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## The Al-Afghani-Renan Debate, Reconsidered

Monica M. Ringer

Professor of History and Asian Languages & Civilizations, Amherst College

A. Holly Shissler

Associate Professor, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations,  
University of Chicago

Anyone a little knowledgeable about the affairs of our time sees clearly the present inferiority of the Muslim countries, the intellectual nullity of those races that have received their culture and education solely from that religion. All those who have traveled in the Orient or in Africa have been struck by the fatally enslaved spirit of the true believer, by that sort of iron band that encircles his head, rendering it completely closed to science, incapable either of learning anything or of working with any new idea.

Ernest Renan, "Islam and Science."

The (in) famous lecture given at the Sorbonne by French religious studies scholar Ernest Renan on March 29, 1883 entitled "Islam and Science" caused enormous consternation in Muslim intellectual circles and prompted the penning of a number of refutations, the most famous of them that of Jamal al-Din "al-Afghani."<sup>1</sup> In

<sup>1</sup>Al-Afghani was the first to pen a refutation of Renan's essay, but not the last. At least seven refutations were written before World War I and refutations continued to appear periodically well into the twentieth century. The fact that al-Afghani's refutation appeared in French in the *Journal des débats* led to its widespread availability. Nikki Keddie's seminal work on al-Afghani, and her translation of

many of his essays, including his refutation of Renan, also contributed to al-Afghani's visibility. See 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), 181-187. For a comprehensive bibliographical essay on the various Renan refutations, see Dücane Cündioğlu,

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many ways, the debates surrounding Renan's assertions resembled the "Clash of Civilizations" controversy engendered by Samuel Huntington's similarly infamous article published exactly 110 years later.<sup>2</sup> Renan argued that Islam was a metaphoric 'iron band' crowning the heads of Muslims that prevented rational and scientific thought and which therefore accounted for Islamic societies' backwardness vis-à-vis Europe.

Renan's argument was a product of his two intellectual priorities: first, to fit Islam into his larger schema of religio-civilizational difference to account for European superiority; and second, to demonstrate that religion, Catholicism in particular, needed to be rethought as a system of doctrine and dogma and reconceived instead as the moral underpinnings of society consistent with God's plan for the evolutionary progress of humanity. In broad brushstrokes, he attempted to reconcile 'religion' and 'science' yet his was not a simplistic accommodation, but rather a wholesale recalibration, a re-conceptualization, and even a re-propagation of religion.<sup>3</sup> Renan spoke and wrote often of the necessity of freedom of thought as a fundamental requirement of progress. Only then would rational inquiry be allowed to take its course. For this to be achieved, all restraints of dogma needed to be removed.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, any belief in the supernatural had to be overcome. But this firm position of his did not mean that he was an atheist or even a Deist. On the contrary, he often spoke of the fundamental importance of religion and religious feeling, which he believed represented the best part of the human condition: idealism, rising above material interests, self-sacrifice, the pursuit of the Good and the True. In this sense he, when he spoke of 'science' often included in it, or included

"Ernest Renan ve 'reddiyeler' bağlamında İslam-bilim tartışmalarına bibliografik bir katkı," *Divan*, 2 (1996), 1-94.

<sup>2</sup>Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

<sup>3</sup>For a discussion of Ottoman Intellectual Ahmet Midhat Efendi's critique of the Christian "conflict between religion and science debate," see M. Alper Yalçınkaya, "Science as an ally of religion: A Muslim appropriation of 'the conflict thesis,'" *British Journal of the History of Science*, 44 :2 (June 2011), 161-181.

<sup>4</sup>Renan discusses this at great length in many places. Especially interesting are his treatment of the topic in *La Réforme intellectuelle et morale* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968) and in the collection *Questions Contemporaines* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1912), containing several lengthy essays that address this topic: "L'Avenir religieux des sociétés modernes," "Réflexions sur l'états des esprits," and "Du Libéralisme clérical." See also his essay "Spinoza" in *Oeuvres complètes de Ernest Renan*, (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1947), vol. 7.

it in, what he called ‘philosophy,’ which he took to be critical inquiry into the human condition in pursuit of the Good and the True.<sup>5</sup>

Renan’s broader ideas concerning religion and rationalism found a ready audience in al-Afghani. In fact Renan and al-Afghani saw eye to eye on many fundamental ideas concerning the nature of religion as a phenomenon and religion’s connection to evolutionary notions of civilization and progress. Al-Afghani was attracted to Renan’s attempt to reconcile religion and rationalism and to subject religious tradition to critical inquiry. In his own writings, al-Afghani also railed against superstition, labored to oppose ‘traditional’ interpretations of religion, and fought to disengage faith from dogmas and rituals he believed were inimical to rationalism, empiricism and ultimately, modern scientific and intellectual progress.

For all these reasons, al-Afghani by and large did not take issue with Renan’s fundamental premises concerning the nature of religion, and confined himself to a rejection of his assertion of European exceptionalism – in other words, the claim that Christianity could be rationalized through critical inquiry, but that Islam could not.<sup>6</sup> Instead, al-Afghani, in keeping with other Islamic Modernists, insisted that Islam was similar to Christianity and no less potent a motor of civilization, rationalism, and scientific progress. This paper explores al-Afghani’s refutation of Renan as it sheds light their shared conceptions of science and scientific method. It also highlights al-Afghani and Renan’s differences concerning the causal relationship of religion and civilization.

The nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of new academic disciplines as part of a larger European-led attempt to develop new taxonomies of difference in human society. New disciplines of philology, anthropology and religious studies grappled with explaining commonalities and differences between human societies over space and time. The production of knowledge that resulted from these categorizations was premised on the idea of the evolution of humanity. As

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, Ernst Renan, “Réflexions sur l’états des esprits,” in *Questions contemporaines*, especially 322-235.

<sup>6</sup>One might equally call the idea of Islam having essentially different responses to the possibility of accommodating secularism as

Christianity, “Islamic exceptionalism.” For a discussion of Islamic exceptionalism in the French context, see Olivier Roy, *Secularism Confronts Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

different societies were mapped onto a linear conception of human evolution, race and language emerged as primary signifiers of difference. Ideas of the nature of religion as a shared human phenomenon led to religion being reconceived on evolutionary terms, rather than as simply a function of truth-value. In this way, religious difference was understood as a function of evolutionary progress. Religious studies scholars, working within a hegemonic Protestant paradigm,<sup>7</sup> held up all religions to various standards of ‘truth’ and ‘progress’ whereby European ‘civilizational’ superiority was provided with empirical justification on racial, linguistic and religious grounds.

Inhabitants of the nineteenth-century Middle Eastern *oikoumene* broadly conceived experienced very similar controversies and intellectual challenges presented by the implications of the Scientific Revolution and new ideas of historicism and evolutionism.<sup>8</sup> The period was dominated by attempts to thwart European imperialism and to adopt reforming programs to strengthen political sovereignty. The massive enterprise of forming citizens from subjects was thus the central concern of many reformers who attempted to reshape their political structures and mold new societies.<sup>9</sup> Middle Eastern reformers were deeply embedded in attempts to define their own modernities, and to reconsider their own political, social, and religious traditions and institutions in the process.<sup>10</sup> Religion was understood as a human phenomenon shared throughout time and place, and in some sense containing universal elements or functions.

<sup>7</sup>Renan accepts the superiority or “more advanced” nature of Protestantism. See for example, Ernst Renan, *La Réforme intellectuelle et morale*, 64–66 or Ernst Renan, “L’Avenir religieux des sociétés modernes,” in *Questions Contemporaines*, 406.

<sup>8</sup>On the dissemination of Darwin’s ideas of evolution in the Middle East, see Mona Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>9</sup>On the connection between religious reform movements and the production of new citizens, see Monica M. Ringer, *Pious Citizens: Reforming Zoroastrianism in India and Iran* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press,

2012). Renan’s own work, *La Réforme intellectuelle et morale*, could be viewed as a comparable attempt to restructure French society from top to bottom following France’s 1871 defeat at the hands of the Prussians.

<sup>10</sup>For an examination of how one Middle Eastern intellectual engaged this issue and detailed discussion of his engagement with late 19th century social scientific thought and the evolutionary ideas of men like Renan and Gustave Le Bon, see A. H. Shissler, “A Student Abroad in Late Ottoman Times,” in *Iran and Beyond*, eds. Rudi Matthee and Beth Baron (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2000).

Ernest Renan's intellectual career spanned a particularly troubled period in Europe and France, at time when religion, religious dogma, sacred texts and traditions received renewed scrutiny and challenge by new 'scientific truths' and scientific methods. Attempts to reconcile religion, science and a historicized understanding of human civilization generated radically different solutions where universalism expressing itself in Deism, Scientism and ecumenism combated exceptionalism expressed in racial and civilizational terms. In a period of political and social transformation of 'subject to citizen,' with all that this process implied for new conceptions of the individual and of the individuals' relationship in society and vis-à-vis the state, religious convictions were often reinforced by political allegiances to liberalism and conservatism, respectively.<sup>11</sup> It was thus a period when attempts to define modernity ran through political, social and religious arenas.

In Europe the attempt to explain commonalities and differences led to claims of Christian universalism as the ultimate religion of mankind, or alternatively, of the development of super-rationalized religion as Deism, or even scientism or positivism. The emphasis on the social and spiritual function of religion also led some to believe that the evolutionary end point of human development would be commensurate with a hyper-rationalized religion as a human-wide ethical prompt and the total abandonment of ritual and formal structure as manifestations of a more primitive conception of religion.

Although profoundly influenced by positivism and the concept of religious evolution, Renan and his like-minded Catholic Reformist and Islamic Modernist colleagues, the latter typified in many ways by al-Afghani, sought to find a place

<sup>11</sup>Some of the classic work on theorizing the development of concepts of popular sovereignty and nationalisms are Eugene Weber, *Peasants to Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, Revised Edition* (New York: Verso, 2006); Eric Hobsbaum, "The Invention of Tradition," *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbaum and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univer-

sity Press, 1983). For a synthesis of nationalism and its kin in the complex Ottoman context see A. Holly Shissler, *Between Two Empires: Ahmet Ağaoğlu and the New Turkey* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003). Renan and other intellectuals located religion at the center of the matrix of nationalism, civilization, popular sovereignty and citizenship. See in particular his essay "Que'est-ce qu'une nation," in *Qu'est-ce Qu'une Nation* (Paris: Mill et une Nuits, 1997); and *L'Avenir de la science: pensées de 1848* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1890).

for religion in modern society.<sup>12</sup> To do so, they believed strongly in rationalizing religious dogma and practice, rejecting tradition and ritual as relics of a primitive past, and instead seeking to resuscitate Divine intentionality as individually accessible spirituality and ethics. They were deeply committed to religious reform as a vehicle for a more evolved, truer understanding of God's intent for mankind, which would serve, yet again, as a bulwark against irreligion.

Renan, operating well within the Christian tradition, used arguments concerning science as method to assault unquestioned dogma and tradition of Catholicism. He devoted his life to re-conceptualizing Christianity as a faith, as a spiritual commitment to God's intent for the evolutionary progress of mankind. In this quest, he sought to move away from dogma and ritual, away from the Church as an institution of power, and instead advocated for re-conceiving the "original meaning of Jesus;" for exploring means of harnessing religion in the cause of social progress.<sup>13</sup> His essay "The Religious Future of Modern Societies" which first appeared in the *Revue des deux mondes* in 1860, is a lengthy exposition of this conviction, offering an analysis of the progress of Christianity towards freedom of conscience and freedom of thought, with Protestantism as its most advanced incarnation up to that point, and with some prescriptions for how Catholic France could rise to that level. Renan concludes by affirming:

The world will ever be religious, and Christianity in a large sense is the last word in religion. –Christianity is capable of indefinite transformations.– All official organization of Christianity, be it in the form of the national church or in the *ultramontaine* form, is destined to disappear. A free and individual Christianity, with countless internal varieties, just as it was in its first three centuries— that is what seems to us to be the future of religion in Europe. Those who believe that religion is destined little by little to lose its importance in the world's

<sup>12</sup>For an overview of Islamic modernist thought in translation, see Charles Kurzman, *Modernist Islam 1840-1940: A Sourcebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>13</sup>Renan's *Vie de Jésus* attempted just this. Renan's rejection of the Catholic Church's construction of Jesus was embraced by his admirers and denounced by his critics. Ernst Renan,

*Vie de Jésus* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1898). For praise of Renan's attempts at the resuscitation of religion, see Grant Duff and E. Mountstuart, *Ernest Renan, In Memoriam* (London: Macmillan, 1893). On Renan's Catholic critics, see Vytautas V. Gaigalas, *Ernest Renan and His French Catholic Critics* (North Quincy: The Christopher Publishing House, 1972).

affairs and those who see the final expression of all religion in a sort of Deism are equally deceived. Religion is something *sui generis*; Philosophical schools will not substitute for it. Deism, which has the pretention of being scientific, is nothing more than religion; it is an abstract mythology, but it is a mythology. It requires miracles; its God, intervening providentially in the world, is in the end no different than the God of Joshua stopping the sun . . . The religious and utterly non-dogmatic principle proclaimed by Jesus will develop eternally, with infinite flexibility, bringing with it ever more advanced symbols and, in any case, creating forms of worship appropriate to the capacity of each according to the different stages of human culture.<sup>14</sup>

As a religious reformer Renan experienced first-hand the tension between religion and science – but only of religion as a reified and essentialized Tradition. He saw no inherent tension between science and religion, only a tension between the current *form and understanding* of Catholicism and modern science. Renan should be read as a pious individual committed to preserving the essence of Jesus' teachings through recalibrating and re-conceptualizing the nature and meaning of faith. He believed that in so doing, mankind could thereby harness the creative and emotional benefits of faith and usher in the next evolutionary phase of humanity.

Al-Afghani, as a prominent Muslim intellectual, shared Renan's convictions concerning the possibility of religion either promoting or hindering progress and civilization. Yet he was further burdened with refuting Renan's claims of Christian exceptionalism. His response thus manifests a two-pronged objective: to provide a pathway to reconcile religion and science, and to provide an alternative reading of the causal elements of progress and civilization that could debunk this supposed exceptionalism. Al-Afghani understood science as a methodology premised on empiricism and rationalism expressed as critical enquiry. He advocated applying scientific method to religion, which would entail a re-reading of texts and traditions and their subjection to demands of functionality, purpose, rationalism, and intent. Historicism, meaning here the

<sup>14</sup>Ernest Renan, "L'Avenir religieux des sociétés modernes," in *Questions Contemporaines*, 403 ff.

premise of historical context, acted as the dissolvent of Tradition and was central to Al-Afghani's understanding of scientific method as an assault on the concept of Tradition as an absolute unchanging essence, and as such, unassailable precedent.

Precisely because of the profound commonality of many of Renan and al-Afghani's objectives, Renan's treatment of Islam is intellectually disappointing, and it must have seemed so also to al-Afghani. Rather than advocate for Islamic reform alongside that of Catholic reform, Renan instead insisted on the exceptional capacity of Christianity to evolve through rationalization, even as he denied this very possibility to Islam. In "Islam and Science" he expounded the idea that the 'backwardness' of the Islamic world could be attributed to a cultural environment hostile to a rational and scientific frame of mind and to intellectual freedom. Renan claimed that this hostility stemmed from the very nature of the Islamic faith, and from what he viewed as its essentially Arab character. He carried this theme forward when he argued, for instance, that all the great achievements of medieval Islamic science and philosophy were borrowings from the Hellenistic world, adopted and developed by Persians, Spaniards, even Central Asians, who "happened to have" Arab names. He further contends that the Arab essence of Islam and the fact that Islam "supposed" the subordination of the polity to religion precluded any material or political advance for the Islamic world, then, or at any future time. It is worth noting that by science he means a method or approach, which he largely identifies with rationalism and free thought. His discussion rests heavily on the deleterious effects of institutions that limit free thought, and the worst of these is the theocratic state. As Renan puts it, "liberty has never been more profoundly damaged than by a form of social organization where religion dominates civil life absolutely . . . Islam is the indistinguishable union of the spiritual and the temporal, it is the reign of dogma, it is the heaviest chain that humanity has ever had to bear."<sup>15</sup>

It is on the question of whether or not Islam can evolve that al-Afghani, and other later refuters, take Renan to task. Al-Afghani concurs with Renan's larger religious mission. He shares Renan's commitment to religious reform and his views on the urgency of subjecting religious tradition to scientific method,

<sup>15</sup>Ernest Renan, "L'Islamisme et La Science," in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 1, 956.



but rejects Renan's Christian exceptionalism. Both Renan and Al-Afghani viewed religion as a shared human phenomenon expressed differently over time and place. The form that religion takes, not the identity of the religion itself, it would seem, should be the matter of primary importance. Religion needs to evolve, and this is equally true for Christianity and for Islam. When al-Afghani writes about "the influence of religion in the history of nations, and in particular that of civilization" he is not writing in the particular, but in the general. As he later notes, "religions. . . all resemble each other."<sup>16</sup>

The last point is the place where Renan and Al-Afghani part company. For Renan, language and religious belief are two spontaneous human phenomena. Language and religion are fundamental and naturally occurring in all peoples throughout history and they are subject to change over time. Renan, like Afghani, believes that the human understanding of religion, the human capacity for understanding it, evolves over time from the concrete, superstitious, dogmatic and communal, to the abstract, spiritual, ethical and individual. But for Renan, while language and religion are universal in the sense that all human societies have them, they are also diverse and their diversity is both sign and expression of fundamental differences in the character or "genius" of the people who bear them. Advancement or progress through history is achieved through the collision of these different elements and the synthesis that emerges from it. The analogy would be to geology rather than to chemistry: the nature of the materials and the accidents of history shape the terrain in ways that are unique—it is not like a laboratory experiment where results can be reproduced. Thus some groups bring more to, and are able to profit more than others from, this contact. In fact, in Renan's interpretation, real human progress is largely the effect of the encounter of two significant groups: the Indo-Europeans and the Semites. The Indo-Europeans bring creativity, curiosity, and talent for politics that allows them both organized government and a fierce individualism that resists despotic regimes. The Semites bring monotheism with its larger moral compass and its vision of the absolute. This interest in language groups as a mark of fundamental or underlying character ('genius' as he often calls

<sup>16</sup>Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, "Answer of Jamal ad-din to Renan," in Nikki R. Keddie, *Islamic Response to Imperialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 187.

it) allows Renan to postulate essential difference, while yet talking about commonalities and evolution.<sup>17</sup> There is often slippage in Renan's writing among the categories of racial-ethnic groups, religious groups, linguistic groups, and cultural groups, and there is often slippage as well about when and whether acculturation is possible. That is, at times when he speaks of a German genius or a Semitic genius he seems to be talking about a set of attitudes or predispositions that arise from a particular ethno-linguistic group, but that are culturally transmissible to others. At other times he seems to suggest that these predispositions are engrained and that they can neither be transferred to others, nor alloyed in any way in their original carriers.

Al-Afghani, in responding to Renan, quickly takes note of the fact that Renan elides the difference between ethno-linguistic identity and religious identity, and is contradictory about whether aspects of culture, be they ethnic or religious, are open to change. He points out that it is impossible to determine whether Renan is making claims about Arabs or about Muslims or about non-Arab Muslims. As Al-Afghani says:

M. Renan's talk covered two principle points. The eminent philosopher applied himself to proving that the Muslim religion was by its very essence opposed to the development of science, and that the Arab people, by their nature, do not like either metaphysical sciences or philosophy. This precious plant, M. Renan seems to say, dried up in their hands as if burnt up by the breath of the desert wind. But, after reading this talk one cannot refrain from asking oneself if these obstacles come uniquely from the Muslim religion itself or from the manner in which it was propagated in the world; from the character, manners, and aptitudes of the peoples who adopted this religion, or of those on whose nations it was imposed by force. It is no doubt the lack of time that kept M. Renan from elucidating these points; but the harm is no less for that, and if it is

<sup>17</sup>The existence of these two "fundamental groups," namely Indo-Europeans and Semites, their characteristics, and their historical interactions, was almost an obsession with Renan. The topic recurred in multiple books and essays. Here I will mention only a few: "L'Avenir religieux des sociétés modernes" in

*Questions Contemporaines*; "De la part des peuples sémitiques dans l'histoire de la civilisation," in *Oeuvres Complètes de Ernest Renan*, vol. 2; "Le Judaïsme comme race et comme religion," in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 1; "L'Histoire du peuple d'Israël," in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 7.

difficult to determine its causes in a precise manner and by irrefutable proof, it is even more difficult to indicate the remedy.<sup>18</sup>

When al-Afghani takes note of his slippage, though he does so in an almost casual fashion, he is in fact putting his finger on the crux of the matter, namely he is pointing out that in some places Renan is talking about a cultural or civilizational field populated by diverse peoples and shaped by numerous cultural encounters, but in other places his comments seem more essentialized. In Renan's account of religious development, Christianity freed itself of Judaism and evolved through its contact with Europeans; Protestantism freed itself from the hierarchy and dogmatism of the Papacy under the guidance of the German "genius," but that genius is available as a cultural matter to others, like the British and the French. But the Muslim world, he seems to say, cannot escape the "Semitic" character of Islam, a character infused in that religion by its people of origin, the Arabs. But why should this be so? If the Indo-Europeans can adopt the great moral and ethical insights of monotheism that originated among Semites, if the English and the French can absorb the lesson of freedom of conscience from the Germans, if the insights of French philosophy are available to others, then why should it be the case that the Muslim world is barred from progress? Renan seems to say at times that the Muslims are incapable of progress because they are Arabs (Semitic), at other times that it is the Semitic cultural character of Islam that condemns all Muslims, including the Arabs, to backwardness.

Despite his polite phrasing, al-Afghani is pointing out not errors, but contradictions in Renan's argument, and he doing so in a way that points to an ahistorical and contradictory current in Renan's larger approach to religious and civilizational history: though Renan often proclaimed the universality of evolution and the availability of progress to all, his account of its mechanisms leads him ultimately to consign some peoples to the backwaters of history because of their essential natures – for them there can be no evolution.

Al-Afghani responds by putting forward a universalist and evolutionary conception of the history of religion, one that positions his own contemporary Islamic society at a pivotal crossroads. In so doing he both provides an

<sup>18</sup>Renan, *Questions Contemporaines*, 182.

explanation for Middle Eastern weakness vis-à-vis Europe and proposes the solution for redressing this power disparity. Al-Afghani begins his explanation by asserting, “no nation at its origins is capable of letting itself be guided by pure reason.” He elaborates; arguing that “humanity . . . at its origin” needed religion to move from barbarism to a higher evolutionary stage of civilization. Religion was the motor of progress that propelled the evolution of humanity from “barbaric” to “civilized.” As humanity moved into this new level of development, the “tutelage of religion” promoted the development of sciences, civilization, arts and consequently, political power. The focus on political power is significant, not least because Renan so often asserted in his writings that “Semites” lacked political instincts and capacity, and had rarely, if ever, established great and enduring states or empires.<sup>19</sup> Short on specifics, Al-Afghani suggests that this explained the glory of the Abbasid period, when Arab civilization embraced Islam and ushered in a golden age of science and civilization. Here he specifically addresses Renan’s claims that those who contributed to science and philosophy in this period were not “Arab,” which Renan implied was the reason they were able to overcome the intellectual limits of Islam. Al-Afghani argues that one must take them as Arabs in the cultural sense, since they wrote in Arabic, that it is historically indefensible to claim that after long centuries conquerors and the conquered do not acquire cultural characteristics from one another, and further, that if “Arabness” is the issue, the claim that the Harranians were not Arabs is a nonsense, as they were ethnically Arab though non-Muslim. In other words, he is arguing for construing them all them as part of a single, wider civilizational complex, just as he defines the Christian religion saying, “I mean the society that follows its inspiration and its teachings and is formed in its image.”<sup>20</sup> This is an important point, because he insists upon seeing all these phenomena – people, languages, and religions – as part of human society and subject to historical change, not as essences or absolutes. In insisting upon this, al-Afghani is also drawing our attention to Renan’s failure to do the same, at least when he is talking about the Middle East.

<sup>19</sup>However absurd this claim may seem, Renan made it on more than one occasion. See for example, Ernst Renan, “Histoire générale et système comparé des langues sémitiques,” in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 8, 153-154 or

Ernst Renan, “De la part des peuples sémitiques dans l’histoire de la civilisation,” in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 2, 324-325.

<sup>20</sup>Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, “Answer of Jamal ad-din to Renan,” 183.

Al-Afghani recognizes that at some indeterminable point in the history of Arabo-Islamic civilization, Islam transitioned from an avenue of promoting science and thus civilization, to a roadblock that hindered it. He does not specify what changed, but intimates that at some point in time, some parts of society were ready to evolve further, whereas religion, described at this point in his argument as “a slave to dogma,” prevented it. He explained that “obedience that 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” – was the price of enabling evolution from primitivism, since “whether it be Muslim, Christian or pagan . . . all nations have emerged from barbarism and marched toward a more advanced civilization.” Yet this very ‘obedience’ became an intellectual shackle, preventing “free investigation,” and “philosophy” that are at the heart of “science” both as fields of knowledge, but more importantly, as epistemic methodologies. He gives no explanation for this beyond a “natural” contradiction between dogma and free thought, and expresses hope for the future simply by saying that after all Christian society (not the Church itself) had escaped the intellectual bonds of dogma and tradition, and there was no reason to suppose that Muslim society, so many centuries younger, would not in time do the same.

On these points, namely the impossibility of change and progress in Muslim societies and the “Arabness” or not of figures like Ibn-Rushd, Ibn-Tufail and Ibn-Bajja, Renan’s reply to al-Afghani is far from convincing. Though he denies that the impossibility of development and progress in the Islamic world was his position and claims that he was saying that Catholicism and Islam both persecuted free thought, and the only difference between them was the success of Islam in doing so, as he offers no account of why Islam has been so much more effective in repression, one is, *de facto*, thrown back on his account of Semitic character. Equally, his insistence that Ibn-Rushd and others were not more “Arab” than Francis Bacon was Roman on account of writing in Latin is disingenuous,<sup>21</sup> since he had often characterized Arab Muslims as the epitome

<sup>21</sup>Ernest Renan, “Appendice à la précédente conférence [L’Islamisme et La Science],” in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 1, 960-965.

of the Semitic spirit in the modern world, and since he equally often grouped all of Europe together under the Indo-European heading.

We may conclude from all of this that while al-Afghani shared with Renan a commitment to religious reform as a good in itself and as an important step on the road of progress, and while he saw religious tradition and practice in human and evolutionary terms as did Renan, he was well aware of the tendency of Renan and other European thinkers to cast their own societies, religions, and ethnicities as engaged in evolution and those of others as “stagnant.” In other words, he saw that while European thinkers created space for their own religious reform by saying that God’s truth was outside of time and space, but man’s – or European man’s – engagement with it was purely historical and subject to development through experience and interaction, they simultaneously denied this to others by attributing to them immutable, unalloyed and unalloy-able characters. In fact, al-Afghani deftly perceived the heart of Renan’s Orientalism. What he seems to be seeking, indeed attempting, is an evolutionary account of the production of religious reform, intellectual liberty, and scientific progress that is free from essentialism, whether religious, racial, or cultural.

Al-Afghani’s dichotomy of dogma with “philosophy,” “free investigation,” and “reason” suggests not only his view of science as new fields of knowledge (the sciences) but of science as a method of arriving at truth, a method at odds with precedent and as such, with contemporary understandings of Islam. Scientific method, as rationalism, as logic, and as a commitment to empiricism and the universality of natural law, is in natural and in some sense therefore, inevitable, tension with the dogmatism of religions. He writes, “Religions, by whatever names they are called, all resemble each other. No agreement and no reconciliation are possible between these religions and philosophy. Religion imposes on man its faith and its belief, whereas philosophy frees him of it totally or in part.” Science as method is not culturally specific, but universal. The solution is not to eliminate religion, but to create conditions

in which “philosophy” enjoys what al-Afghani terms “the upper hand.” Only when individuals in society are free to subject religiously sanctioned truths to critical inquiry, and to disengage faith from dogma can that society promote sciences and prosper from them. As he argued elsewhere, “The Europeans have put their hands on every part of the world . . . in reality this usurpation, aggression, and conquest has not come from the French or the English. Rather it is science that everywhere manifests its greatness and power.”<sup>22</sup>

Yet while it is clear that al-Afghani understands method to be of paramount importance, his proposals for religious reform remain elusive. On the one hand, he despairs of any real resolution between religion and science, hoping only for science to “reign as sovereign mistress.” On the other hand, it is not clear where this leaves religion. As an unchangeable “iron band” on the heads of all mankind? Or as a human phenomenon which also has the capacity to evolve in form? When he notes in another context that “those who forbid science and knowledge in the belief that they are safeguarding the Islamic religion are really the enemies of that religion” he suggests the possibility of religious reform.<sup>23</sup> Yet his response to Renan suggests a more pessimistic view of the capacity of religion to ever embrace rationalism: “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 because science, however beautiful as it is, does not completely satisfy humanity.” Keddie noted that the chameleon-like quality of Al-Afghani’s writings make it difficult to disentangle al-Afghani’s views from the message he presents to different audiences. Nonetheless, there is room here to read this pessimism not as a renunciation of the project of religious reform, but rather as a realistic assessment of the hurdles – emotional, social, and institutional – in such an undertaking.

<sup>22</sup>Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, “Lecture on Teaching and Learning,” in Keddie, *An Islamic Response*, 102.

<sup>23</sup>Al-Afghani, “Lecture on Teaching and Learning,” 103.

Al-Afghani certainly saw the existing power disparity between Europe and the Middle East as a function of the relationship of religion to scientific inquiry, and a clear indication of the necessity of Islamic reform. His historical and evolutionary explanation of the shifting causal relationship between religion and civilization is a fascinating attempt to account for contemporary European hegemony while also providing a roadmap for the regeneration of the Arabo-Islamic world (and beyond). Al-Afghani also makes a point of emphasizing the superiority of Abbasid Arabo-Islamic civilization over its contemporary European counterparts – suggesting different evolutionary chronologies. He also emphasizes that Catholicism went through much the same relationship with European civilization – at first enlivening it and then restraining it – and that just as the dogma and anti-intellectualism of Catholicism has been overcome, so too can the dogma and anti-intellectualism of Islam.

Renan's lecture and Al-Afghani's refutation are valuable windows onto wider nineteenth century attempts to reconcile scientific truths and scientific methods with religion in line with new conceptions of religion, of humanity, and the new political and social ideals and possibilities that resulted. These broader conversations are situated in the context of European colonialism, and of the European and Middle Eastern transformation of "subject to citizen" with all that this process implied for new conceptions of the individual and of the individual's relationship to society and the state.<sup>24</sup>

These debates also serve to fundamentally challenge the historiography of compartmentalization of these scholars in their national units, as well as the minimization of interaction and conversation across national, religious and cultural borders. Rather than conceiving of Muslim intellectuals 'responding' to the European hegemonic discourse of Renan, all of the participants in this conversation, Renan included, should be conceived of

<sup>24</sup>M. Alper Yalçinkaya, *Learned Patriots: Debating Science, State, and Society in the Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015) is an ex-

cellent example of a fresh approach to the relationship of new definitions of science to citizenship and the modern state.



as manifesting different responses to similar stimuli: namely the Scientific Revolution, the new social sciences, and the very real dangers of European colonialism.<sup>25</sup> These three inducements, in various ways, informed the debates about religion and civilization, and necessitated a religious response to new concepts of human society, evolution, science, and ultimately, the nature of Truth.

Our aim is to emphasize the participation of religious modernism in establishing theological foundations for modernity as scholars responded to, and grappled with theological implications of new fields of science and social sciences. Any accurate historical account of reforms must include Islamic modernism as a serious endeavor by those committed to the genuine reconciliation of religion and science, alongside new social and political ideals. Modernist scholars believed in the unitary nature of truth, and attempted to reconcile reason and revelation as paths to a single truth. They also were committed to applying new scientific methods to questions of religion. The critical reading of texts and the historicizing scrutiny of Islamic tradition were corollaries to the adoption of empirical, rational modes of scientific inquiry and necessitated a serious redevelopment of Islamic epistemological methodology. These modernists thus were committed to rethinking the nature and function of religion in society, and of the individual's relationship to sacred texts and traditions, and equally committed to the revivification of Islam in order to serve the ethical and moral needs of the contemporary Muslim world.

The so called 'reconciliation of Islam with modernity' was not simply a question of realigning Islam with modern 'values' but a more fundamental shift in ways of thinking, argumentation, and the assumptions concerning the nature of religion which lay behind this. In other words, while it is certainly true that these scholars wrote about the compatibility of Islam with constitutionalism,

<sup>25</sup>On intellectual responses to the implications of the Scientific Revolution, see Guy G. Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

science and women's rights, we argue that these were the products of a new methodology; of new modes of Islamic thought premised on concepts of rationalism and historicism. Muslim modernists were sincerely committed to the relevance of Islam in the 'modern' world. Islamic Modernism thus should not be seen as a belated and ultimately futile attempt to instrumentally craft Islam into a language that legitimized its own marginalization in an increasingly secular modern world. This would be to accept the myth of the modern as non-religious or even anti-religious, which often dominates the historiography of nineteenth-century secularizing reforms in the Middle East. Rather, we propose that a closer examination of Islamic modernist texts in their larger, international intellectual field, will subject the Middle Eastern project of modernity's own narrative to necessary scrutiny, and illuminate distortions in our understanding of the place and role of religious thought in the emergence and development of secularism and the citizen in the Middle East. The project of revivification of the Islamic sciences thus is a window onto the much more complex re-conceptualization of religion, and re-placement of religion vis-à-vis the individual, society and state in Middle Eastern 'modernities.'