Chapter LXXIV

JAMAL AL-DIN AL-ÂFGHÂNI

A INTRODUCTION

While Europe was disengaging herself from the spiritual hold of Rome and embarking upon the hazardous yet challenging road of freedom, the Arab world was being isolated from and insulated against almost all outside influences and changes. This process of isolation and insulation continued unabated till it came to an abrupt end at the time of the Napoleonic expedition against Egypt in 1215/1736. This was indeed the first serious external stimulus that the Arab and the Muslim world had received since the Ottoman conquest in 922/1516. The episode of French occupation of Egypt was quite significant as it ushered a new era for the Muslim world—an era in which the Western nations began to penetrate into the lands of the Muslims at a breakneck speed. The story of this penetration is very painful to narrate but it proved to be a blessing in disguise since it awakened the Muslims from their slumber. The Muslim society, which was a medieval and ossified society, when it faced a relentless and superior power which subjected its people and exploited its wealth, fully realized the enormity of the danger. The method by which the policy of the Western imperialists was executed and the resistance crushed, and the way in which the culture of the conquerors was imposed, did not foster either understanding or friendship, but rather created doubts and promoted fears with regard to the intentions of the ruler. The Muslims were alarmed at the situation that not only their political freedom was in peril, but their institutions, culture, and even their faith—the bedrock of their life—were also being threatened.

The advent of the modern Christian missionary movement (about the same time confirmed this belief. Islam as a result became a rallying call for existence and an instrument of protest against foreigners. The foreigners in turn arrived at the conclusion that unless this potent instrument was subdued,

their position in Muslim lands would not become stable. They, therefore, besides tightening their political control, tried to change the outlook of the younger generations of the Muslims by encouraging Christian missionary activity and foreign educational efforts.

"Throughout the Muslim world in general and the Arab world in particular this relentless political penetration galvanized Muslims into a reaction consonant with Islam’s politico-religious structure. This structure being both a religion and a State at the same time, weakness in one was deemed by the Muslims weakness in the other and vice versa" (Nabih Amin Faris). This feeling culminated in a form of movement which aroused the Muslims on the one hand to defend their lands against the incursions of Western imperialism and on the other to save their faith against the aggression of the Christian missionary. That is how the Muslims came to realize that they could not, even if they wanted to continue to live as they had hitherto lived, be consistently secure in the illusion that the pattern of life accepted as valid in the past must for ever remain valid, for that, is complicity, that security of convictions and illusions, was shattered to pieces by what had happened to them in the last few decades. It was the realization of this time-lag between the demands of a new situation and their traditional ways of thinking and living which inspired them with a strong desire to cast off their fatal inertia.

The Muslims were, thus, awakened to the need of taking stock of their cultural holdings. They observed that only paying lip-service to their ideology could not help them to solve the problems which had cropped up as a result of the penetration of Western Powers in their respective lands. If they really wanted to defend their freedom without obliterating Islam as a basis of their civilization, they must make a fresh start in terms of Islamic programme and thus reverse their society from the old ashes of convention and decay. In case they did not realize the gravity of the situation and simply cling to old notions and conventions in their entirety, they would be playing the game of the proverbial ostrich that buries its head in the sand in order to escape the necessity of making a decision.

If Muhammad bin ’Abd al-Wahhâb of Arabia (Chap. LXXII) and Shihk Wali Allah of the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent (Chap. LXXIII) be considered to be precursors of the modern awakening in Islam and their movements the signs of the coming dawn, Jamal al-Din al-Âfgâni (1254/1838-1314/1897) must be taken to be the foremost leader of this awakening and his movement the first glow of the dawn. He was the greatest Oriental thinker of the nineteenth/twentieth century. It has rightly been said that the message of al-Âfgâni burst through the reigning obscurantism as a splendid lightning. He was a thinker and at the same time a man of action, endowed with a penetrating intelligence and a great heart. His rare intellectual gifts and his high moral qualities gave to his personality the magnetism peculiar to all great leaders and drew to him many followers. Al-Âfgâni was for the Muslim world a comprehensive personality, being at the same time a great thinker,
future reformer Muhammad 'Abdah—and did much to awaken the young Egyptians to the dangers of foreign domination. Finally, however, his advanced religious views offended the conservative theologians and his political opponents, the British, and he was expelled from Egypt in 1877.

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

Then followed a period of three years in Paris, fruitful for the publication of his ideas. In 1901/1883, he carried on a controversy with Ernest Renan on "Islam and Science," and in 1902/1884, published with his disciple Muhammad 'Abdah—exiled from Egypt for his complicity in the 'Arabi uprising—an Arabic weekly al-'Uraa al-Witgha (The Indissoluble Link) aiming at arousing the Muslims against Western exploitation. The British soon banned the paper the Muslims against Western exploitation. The British soon banned the paper and it ceased to appear.

From Paris, al-Afghani went to London to discuss the Mahdi uprising in the Sudan but was unable to obtain an agreement with the British. Thence, interrupted by a four years' stay in Russia, followed a period of service under the Shah of Persia, ending in his expulsion in 1898/1899 when his reforming zeal antagonized the Shah.

Then followed another brief visit to England where Jamal al-Din started his campaign against the Shah and published his "Splendour of the Two Hemispheres" (Da‘a al-Akhfajan) ending in his ill-fated acceptance of the Sultan of Turkey's invitation to be his guest at Constantinople for there he had to remain in "gilded captivity" till his death in 1913/1897.

PHILOSOPHY

The life of al-Afghani corresponded exactly with his thought; in him theory and practice were closely linked. In this respect one might compare his mission in the modern Muslim world with that of Socrates in Hellenic antiquity.

His life and thought were both marked by three characteristic traits: a subtle spirituality, a profound religious sense, and a high moral sense which influenced very strongly all his actions.

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

As 'Abd al-'Aziz has said, Jamal al-Din was opposed to the propaganda made among the Muslims in favour of materialism; with his natural per

spiration he exposed the characteristics of materialism. He published a book entitled "The Refutation of the Materialists" (al-Radd ulla al-Dahrugyyin).

"Sometimes the materialist," says al-Afghani, "proclaim their concern to purify our minds from superstition and to illuminate our intelligence with
true knowledge; sometimes they present themselves to us as friends of the poor, protectors of the weak, and defenders of the oppressed. ... Whatever the group to which they belong, their action constitutes a formidable shock which will not fail to shake the very foundations of society and destroy the fruits of its labour. ... Their words would suppress the noble motives of our hearts; their ideas would poison our souls; and their tentacles would be a continual source of disturbance for the established order." Jan Ali al-Din had denounced the sophism and practices of the puritans of the materialistic interpretation of history before it became well known in Europe.

2. Religious Sense.—This trait found its expression in almost all of Al-Afghani's writings and is notably manifest in his views about the function of religion in society. "Religion," he wrote, "is the very substance of nations and the real source of the happiness of man."

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

3. Moral Sense.—His acute moral sense subjected him to the famous accusation that he addressed himself against the imperialist colonial policy of the Western powers, a policy based upon their intention to exploit the weak. He was of the view that what the Occidentals designate as "colonization" is in reality no other than what is its opposite in meaning, "decolonization," "depopulation," and "destruction." It was this view that made al-Afghani make a distinction between "the Holy Wars" of Islam, which aimed at the propagation of faith, and the economic wars of Europe, which always ended in the subjugation and enslavement of the vanquished peoples.

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

Al-Afghani was a true Muslim and a rationalist. He appealed to the Muslims of all sects to make use of the principle of rationalism which is a special privilege of Islam. "Of all religions," he says, "Islam is almost the only one that blames those who believe without having proofs, and rebukes those who follow opinions without having any certainty. ... In whatever Islam teaches, it appeals to reason ... and the holy texts proclaim that happiness consists in the right use of reason." In the same spirit, al-Afghani advocated the Mu'tasili doctrine of free-will against fatalism; this latter is an attitude commonly and wrongly attributed to the Muslims by the Western people. According to Jamal al-Din, there is a great difference between the Muslim belief in al-qad'a u-al-qadar (predestination) and that in al-jahr (fatalism). Al-qad'a u-al-qadar is a belief which strengthens the faculty of resolution in man, builds up his moral stamina, and incubates in him courage and endurance. Al-jahr, on the other hand, is nothing but an evil innovation (fitna) which was introduced maliciously into the Muslim world for political purposes.
A History of Muslim Philosophy

and gives her over to an enemy for a price, whether it be great or small—no price for which one's country is sold can ever be great; the real traitor is one who is responsible for the enemy's taking one step on his land and who allows the enemy to plant his foot on his country's soil, while he is able to shake it loose. He indeed is the real traitor in whatever guise he may appear. Anyone who is capable of counteracting the enemy is thought or action, and then acquires himself poorly in this, is a traitor."

He goes on to say: "There is no shame attached to any small and weak nation, if she is vanquished by the armed might of a nation larger and stronger than she. But the disgrace which the passage of time will not erase... is that the nation, or one of her individuals or a group, bold, run to put their necks under the enemy's yoke, whether through celerity in the management of their affairs or out of desire for some temporary benefit, for they become thus the agents of their own destruction."

The Occidentals, according to al-Afghani, adopt in the East strange methods for suppressing the patriotic spirit, stifling national education, and destroying Oriental culture. Thus, they incite the Orientals to deny every virtue and every value in vogue in their respective countries. They persuade them that there is not, in the Arabic, Persian, or Indian languages, any literature worth mentioning, and that in their history there is not a single glory to report. They make them to believe that all merit for an Oriental consists in turning away from the understanding of his own language and in feeling proud of the fact that he cannot express himself well in his own language, and in maintaining that all he can attain in human culture resides in the jargons of some Occidental language.

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

CONCLUSION

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

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

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A Works of al-Afghani


B Works on al-Afghani

Chapter LXXV

RENAISSANCE IN EGYPT

MUHAMMAD 'ABDUH AND HIS SCHOOL

A

LIFE

Nobody has contributed to the renaissance of modern Egypt more than Muhammad 'Abduh. He was a great Egyptian philosopher, sociologist, and reformer, and is ranked as one of the most remarkable figures in the modern Muslim world. On his death in 1905 he left numerous disciples and many works of real interest and inestimable value. He was, and still is, commonly given the superb title "al-Usta'dh al-Imám" (The Master and Guide); this title alone shows the influence which he had upon his contemporaries. A young Egyptian writer, Kamil al-Shimawi, recently described 'Abduh's life as a "combination of the life of a prophet and that of a hero." However, he remained little known: on the one hand, the passion for factions and schools of thought had for over half a century distorted his true personality; on the other hand, a superficial knowledge of his teachings had given rise to erroneous interpretations which everything in the Master's writings combined to contradict, as everything in his life tended to refute.

We know the essential facts of Muhammad 'Abduh's life thanks to a source which is excellent because authentic. It is a form of autobiography which the Egyptian philosopher himself composed towards the end of his life, by way of reply to questions put to him by his disciple, 'Abd al-Rahim. We also possess, written by the hand of the Master, a number of very interesting documents about his family and his early education.

Muhammad 'Abduh was the son of an Egyptian farmer. He was born in 1266/1849 at Makassat Nafir, a little village of the Beheira Province, where his father enjoyed a high reputation as a man of integrity whose growing prosperity did not mar his altruism and willingness to make sacrifices for the cause of justice; 'Abduh's mother was a gentle soul, respected for her piety and charity. He studied first at Tanjia, at the Mosque of al-Ahmedi, where he became so discouraged by the amount of work demanded of him, with its suppression of intelligent inquiry, that he would undoubtedly have turned away from his schooling altogether had it not been for the beneficial influence of his uncle.