

Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani's "Refutation of the Materialists": An Approach

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Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, (1839/39-97) an outstanding figure of the later part of the nineteenth century, is considered as the defender and reformist thinker of Islam. He exercised a greater influence upon the contemporary history particularly that of the Muslim world, more than any of his contemporaries.

By the nineteenth century a clear shift of power had occurred; West had dominated and threatened the Muslim world politically, economically as well as culturally and Muslims found themselves on the defensive, where as up to the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the real threat and primary challenge to Islamic Identity and unity was generally seen as internal and challenge to Islamic Identity from the West was not experienced until the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.¹

According to Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Afghani seems to have been the first Muslim revivalist to use the concepts "Islam" and "the West" as connoting correlative and of course antagonistic historical phenomena. The spectre of West as an accusing and menacing power.

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It was in Afghani that this became explicit; and that the response to it became active.²

Jamal al-Din al-Afghani having broad knowledge of Western Culture and deep comprehension of Islamic traditions,³ was first man to notice with his clear sight and intelligent realism,⁴ the dangerous influence and domination of Westerns in the eastern lands in general and Islamic nations in particular. He realised the extent of this danger and its ruinous consequences. He adopted different means and styles to stop Western incursion, with self-sacrificing spirit; He resolutely endeavoured to remove it and where ever he went his heart-full words impressed listener's hearts and inspired them with his fiery and revolutionary thoughts. Afghani wrote several books and articles in different news papers, in order to make people aware of the snare placed in their way by Western policies and their serious and fearful consequences. He was practically involved in the politics of many countries in order to stop western influence.

Jamal al-Din's greater part of life was given to a defence of the Islamic countries threatened by the danger of western expansions, but his thought was not exclusively political. It was of course the power and pressure of Europe which gave it a new urgency, to make the Muslim countries politically strong and successful in order to stop western incursions; In fact it was rather reformations and how to persuade Muslims to understand their religion aright and live in accordance with its teaching. If they did so, he believed, their countries would of necessity be strong.⁴ As they had once been mighty but now were weak.

Jamal al-Din had written little, but there are, some of his writings apart from political articles, which exhibit and express his general ideas about Western culture which include: "*Refutation of the Materialists*", some articles written in India⁵ and the leading articles of his periodical *al-'Urwa al-Wuthqa*. From these and the reports of his conversation made by some of his disciples, it is possible however, to formulate a clear idea of his response to Western culture.

For the advancement and reformation of *Ummah*, Afghani strongly opposes the blind imitations of the West, and believes that those people of the nations, who imitate the non-Muslims blindly and follow them in their modes of life are actually paving the way for their intrusion. Their intellect suffers from superstitions. The people whom they imitate in their daily practices, their reason is over powered and dominated by the foreigners, false superiority of culture and those who differ from them are looked down by them. Such imitators become cause of ruin of their nations, as they conceive their people backward and down trodden. If however, any of the patriots come out with the qualities of greatness and boldness, he is strongly opposed and suppressed down. Their effort is to eradicate the qualities of his boldness, desensitize and make him emotionless. There peoples are tools in foreign hands.⁶

"*Refutation of the Materialists*" is Afghani's famous and major work, originally in Persian and entitled *Haqiqat-i-Mazhabi-i-Naichiri va bayan-i-hal-i-Naichiris* (The Truth of Naichiri Sect and an explanation of the Conditions of the Naichiris) written in 1881. The English title "Refutation of Materialists" is taken from its Arabic translation, "*ar-Radd 'ala ad-dahriyyin*" of Muhammad 'Abduh and 'Abdu-Turabi; translated from original persian in 1886.⁷ In which he strongly condemn the "materialists" or *Nayshariyaa*, naichiris (derived from English word nature), the name given to modernist Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and his followers. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani regarded them as partisans of enemies — the British- as they are destroying the beliefs of Indian Muslims and thereby preparing them to accept the religious as well as the political and cultural domination of western imperialists.⁸ It is because Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, like the rest of the reformers of the period saw that the Indian Muslims could regain their social stability, firstly by inspiring confidence in the British government in India as to their loyalty, and secondly by adopting western modes of life and by acquiring British style of education⁹ and encouraging them

to enter government service in growing numbers.

The "*Refutation of the Materialists*" is the first of Afghani's writings in which he presents himself as a champion of Islam against heretical and western liberal tendencies¹⁰ and those whom he attacked under the name of 'naturalists' or 'materialists' included all, from Democritus to Darwin with their equivalents in Islam, who gave an explanation of the world without regarding the existence of a transcendent God. Thus not only endangering the truth but also regarded them a danger to social well-being and human happiness.¹¹ Thus the decay of the nations was the result of the corruption of these essential beliefs and qualities caused by the teachings of the naturalists.

The first part of "*Refutation*" contains the descriptions and criticism of the philosophers holding a naturalistic or materialistic view of the universe, man and society, from the time of the early Greeks down to the middle of the 19th century. He includes and makes special references to Democritus, Epicurus, Leibniz, and Darwin. In Persia to Mazdak and Babism; among the Muslim schools to Batinites, Ismailites and the Assassins; and in France to Rousseau and Voltaire, and among the modern general passing remarks about communism, socialism and nihilism and then goes on to say:-

The materialists, or *Naichiris*, have appeared in numerous form and various guises among the races and people, and under different names. Sometimes they have become manifest under the name of "Sage". Sometimes they have appeared adorned as those who remove oppression and repel injustice... . Sometimes they have claimed that their goal is the removal of superstitions and enlightenment of people's minds. For a time they came forth as the lovers of the poor, protectors of the weak, and well-wishers of the unfortunate. Sometimes to fulfil their evil aims, they have laid claims to prophethood. Sometimes they called themselves the educators, teachers, and benefactors of the community. But among whatever people they appeared, and whatever guise or name they bore, they became, — because of their evil premises and false principles, their

harmful teachings, deadly views, and fatal sayings__ the cause of the decline and collapse of that people and the annihilation of that community. They destroyed the social orders of those people and scattered their members.¹²

While describing the ruinous effects, caused by the ideas of these materialists, Afghani discuss the social virtues of the religion as:

For man is very cruel and ignorant. And to this tracherous, greedy, blood thirsty creature, there were supplied beliefs and qualities in the earliest period by means of religions. Tribes and people learned there beliefs and qualities as an inheritance from their fathers and grand fathers, and they adjusted their behaviour accordingly; avoiding the evil and corruption that are the destroyers of the social order. Thus there was produced for them, a kind of stability and continuity. The sect of Neicheris, among whatever people they appeared, tried to nullify those beliefs and corrupt qualities. From them destruction penetrated the pillars of the social order of that people and headed them toward dissolution, until they were suddenly destroyed.¹³

In the above and the subsequent pages of the, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani repeatedly claims that the religion is good for the people because it supports the social fabric, while the Neicheris. "Materialists" like other sectarians, bring dissension and finally political ruin to the community. While reverencing religion as compared to materialism, Afghani goes on to discuss three beliefs and three qualities which formed the basis of the progress of a nation. The first is the belief that man is the noblest among God's creation, the second is man's certainty "that his community is the noblest one, and that all outside his community are in error and deviation." The third is the firm belief that man has come into the world in order to acquire accomplishment worthy of transferring him to a world more excellent, higher, vaster, and

more perfect than this narrow and dark world that really deserves the name of the abode of sorrows. One should not neglect the important effect of each of these beliefs on the social order, their great advantages for civilization, and their many contributions to order and relations among people.¹⁴

Jamal al-Din then goes on discussing the virtues arising from each of the three beliefs. The first belief "that man is the noblest creature", leads man to ascend the ladder of cultural development and "proceeds in proportion to his progress in the intellectual sphere, until he becomes one of those civilized virtuous men whose life with brothers who have reached this rung of civilization is based on love, wisdom, and justice. This is the ultimate goal of sages and the summit of human happiness in the world."¹⁵

The second belief, the knowledge of every man that his own community is the noblest, goades nations to go-ahead to achievement in civilization, and to competition in knowledge and progress. It inculcates communal pride and desire to keep ahead of others. The third belief, that man had been sent into the world to perfect himself in preparation of another life. It is this belief alone which provides a stable basis for obedience to moral principles. It is the only belief that restrains man from all evils, save him from the values of adversity and misfortune, and seats him in the virtuous city on the throne of happiness.¹⁶

While giving three beliefs and discussing the results of them, Jamal al-Din says that the religion is only good for cultural development. He then discusses the three virtues or qualities produced by religion: Modesty (*hay'a*) trustworthiness (*amāna*), and truthfulness (*sidq*). Afghani shows how necessary they are to the proper functioning of the social order and how they produce good society, and the ruin brought by their absence. Jamal al-Din then specifies the social harm brought by the materialists. The materialists who denied these truths brought by religion also destroyed the bases of human society, and "cast men down from the throne of human civilization to the base earth of animality".¹⁷ By dismissing the

three beliefs and three qualities brought by religions, and teaching that all religions are false, they discourage men from practising virtue, encourage the most bestial vices, and undermine the social order. They dismissed the modesty (*haya*) as a weakness not a virtue, and by denying the day of judgement struck at the root of trust and truthfulness.

Afghani accuses the materialists for the decay of civilizations. They have appeared in the classical world in the form of Democritus, Epicureanism and in ancient Persia in the person of Mazdak. He also includes Darwin among them and rejects his theory, 'Adaption according to necessity' or natural selection.¹⁸ According to Afghani, the decline of Muslim power was caused by the propagation of the ideology and thought of the naturalists, (Batiniya) which had weakened Islam and divided the Muslim community into the several sects and made possible the disaster of the crusades and Mongol invasion. However, it was the deep-rooted Islamic beliefs and morals, which were alive in some Muslims and were able to drive out the crusaders in the end and converted Mongols (tartars) to Islam later.¹⁹

Afghani has accused the eighteenth century free-thinkers of France Voltaire (1694-1778) and Rousseau (1712-78) as the new poison of materialism. He also included the socialist, the communists and the nihilists in the same category of materialists and naturalists. "In Europe" says Afghani, materialism has culminated in the evil doctrines of socialism, nihilism, and communism".²⁰

Afghani dismissed these current political theories of the West as incapable to satisfying the needs of human society and considered these ideologies destructive. According to Afghani, they all claimed to be the friends of the poor and the downtrodden expressing their views in different ways. They shared certain common principles and beliefs. They ignored all human distinctions and allowed all to share everything: all mundane pleasures and comforts were the gifts of Nature: The greatest hindrance in the propagations

of the sacred laws of Nature, namely *ibahat* were religion and state, and hence, these two institutions should be destroyed forth with. Afghani warned that if the three schools of thought cited above gained strength, they would prove dangerous to mankind.²¹

Jamal al-Din al-Afghani has commented upon socialism at many places,²² where he dwelt on the basic weaknesses of socialism and the merits of Islamic social teachings. Afghani regarded Western socialism as a product of the revolt of the poor (Mustad'ifin) against their suppression by the well-to-do, as sharing (*ishtirāk*) by the poor in the wealth and comforts of the rich. While analysing Western socialism, he says:-

“Owes its being solely to the vindictive feelings against unjust rulers and unjust laws and the jealousy on the part of the workers (Ummal) of those who have grown rich from their labour and toil. These, moreover, accumulated fortunes which are used by them foolishly, extravagantly and wastefully before the very eyes of those who produced it all and got it out, as it were, from the very ground. In short, the diverse needs of civilised life are all of them supplied by the labourers”.²³

While commenting upon the exploited peoples' reactions he says: “The rich in the West have grossly trifled with the rights of the workers and that of the poor, and these in turn have gone too far in their defence of those who have robbed them of their rights who only seem to care for position and prestige”.²⁴

In comparing the unity in socialism with the Islamic concept of unity (*ukhuwwah*) — According to Afghani, the basis of unity in socialism, that is, economic equality had no attraction for the people in preference of the system based on religion and cultural affinities. He pointed out that it was an age full of commercial and political rivalries and as long as human society remained divided in this manner, no country or people could follow the impracticable principle of economic equality. On the other hand, Islam's basis of unity, is

tawhīd and belief in Prophet Mohammed (صلى الله عليه وسلم), satisfies both the material and the spiritual aspects of human life.²⁵ Thus socialism, in the Islamic context, is not a consequences of any social or economic development but is inherent in Islamic teachings. It is "a part and parcel of the religion of Islam. It is also closely related to the character of its people from the time when they were nomad peoples."²⁶ Thus Muslims need not to get excited by these ideologies of the West, as their own religions is better than that. "Socialism, with no religious foundation, and with no authority to restrain and work for the general good, can only introduce chaos and must eventually suffer a reverse".²⁷

Afghani also criticised the communist theories of social justice and economic equality. He points out that need of human society are dependent upon certain arts and crafts which are different from each other in their being noble or ignoble and difficult or easy to perform these materialist spread a harmful egalitarianism such as that all men should share in all desires and delights: that privileges and distinction should be abolished; and that all should be absolutely equal. If it becomes like that naturally every person will refuse to perform hard and menial task and economic life will be disordered; and the machinery of mutual transactions and cooperation would come to dead lock. 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. Men would live in this world like beasts of the desert, were it possible for them.²⁸

According to Afghani, it is only religion which promotes solidarity and its decline is accompanied by harmful individualism. He considered all these ideologies based on materialism as evil doctrines and are useless to solve any social problem. Afghani says: That since they denied life after death, self love dominated all activities of the naturalists. Self-love allows to sacrifice universal good for one's own particular good. Which means

that one can sell one's nation for personal benefits.²⁹ Thus, after refuting the other means of securing justice and social stability, Afghani says:

Thus no force remains for restraining men of passions from their transgressions and oppression other than the fourth way. That is the belief that the world has a creator, wise and powerful; and the belief that for good and evil deeds there is a fixed recompense after this life. If truth, these two beliefs together are the firmest foundation for the suppression of passion and the removal to external and internal transgressions.

Thus, from all we have expounded, it becomes clear that religions, even if it be false and the basest of religions, because of those two firm pillars— belief in a creator and faith in reward and punishment and because the six principles that are enshrined in religion is better than the ways of the materialists, or Naichiris. [It is better] in realm of civilization the social order and the organisation of relationships; indeed in all human societies and all progress of mankind in this world.³⁰

In the concluding remarks of his book “(*Refutation of the Materialists*)”, Afghani says that of all the religions Islam is most capable of ennobling men's souls and leading them to happiness,³¹ while answering to Muslim plight he says;

If someone says: If the Islamic religion is as you say, then why are the Muslims in such a sad conditions? I will answer: when they were [truly] Muslims, they were what they were and the world bears witness to their excellence. As for the present, I will content myself with this holy text:

“Verily God does not change the state of people until they change themselves in wardly”.³² (13:11)

In “*Refutation of the Materialists*”, Jamal al-Din thus clearly rejects materialists and their new “ideologies” and reinforces pride in Islam as the best religion capable of solving all problems of society, providing Muslims with a useful counter weight to the

West's (*nachiris*) claim of cultural superiority. He shows antagonistic towards (materialists), who render their services to foreign enemies, cooperate with British and imitate their ways and style. It is, therefore obvious that he was fully alive not only to the political events taking place in the West but also the various ideologies shaping the western culture and society, and responded to them as an as serious Islamic scholar and intellectual of his times..

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