

## Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani

Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, who came from a Shiite background in Persia (now Iran), was one of the most influential Islamic philosophers of the 19th century. He was a tireless advocate of pan-Islamic reform as part of a cultural and political strategy to unite all Muslims against Western imperialist encroachment. Afghani's strategy did not refuse everything foreign; he looked on European civilization as both "menace and model" and fashioned a politically savvy reassessment of Islamic history and traditions that could be open to Western science and nationalism while defending the autonomy of the Islamic world.



Relatively little is known about the first three decades of Sayyid Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani's life. He was born around 1838 at Asadabad near Hamadan in Iran but often concealed that fact in his later life as part of his campaign for Islamic unity. In the 16th century, Persian rulers had adopted Shiite Islam as the predominant religion of their domain, in contrast to the Sunni Islam of the Ottoman Empire and most Arab peoples. Since Afghani wished to unite Muslims across that historical sectarian divide, he obscured his origins and took the name al-Afghani to make it appear that he had been born in Afghanistan.

Scholars do know that Afghani came from a family of Sayyids, descendants of the prophet Muhammad, and that he spent the early years of his life learning Arabic, the Koran, and other aspects of Islamic law. He then spent some years at a religious school in Qazvin before moving to Tehran to continue his religious studies, as well as embarking on several pilgrimages to holy sites in Iran and Iraq. Accounts vary, but scholars know that he was educated by some of the most renowned Iranian theologians in his youth, and that in his late teens, he traveled to India, where he first became aware of anti-imperialist ideologies when he observed the colonial consequences of the establishment of the British East India Company. He then made the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina and traveled to other parts of the Ottoman Empire and his native Iran. In 1866, during a visit to Afghanistan, which had been squeezed by the rival imperial ambitions of the British and the Russian empires throughout the 19th century, Afghani tried to persuade Emir Sher Ali to ally with the Russians against the British. By 1868, however, Sher Ali had decided to cast his fate with British India against the Russians. Afghani was thus no longer welcome and was promptly expelled from the country.

The ideas that Afghani promoted were startling to the Islamic world. At the core of his philosophy was the idea that all Muslims formed a single nation—the Islamic *umma*—and that imperialism, be it European or Ottoman, was working to divide and destroy the *umma*. The only way that Muslims could overthrow imperialist forces was through a pan-Islamic movement that recognized the inherent perfection of Islam, revised for the modern world. Afghani argued that the Islamic world had once been the greatest force in geopolitics and that it could be again; the West in the 19th century was not superior because it was inherently better than the East, but rather, Muslims had forgotten the truth of Islam and its unifying power.

Afghani felt that there were two main tenets that, if Muslims embraced them, would elevate the Islamic world to the top once again: unity and action. First, Muslims needed to look at themselves as a gigantic super-state, forgetting about ethnic and national differences promoted by Western nationalism, and concentrating on an identity as one nation of believers. Second, Muslims needed to unite against European expansion and economic exploitation by overthrowing their current governments and instituting new governments that were unwilling to sell off commodities and access rights to Western powers at the expense of local populations, as the leaders of Egypt and Iran had done. Ultimately, Afghani sought a unified Islamic world with political leaders emulating the life of the prophet Muhammad, putting themselves second to the needs of the *umma* and standing up to the oppression of imperialist governments.

Afghani's writings and speeches evidence a solid education in medieval rationalist Islamic philosophy, traditional Shiite disciplines, and even the Islamic mysticism associated with Sufism. Drawing from those sources, Afghani's ideas were often rejected by the powerful Sunni scholars, or ulema, who considered themselves the guardians of Islamic legal and religious tradition. Afghani was a modernist insofar as he appreciated the West's cultivation of science and technology, particularly when they were employed on behalf of the military and political power of the nation-state. Afghani perceived the ulema as helping to preserve the cultural complacency and political inertia of the Islamic world rather than aiding the anti-imperialist struggle that he felt was so important.

Yet Afghani's anti-imperialist theme, while pan-Islamic in essentials, was often couched in nationalist terms that the Sunni ulema found threatening. For Afghani, however, love of one's country was not necessarily in contradiction to the nation-transcending goal of pan-Islamic unification. When faced with the threat of domination by the West, what was paramount for Afghani was the idea that each country—whether Afghanistan, Persia, Egypt, India, or the expanse of the Ottoman Empire—possessed the national and religious resources needed in the fight against imperialism. Afghani tried to craft his anti-imperialist message in a language suited to the nationality and class status of his listeners, speaking in one manner for elite rulers and in another for the masses.

An ascetic in his personal life, Afghani avoided contact with his family and is said to have "rejected ties to women." Those ascetic habits impressed his followers and allowed him to devote that much more energy to arousing his fellow Muslims. Afghani exuded a magnetism that brought him crowds of devoted disciples (who themselves went on to become leaders) and gained him entry into the palaces of the powerful. As in Afghanistan, however, Afghani's message was not always welcome to ulema or civil rulers more intent on maintaining the status quo than on revolutionizing the Islamic world to resist the incursion of the West.

In Istanbul in 1869, Afghani involved himself with the modernist bureaucrats who were trying to shore up the disintegrating Ottoman Empire by enacting the Tanzimat reforms. Afghani became an outspoken lecturer of pan-Islamic ideas and attracted the attention of the most prominent thinkers and politicians in the city, who helped him gain an appointment to the important Council on Education. Part of a pattern repeated throughout his life, one of Afghani's lectures irritated the local ulema, and he was expelled from Istanbul in 1871. The expulsion of Afghani was only a small part, however, of the religious leadership's campaign to close a university inspired by a European prototype.

Afghani proceeded to Cairo, where his charismatic personality, fortified by impressive and timely displays of religious and worldly knowledge, attracted a small circle of enthusiastic devotees. One such enthusiast, Muhammad Abduh, became his leading disciple and a renowned reformer in his own right. Afghani spent almost a decade in Egypt and earned a reputation as a popular orator, giving fiery public speeches, particularly against the British. Much of the content of 20th-century political Islam was presaged in the ideas of Afghani. He spread his message wherever he could and became known as an "intriguer" for involving himself with such secret societies as the Egyptian Freemasons. As political activity in Egypt gained the momentum that would eventually result in the military occupation by the British, Afghani was ordered to leave the country in August 1879 by Khedive Tawfiq, the new viceroy of the Ottoman sultan.

Returning to India, Afghani began to recruit among the followers of Sayyid Ahmed Khan in the Muslim-ruled princely state of Hyderabad. Ahmed Khan was a committed Anglophile who advocated active cooperation with the British and thus was repulsive to Afghani. During 1880-1881, Afghani penned his most famous pamphlet, *The Truth about the Neicheri Sect . . .* (*neicheri* is an Urdu word meaning naturalist or materialist) as a polemic against

Ahmed Khan's views. That work is valuable not only as a summary of Ahmed Khan's ideas but also as a reflection of Afghani's own thoughts on religion and philosophy in general, and Islam in particular.

Traveling to Paris in 1883, Afghani and his friends composed Arabic-language articles that sent home the anti-imperialist, pan-Islamic call to arms. While in Paris, Afghani spent six years learning Western philosophy and working through his own adaptations of it; he also engaged in public correspondence with the French historian and nationalist thinker Ernest Renan. In 1884, Afghani and Abduh published the Arabic newspaper *Al 'Urwa al Wuthqa* (*The Strongest Link*), which the British proceeded to ban in both Egypt and India.

Ironically, in 1890, Afghani was invited to return to his native Iran by the Qajar shah Nasir al-Din as a court adviser. However, the shah sold off tobacco concessions to the British that were extremely punishing to the local economy. Afghani, disgusted, wrote to the head of the Shiite ulema asking him to protest the granting of the tobacco concession and organized massive rallies against it. The Shiite leader's subsequent decree called for a boycott of the use and sale of tobacco by Iranians, which proved instrumental in ending the tobacco concession. As punishment for Afghani's role in that affair, the shah of Iran exiled him.

Invited back to Istanbul by Sultan Abdulhamid II of the Ottoman Empire in 1892, Afghani renewed a call for the overthrow of Nasir al-Din of Iran. One of Afghani's followers responded to the plea by killing the shah in Tehran. The Iranians unsuccessfully sought the extradition of Afghani for the assassination, although associates of his were given over to Tehran and hanged for their alleged conspiratorial roles. Apart from that incident, Afghani's final years in Istanbul were conspicuous for their comparative quiet. Afghani died there, from cancer of the chin, in 1897. His specific and—for Muslims of the era—novel methods of political activism, as well as his unique combination of pan-Islamic and nationalist ideas, survived well into the next century, thanks to devoted students like Abduh, who continued to refine his ideas and established the foundation of modern Islamic revivalism. Afghani's vision of political action in the name of Islamic unity continues to inspire and provoke millions around the world.

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#### FURTHER READING

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