter 1987).