Afghānī on Empire, Islam, and Civilization
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This essay provides an interpretation of Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn al-Afghānī, a controversial figure in nineteenth-century Islamic political thought. One aspect of this controversy is the tension between "Refutation of the Materialists," Afghānī’s well-known defense of religious orthodoxy, and a short newspaper article entitled "Reply to Renan" that dismisses prophetic religion as dogmatic and intellectually stifling. In this essay I argue that close attention to Afghānī’s theory of civilization helps resolve this apparent contradiction. Afghānī’s interest in Ibn Khaldūn and the French historian Guizot is well known, but has not been fully explored in the literature. I suggest that understanding Guizot’s distinctive approach to the concept of civilization illuminates Afghānī’s writings on the political utility of religion. Afghānī was an ardent anti-imperialist and his goal was to encourage reform in Islamic countries while resisting Western hegemony. He concluded that the tension between prophetic religion and critical thought could help Islamic civilization to flourish.

**Keywords:** Islam; imperialism; civilization; reason; progress; Guizot; Afghānī

A number of scholars have shown that the concepts of civilization and progress played a crucial role in legitimizing and justifying imperialism in the nineteenth century.¹ This research has illuminated the relationship between the concepts of universalism and exclusion, freedom and domination in European political theory. Less attention, however, has been paid to the way that non-European thinkers have both assimilated and contested the concepts of civilization and progress. Yet the critique of European civilization was a prominent theme in nineteenth- and twentieth-century anti-imperialist writing.² Many anti-imperialist theorists diagnosed and criticized the pathologies of European civilization: materialism, individualism, corruption, violence, and decadence.³

This essay explores the themes of civilization and progress in Islamic thought. It focuses on the work of Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn al-Afghānī (1839–1897), a prominent anti-imperialist and one of the leading figures in Islamic
modernism. Afghānī concluded that the European civilizing mission was exploitative and barbaric, but he also emphasized the compatibility of Islam and modernity. His concept of civilization reflects the influence of both Islamic and European sources. In his most famous essay, “Refutation of the Materialists,” Afghānī starts with a basically Hobbesian account of endemic conflict and then explains why religion is the best method for creating social order. His main argument is that religion provides the conditions for civilizational progress and general well-being. Secular sovereignty is inadequate because it incorporates no mechanism short of revolution for ensuring that the rulers as well as the ruled follow the law. In spite of his frequent references to the Qu’rān, Afghānī’s critique of secularism and heterodoxy is pragmatic and political rather than theological. For Afghānī, whose own orthodoxy was a matter of some controversy, Islam is a necessary source of unity, identity, and mobilization against imperialism.

Afghānī’s explanation of the political utility of religion raises some difficult interpretive questions. In “Refutation of the Materialists” Afghānī forcefully defended religious orthodoxy, but in a short article entitled “Reply to Renan” he criticized Islam as dogmatic and intolerant. These two contradictory texts draw attention to an ambivalence about reason and revelation that runs throughout his work. To understand this apparent ambivalence, we need to look more closely at the motifs of progress, historical development, and civilization that underlie his analysis. Afghānī’s emphasis on civilization reflects the influence of Ibn Khaldūn (1332–1406), but also departs from Ibn Khaldūn in important ways. In this essay, I suggest that understanding Francois Guizot’s (1787–1874) distinctive approach to the concept of civilization illuminates Afghānī’s writings on the political utility of religion.

This essay builds on several excellent secondary sources written by area studies experts as well as dozens of primary texts that are available in translation. There is a vast and rich scholarly literature on Islamic thought that addresses political issues but there are also important insights to be gained from the methods of political theory, which can help deepen our understanding of contested texts by identifying thematic links across time and space and exposing layers of meaning. My goal is to weave these two approaches together. To do so, this essay begins with a brief introduction to Afghānī and a summary of “Refutation of the Materialists.” In the next sections, I discuss the interpretive puzzle raised by his “Reply to Renan” and explain the theoretical significance of the trope of civilization. In the final section, I analyze Guizot’s theory of civilization and clarify how it resolves the apparent tension in Afghānī’s thought.
Afghānī’s Anti-Imperialism

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

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

Afghānī is widely seen as the founding father of Islamic modernism because he insisted that civilizational advance did not require uncritical assimilation of European models. The modern world, for Afghānī, was a place where European science, military power, and economic development had undermined the political autonomy and threatened the cultural identity of the Islamic world. Modernity and imperialism were integrally linked and it was difficult to separate European technical innovations and culture from the military domination and economic exploitation that were key elements of the new global system. To the subjugated people of the Middle East, the West signified not only a geographical entity (Europe) but also a religious system, a history of geopolitical rivalry, and a set of values. To its detractors, the values of Western civilization were primarily negative: materialism, hedonism, secularism, and atomism. Others associated the West with science, rationality, critical thinking, and material progress.13 Some political leaders and intellectuals responded by arguing that the only way to reassert political independence was to adopt the Western practices that had ensured military superiority.14 This approach was realized most fully in Turkey under Ataturk (1923–1945) and was based on an integrated approach that included secularism, nationalism, and modernization.15 It was emulated to varying degrees by other Muslim nations in the early twentieth century, especially Reza Khan in Iran (1925–1941). The dominant alternative was to reject Western civilization altogether and promote strict adherence to existing religious practices, prohibitions, and legal and educational institutions. Afghānī was among a small but influential number of thinkers who articulated an alternative. He insisted on the social function of religious orthodoxy and also defended rationalism and critical thinking. His polemic against the Neicheris (an Indian group espousing naturalism or materialism) reads like a vitriolic attack on Western values, but Afghānī cannot simply be dismissed as an occidentalist. In the same period he also wrote several articles and speeches embracing practices such as philosophy, science, and rationalism, which were associated with the West. These apparently contradictory positions are a puzzle that has intrigued scholars, who have reached very different conclusions about his true character and agenda.16

Refutation of the Materialists

Afghānī’s best-known work is usually translated as “Refutation of the Materialists.” According to Nikki Keddie, the essay was composed in 1880
as an attack on Sayyid Ahmad Khān (1817–1898) and his followers, the Neicheris. Khān was an influential public figure in British-occupied India. Like Afghānī himself, Khān was a reformer who defended reason and science. Unlike Afghānī, however, Khān advocated cooperation with the British rather than nationalist or pan-Islamist opposition to foreign domination. According to Keddie, “Refutation of the Materialists” is a thinly veiled polemic attacking Khān’s movement because Afghānī felt that the movement was undermining Muslim unity and Muslim identity.

This political subtext, however, is not readily apparent in the essay. In a separate piece written during the same period, Afghānī attacks Khān more directly, but the “Refutation of the Materialists” is a more theoretical piece with few direct references to contemporary politics. In “Refutation of the Materialists,” Afghānī explains the social and political utility of religion, which he defines as a system of laws and practices based on the belief in a transcendent deity. Afghānī argues that materialism is a source of corruption that causes social discord. He traces the concept of materialism back to its Greek roots and claims that it is an approach that is antithetical to the philosophy of Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. His examples of materialists (or naturalists) include Epicurus, Diogenes, and Darwin. According to Afghānī, the logical consequence of materialism is the denial of the existence of a transcendent deity. Materialism therefore undermines people’s faith in religion. This is disastrous because religion is necessary to inculcate morals, ensure political stability, and foster civilizational advance.

In “Refutation of the Materialists,” Afghānī argues that religion teaches three important beliefs that have enormous social utility. The first key principle is that “there is a terrestrial angel (man) and he is the noblest of creatures.” Second, religion fosters a belief in the superiority of the community sharing one’s faith. Finally, religion teaches that earthly existence provides humans with the opportunity to perfect themselves and gain access to the afterlife. Each of these beliefs encourages humans to control their animalistic side—which can manifest itself as either sheep-like passivity or lion-like aggression—and cultivate their higher capacities for justice and wisdom. Not only does this improve the individual character, but it also establishes the conditions necessary for society as a whole to advance.

This emphasis on controlling humans’ animalistic qualities is a theme in medieval Islamic philosophy. The echoes of neo-Platonism are strong even in Afghānī’s most orthodox essay. The neo-Platonist opposition between the rational soul and animalistic body runs throughout the text. For neo-Platonists, the goal of philosophical practice was to attain understanding of universal, abstract ideas and loosen the grip of transitory corporeal
existence. Under the influence of Islam, these goals had to be reconciled with monotheism and prophetic religion. Ibn Sīnā (980–1037), for example, argued that Mohammed was a great philosopher who possessed both theoretical and practical wisdom. His practical wisdom gave him the ability to translate philosophical truths and principles of conduct into an idiom that was accessible to the masses. From this perspective, the Qu’rān is a rhetorically powerful pedagogical tool for introducing the common people to lessons derived from higher levels of wisdom. Prophecy is not opposed to philosophy; instead, it reflects the artful combination of theoretical, imaginative, and practical reason.

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

The man who believes this (his group’s superiority) will enter into rivalry and competition with the other communities; will compete against them in the arena of virtues; and will seek to be superior to and above all other communities in all the human virtues, whether intellectual, spiritual, or material.

This is an example of Afghānī’s subtle reconfiguration of Qu’rānic ethics. In the Qu’rān, the only criteria for superiority is righteousness (taqwā, or “God-consciousness”). Afghānī takes this familiar ideal and animates it with new meaning. He explains that someone who has a strong sense of group pride will want to emulate the accomplishments of other groups. Here he obviously has in mind the scientific achievements of Europe, not its piety, therefore I see this as an illustration of the rhetorical strategy that
he employs throughout the text. He takes familiar religious concepts or ideals and, rather than criticizing them, uses them in unconventional ways. He argues that this rivalry will also foster the advance of humanity, as each group stimulates the other toward greater accomplishments. This argument helps make sense of Afghānī’s attitude toward Europe, which involved both admiration and passionate condemnation. He had a deep commitment to the dignity and worth of his own Islamic culture. He also recognized and appreciated the scientific and technical advances in Europe. Instead of rejecting these European accomplishments, he wanted the Islamic world to emulate and surpass Europe so that it would not become subordinate to Europe.

In the next section of the “Refutation of the Materialists,” Afghānī claims that religion is necessary because it produces three qualities that are essential for the common good: shame, trustworthiness, and trustworthiness. According to Afghānī, shame is more important “than hundreds of laws” for maintaining the social order.25 He argues that shame is the attitude that binds society together. He explains that, “This quality (shame) is the bond of human alliances, associations, and societies, since an alliance within one group takes place only when rules are maintained, and the maintenance of rules is never achieved except with this noble trait.”26 He makes the sociological point that group solidarity is enhanced when the members agree to the same code of conduct. Inculcating a feeling of shame at violating such codes is the only way to ensure that they are followed and thus to maintain social cohesion. Afghānī does not explain exactly what role religion plays in cultivating a sense of shame, but there are two things that Afghānī may have had in mind. First, he believed that the success of Islam in the seventh to the eleventh centuries was because it provided a uniform code of conduct that facilitated social intercourse between Arab tribes and peoples with different cultures. By creating a general set of guidelines for identifying honorable and shameful behavior, religion laid the basis for a strong civilization. Second, Afghānī notes that punishment (short of death) is ineffective in regulating the conduct of men who are surrounded by others who share base and corrupt values. In other words, the informal norms that develop in social life are not effective when there are subcultures that do not share the dominant values. Afghānī implies that religion provides a uniform code that identifies shameful behavior and teaches individuals to internalize widely acceptable values.

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

Know that man’s needs are many and the necessities of his life are innumerable. The things whereby he meets his needs are each hidden under a curtain. Each one is secluded somewhere under a concealing veil, and hidden without a name or sign. Know that thousands of calamities, misfortunes, and disasters lurk in every corner of the world. A deadly arrow aiming at man’s destruction is hidden in the bow of ages and in the turns of fortune. Man, aided only by his five weak senses, will never by capable of being aware of all his interests or of meeting his needs.27

In this passage, Afghānī insists that the only way to prevent disaster is by relying on the guidance and aid of others. Without truthfulness, solidarity—the only weapon against the ravages of fortune—commodious living would be impossible. Afghānī’s argument, then, differs from Hobbes’ in at least one important way. The adversities of the state of nature are not necessarily caused by other people. They almost seem to be intrinsic to existence itself. Even if the isolated individual was not attacked by other people, he or she would be vulnerable to hunger, natural disasters, animals, disease, etc. Solidarity with other people is portrayed as an essential and positive thing but a precarious achievement. Only when religion ensures truthfulness will individuals be able to rely on other people, their one resource in overcoming adversity. Here and throughout the text, Afghānī’s defense of religion is distinctly political. He does not say that faith in God or prayer will provide the solutions to terrestrial problems. Instead, he suggests that religion provides the social conditions that allow humans to help each other.

Afghānī makes the political dimension explicit in his discussion of “trustworthiness,” the other quality produced by religion. He notes that government is necessary to ensure human flourishing. Someone must interpret revealed law, enact civil law, enforce the law, and settle disputes. The government must also collect taxes to fund projects for the common good (libraries, schools, hospitals, bridges, roads, etc) and pay the civil servants who are responsible for public administration. But any type of government, whether republican, constitutional, or absolute, risks becoming corrupt and pursuing its self-interest at the expense of the common good. Unless some mechanism ensures that the government advances the public rather than private good, then “rights will be nullified, killing and plunder will become flagrant; the roads of trade will close; and the doors of poverty and indigence will open before the people.”28 Only the moral trustworthiness inculcated by
religion is capable of tempering this tendency. According to Afghānī, no purely political theory can provide the conditions for political order because religion is necessary to ensure the trustworthiness of the government.

For Afghānī, philosophy, like religion rightly understood, is about the pursuit of wisdom. Materialists undermine progress because they eschew the self-discipline that is required to attain wisdom and instead embrace hedonism. The “Refutation of the Materialists,” however, is structured around an unusual set of oppositions. Instead of juxtaposing philosophy versus religion or religion versus science, Afghānī equates religion, philosophy, and science as modes of rationalism and contrasts them with materialism. In doing so, he was unsettling a set of oppositions that had structured Islamic thought at least since al-Ghazālī (1058–1111). Conservative ulama rejected Western science as anti-Islamic because science (for example astronomy and natural history) contradicted specific statements in the Qu’rān, such as the assumption that the sun revolved around the earth. This reinforced the tendency to equate science with Westernization and Islam with traditional jurisprudence (fiqh). Afghānī disturbed this binary opposition by insisting on the Islamic character of reformist politics, philosophy, and science.

**Afghānī’s Puzzling Critique of Religion**

Afghānī’s colorful life, polemical writings, and mythical reputation have inspired a number of extremely heated debates;\(^29\) the most prominent controversy stems from a short essay entitled “Reply to Renan.” The “Reply” was written in response to a lecture by Ernest Renan that condemned the Islamic religion and the Arab people as backward, intolerant, and hostile to science. Renan was a leading orientalist and philologist whose expertise in Semitic languages earned him the Prix Volney and a chair at the Sorbonne. Edward Said described him as “a harsh divider of men into superior and inferior races” who endorsed “the necessary domination of the many by the few” as a law of nature.\(^30\) In this “Reply,” published in the *Journal des Débats* in 1883, Afghānī disagreed with some of Renan’s analysis, but he also took a very negative view of “Muslim religion,” which he called dogmatic, intolerant, and hostile to philosophy. He also concluded that “no agreement and no reconciliation” were possible between religion and philosophy.\(^31\)

Despite the fairly harsh assessment of religion, it would be wrong to read Afghānī’s “Reply to Renan” simply as an attack on Islam.\(^32\) In fact, the
essay was meant to challenge Renan’s broad condemnation of Islam and Arab society as intrinsically antiscientific. Afghānī explained how Greek philosophy had flourished in the Arab world at a time when such learning had disappeared from Europe. He noted that the Arabs had “developed, extended, clarified, perfected, completed, and coordinated (Greek philosophy and science) with a perfect taste and a rare precision and exactitude.”

He challenged Renan’s claim that the Islamic philosophers were Persian and insisted that the great intellectual accomplishments of the golden age (775–1250 AD) were evidence of the “intellectual superiority of the Arabs and of their natural attachment to philosophy.” In the last part of the “Reply” he asked “why Arab civilization, after having thrown such a live light on the world, suddenly became extinguished” and answered that “the responsibility of the Muslim religion appears complete.” But he noted that this hostility to science is a characteristic of all religions, rather than a pathology of Islam or Muslims in particular.

It is difficult to understand why the author of “Refutation of the Materialists” would espouse these views. Given the obvious tension between the two essays, most commentators have concluded that Afghānī must have adapted his message for different audiences and even dissimulated his views when he thought it was the best way to advance his broader agenda. These scholars differ, however, on the nature of this agenda. Some have characterized him as a religious reformer, others as an ardent anti-imperialist, and still others as a cynical self-promoter.

In Afghani and 'Abdul: An Essay on Religious Unbelief and Political Activism in Modern Islam, Elie Kedourie argued that Afghānī was an unbeliever who feigned religiosity to gain influence and advance his career. Drawing on biographical evidence suggesting Afghānī occasionally drank alcohol and had a German lover—information gathered by European intelligence services—Kedourie concludes that the critique of Islam in “Reply to Renan” reflected his deepest convictions. There are two difficulties with this interpretation. First, by demanding perfect consistency between theoretical beliefs and personal behavior, Kedourie sets up a standard that few theorists meet. As G. A. Cohen reminded us in his wonderful book If You’re An Egalitarian, How Come You Are So Rich? few leftist intellectuals live up to their normative ideals, and there may be legitimate reasons for failing to do so. Second, Kedourie fails to explain why Afghānī would actively defend and promote religious orthodoxy if he felt that it was antithetical to his own long-term goals. It might make sense to feign personal piety to avoid alienating potential allies, but it would be counterproductive to advance religious orthodoxy as he does in “Refutation of the Materialists.”
A second line of interpretation concludes that the tensions in Afghānī’s work reflect the incoherence of the Islamic reformist (e.g., Islamic modernist) project. According to Hisham Sharabi, “The basic assumptions of Islamic reformism are grounded in what psychologists call the ‘sub-theoretical’ realm of outlook, the area of intuition and impulse; as such they could receive little direct or systematic expression.”

This assessment may reflect the influence of orientalist tropes associating Middle Eastern thinkers with irrationality, mendacity, and impulsiveness. It also forecloses an analysis of the interesting theoretical question by dismissing an entire tradition. Shirabi is right that Islamic modernism was beset by deep tensions, some of which remained subtheoretical, but the same thing is true of any number of political theories, including the liberal, universalist defense of imperialism and the idea of the European civilizing mission. It is precisely by exploring these tensions that the critic can discover subterranean theoretical foundations or at least come to understand why people experience the ideology as coherent.

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

Roxanne Euben also identifies the tension between the two essays and concludes that they exhibit “an ambivalence about the connection between the truths of science and the hold of faith.” I think this is accurate, but it is more a way of restating the puzzle rather than solving it. Is the ambivalence simply a contradiction, or does it reflect some underlying principles or premises that remain unexamined? The existing scholarly literature has not provided a compelling solution to the interpretive puzzle, but it did provide a clue. In Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, Albert Hourani briefly mentioned Afghānī’s interest in Guizot and Ibn Khaldūn.
Scholars have not pursued these intriguing connections, yet, as I will argue below, their theories of civilization are an important piece of the puzzle.

**Islamic Civilization**

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

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

Although Afghānī never analyzed European theories of civilizational progress in detail, his writings contain a different view. Like many nineteenth-century Europeans, Afghānī had a developmental understanding of historical progress, but he did not think that foreign domination would advance civilization in the Islamic world. In a newspaper article entitled “Unity and Sovereignty or Concord and Victory,” (June 5, 1884) he described the experience of foreign domination as akin to the relationship between human beings and domestic animals. According to Afghānī, under imperialism, the native is exploited to benefit the foreigner. Under this system, the native people become passive and fearful like sheep and lose their ability to control their own destiny. The imperialists exercise political and cultural power while the native people are forced to labor for the benefit of others. According to Afghānī, foreign domination turns the native people into beasts of burden, who lose their higher human capacities of imagination and wisdom.

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

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

Afghānī consistently held the view that religion promoted the development of primitive peoples by inculcating morals, fostering intellectual development, and (especially in Islam) providing a uniform legal code. He
believed that both reason and religion were necessary to reverse the decline of Islamic civilization, but at the same time he recognized the tension between them.

The dialectical approach to civilization had roots in fourteenth-century Islamic philosophy. Afghānī was familiar with the writings of Ibn Khaldūn, whose theory of history was well known in Europe and throughout the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century. In The Muqaddimah, Ibn Khaldūn developed an account of the rise and decline of political dynasties that was based on an opposition between settled forms of civilization (‘umrān hadara) and the civilization of nomadic people (‘umrān badāwah). This opposition loosely corresponds to the concepts of civilization and savagery that were popular in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For Ibn Khaldūn, however, there was no smooth evolution from savagery to civilization and no stable, permanent resolution to the tension between these two ways of life. Tribal, nomadic people (badawi) possess a key characteristic that makes them effective at acquiring political power and founding new dynasties. Ibn Khaldūn called this characteristic ‘asabiyah, which is usually translated as group feeling or solidarity. Because of the harsh conditions of nomadic life, tribal people develop a strong sense of group solidarity and loyalty that allows them to act effectively in gaining power. Over time, however, the new dynasty comes to display the same weaknesses of the former one that it replaced—luxury, idleness, and docility—making it vulnerable to decline and defeat. In The Muqaddimah, Ibn Khaldūn identifies religion as the one factor that can create a more stable basis of civilization. Although Ibn Khaldūn recognizes that religion is not the only possible source of order and stability, he notes that it is a particularly effective one. He explains that it played a fundamental role in fostering unity among the Arabs. Divine revelation also provides a more stable basis for solidarity (‘asabiyah); compared to the natural solidarity of the tribe, religion has potentially wide, even universal appeal, which makes it an important source of political power.

There are traces of Ibn Khaldūn’s ideas in Afghānī’s writing. The most obvious similarity is the strong emphasis on religion as a source of solidarity and political power. In an ironic reversal of the typical colonial narrative, however, Afghānī casts the Europeans in the role of marauding barbarians descending on the civilized Ottomans and insists that the Muslim religion is a source of ‘asabiyah that can help fortify their capacity of resistance. But there are also ways in which The Muqaddimah is limited as a framework for thinking about the challenges of European imperialism.
and its supposed civilizing mission. It treats history as largely cyclical whereas nineteenth-century commentators were beginning to suspect that European imperialism ushered in a new era. Furthermore, its distinctive focus on the dialectic between nomadism and urban life maps poorly onto tension between industrial nation-states and feudal-agrarian empires.

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

**The Contradictory Sources of Historical Progress**

To understand Afghānī’s affinity for Guizot, it is necessary to clarify how Guizot’s approach to the concept of civilizational development differed from other influential variants, for example the four stages thesis. The four stages thesis is associated with historians of the Scottish Enlightenment such as Adam Ferguson and John Millar. According to this account, societies moved from hunting, to herding, then to farming, and finally to commerce, a developmental process that enabled a broader societal transformation from “savagery,” through “barbarism,” to “civilization.” “Civilization” was not just a marker of material development, but also a normative judgment about the moral progress of society. Guizot, like the Scotts, saw civilization as a complex, multifaceted concept that described cultural, moral, and material excellence. But he did not emphasize that civilizational advance was driven primarily by forms of social organization (e.g., hunting, herding, commerce). In *The History of Civilization in Europe*, Guizot articulated a complex account that emphasized the impact of morality and political institutions as autonomous forces driving civilizational advance. He particularly stressed
the importance of religion in fostering the moral and intellectual capacities that were prerequisites for civilization. He credited Christianity with the “regeneration of moral man” during the period of barbarism and argued that this, in turn, brought about “the regeneration of the social state” in pre-modern Europe. According to Guizot, the civilizing effect of the Catholic Church worked in a number of ways. The clergy sustained practices of science and learning during the Dark Ages; the theology of the Christian faith encouraged moral improvement; finally, the autonomy of the Church helped introduce the principle of the division of powers. Guizot concluded, “The fact is evident; the moral and intellectual development of Europe has been essentially theological.”

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

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

Both Guizot and Afghānī recognized the limitations of religion as well as its positive contributions to civilization advance. According to Guizot, the Catholic Church promoted intellectual pursuits, but it also stifled genuinely independent, critical thinking. If it had not been for the Reformation, the Catholic Church would have stifled further progress. This was precisely the argument that Afghānī cited sympathetically in “Refutation of the Materialists.” Afghānī also claimed that Islam, like
postreformation Christianity, was premised on critical thinking and rational proof. He wrote, “The Islamic religion is the only religion that censures belief without proof and the following of conjectures; reproves blind submission; seeks to show proof of things to its followers; everywhere addresses itself to reason . . .”73 This was not exactly an accurate characterization of actually existing Islamic practice, but it described Afghānī’s ideal, one that had historical roots in the tradition of Islamic philosophy and in the Mu’tazilite movement, an influential theological school that held that all knowledge is available to human reason.74 Some commentators have claimed that Afghānī imagined himself as a Muslim Luther but this is true only in the most general sense that he hoped to foment an Islamic reformation.75 It is misleading, however, if it implies that he tried to accomplish this by nailing his theses to the Mosque door. Sixteenth-century Germany was not occupied by foreign infidels, therefore the political context was very different. The unity among Christian people and nations was not so critical in Luther’s time. Given the realities of European domination of the Middle East in the nineteenth century, Afghānī had to proceed more cautiously than the protagonists of the Reformation; he felt that intemperate reforms or radical theological innovations could weaken Muslim unity, making Islamic areas unable to withstand the hegemonic project of Europe. By calling his heterodox, rationalist, and modernist Islam the true Islam, he developed a rhetorical strategy that would be employed by influential twentieth-century figures such as Ali Shari’ati. His goal was to promote the theological reforms that would reverse the stagnation of Islamic societies, without unleashing the centrifugal tendencies of religious conflict.

Afghānī’s emphasis on unity might initially seem to be an important difference between his understanding of the factors promoting civilizational advance and Guizot’s. Guizot insisted that the pluralistic character of European society was the real explanation for its success. According to Guizot, the competition between different ideas and institutions created a social order that was open to critical thought and change. A careful reading of Guizot’s lectures, however, reveals that he believed that both pluralism and unity played a role in creating this favorable social environment. Each of the key principles—barbarian freedom, Christian morality, etc.—was influential because a unified and powerful group advanced it with single-minded tenacity. The precarious synthesis of European civilization would never have emerged had the barbarians simply given up their freedom and embraced Roman institutions. This would have simply prolonged the period of Roman decadence. Similarly, Luther did not fight for religious
pluralism but for a different vision of truth, one which unintentionally brought about the conditions for pluralism.

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

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

With a Guizotian sensibility in mind, we could reinterpret this passage in a new light. The irreconcilable tension between philosophy and religion becomes a cause of optimism rather than pessimism and despair. It reflects a tenuous balance that fulfills humans’ contradictory longings and it preserves a space where a degree of nonconformity is possible. If Afghānī did want to preserve this constitutive tension that prevented stagnation, then it makes sense that he would promote philosophy in some contexts and religion in others. If he felt that the balance was tipping toward excessive theocratic dogmatism, he would want to emphasize the virtues of philosophy, like he did in his early speech in Turkey. If he felt that political leaders were becoming too reconciled to European domination, then it would make sense to promote Islam as an alternative source of asabīyah.
The Guizotian reading is a conjectural solution to an interpretive problem. It provides a coherent theory that helps reconcile the most glaring contradictions in his work. Afghānī was a pragmatist who concluded that religion had played an important role in advancing civilization. He also believed that it would be critical in resisting imperialism; nevertheless, Islamic religion had to be reformed if it were to be prevented from stifling science and critical thinking, the other key components of progress. This put the politically motivated reformer in a difficult position. Too much reform would lead to schism and cynicism, which would undermine the faith of the masses, making way for the hegemonic project of European imperialism. Too little reform would cause rigidity and stagnation, which would also lead to the collapse of Islamic civilization. Afghānī’s apparently contradictory writings remind me of a man walking on a tightrope in the wind, leaning one direction and then another to maintain a tenuous balance.

Conclusion

The main goal of this essay is to provide an interpretation of Afghānī that explains the tension between the ideas advanced in his two most influential essays. A close study of Afghānī’s writing, however, also has at least three implications for broader theoretical debates in political theory. First, Afghānī’s work challenges us to think more deeply about the relationship between religion, politics, and history. Given the strong consensus in favor of secularism in North American academia, theoretical work has tended to focus on refining and balancing the two dominant liberal principles: the separation of church and state and the right to freely exercise one’s religion. Recently, however, political theorists have begun to pay renewed attention to the broader questions about the legitimacy of religious doctrine as a valid source of public reason and the role of religious law in modern legal systems. Afghānī’s defense of religion reminds us that religious law has an important political purpose as a source of meaning and social order. This later function does not mean that it is inevitably a conservative force. Religion can function on multiple levels: as a code of conduct, a powerful narrative rendering of the good life, or an introduction to philosophical reflection. Afghānī’s writing is filled with a rich sense of the value of religion as well as its dangers. He concluded that religious identity could play a decisive role in securing Islamic civilization by resisting the centrifugal effects of imperialism; but he warned that this same identity could hinder further development if science and rationalism became equated with Westernization.
Second, Afghānī’s work also contributes to current debates about civilization and imperialism. The existing academic literature has highlighted the way that European theorists used theories of civilization and progress to legitimize imperialism. It is interesting that Afghānī reconfigures a Eurocentric theory of civilization and progress as the foundation for his anti-imperialism. He does this by arguing that imperial domination treats the indigenous population in a bestial fashion and creates conditions that stifle progress.

Finally, Afghānī’s “Reply to Renan” can be read as an important contribution to an earlier iteration of the “clash of civilizations” debate. Writing in the *Journal des Débats*, Afghānī challenged Renan’s depiction of the Arab world as fundamentally opposed to the West and permanently inferior. In “Islam and Science,” Renan argued that Arabs were by nature and culture hostile to science and insisted that this antirational attitude was reinforced by the dogmatic and authoritarian character of Islam. Afghānī responded by insisting that the Arab world had contributed to the preservation and advancement of Greek science, noting that a vibrant philosophical tradition had flourished in Islamic lands. He argued that all religion was hostile to reason because reason undermined religious authority. In other words, Afghānī destabilized the absolute opposition between East and West and challenged claims about the intrinsic inferiority of Arabs. Instead, he placed both East and West within the same historical framework to analyze their respective strengths and weaknesses. Neither one could claim to be fully civilized or dismiss the other as barbaric. He criticized the excessive materialism, individualism, and secularism of European civilization while faulting Islamic religion for stifling science, reason, and progress. While this view does initially seem to be at odds with his strong defense of religion and even orthodoxy in “Refutation of the Materialists,” it is less troubling if, following Guizot, we recognize the tension between religion and critical thinking as a potentially generative one.

Notes


6. For example, Afghānī implies that prophetic religion is necessary to foster social order through religious law. Ibn Khaldūn explicitly denies this position; in *The Muqaddimah* he concludes,

This proposition of the philosophers is not logical, as one can see. Existence and human life can materialize without (the existence of prophecy) through injunctions a person in authority may devise on his own or with the help of a group feeling that enable him to force the others to follow him wherever he wants to go.


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


12. Keddie, _An Islamic Response to Imperialism_.


16. For a particularly harsh assessment of the incoherence of Islamic modernism (which he calls Islamic reformist) in general and Afghânî in particular, see Hisham Sharabi, _Arab Intellectuals and the West, 6–7_. Kedourie suggests that given the conditions of “oriental despotism” it is futile to even expect the kind of coherence that Western intellectuals aspire to. See _Afghânî and `Abduh_. 2. Finally, Sylvia G. Haim concludes that Afghânî was basically a political activist and opponent of religion who use professions of faith strategically. See the introduction to _Arab Nationalism: An Anthology_ (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964).


21. Hourani, _Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age_ , 114.


24. I would like to thank one of the anonymous referees for making this point.


26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., 147.

28. Ibid., 146.


32. This is the reading emphasized by Kedourie in _Afghânî and `Abduh_.


34. Ibid., 187.
35. See especially Kedourie, Afghani and `Abduh, 45. As evidence, Kedourie cites the following passage from a letter from `Abduh to Afghani: “We regulate our conduct according to your sound rule: we do not cut the head of religion except with the sword of religion.”


38. Sharabi, Arab Intellectuals and the West, 30.


40. For an interesting example of this method applied to the inconsistencies in American political ideologies, see George Lakoff, Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).


42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.


45. Hourani, Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 114.

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


52. Birgit Schaebler, “Civilizing Others: Global Modernity and the Local Boundaries (French/German, Ottoman, and Arab) or Savagery,” in Globalization and the Muslim World: Culture, Religion, and Modernity, ed. Birgit Schaebler and Leif Stenberg (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004). The Muqaddimah was translated into Turkish in 1749 and was known among the Turkish imperial bureaucracy in the nineteenth century. It was also printed in Cairo in 1858.


54. The similarities may not be a coincidence. At least one scholar has argued that Ibn Khaldun’s ideas may have influenced Montesquieu. See Warren E. Gates, “The Spread of Ibn Khaldun’s Ideas on Climate and Culture,” Journal of the History of Ideas 28, no. 3 (1967): 415–22.
56. Ibid., 286–90.
57. Ibid., 318–21.
58. In vol. 1, chap. II, section 26, Ibn Khaldūn argues that “Arabs are the least willing of nations to subordinate themselves to each other. . . . But when there is religion (among them) through prophecy or sainthood, then they have some restraining influence in themselves” (*The Muqaddimah*, 305). In several passages, however, Ibn Khaldūn emphasizes that religion in not a necessary precondition of civilization. See note 6 above.


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


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

66. There has been some scholarly debate about whether the historiography of the Scottish Enlightenment was based on a materialist theory. For evidence in favor of this view, see Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage*. For an overview of some criticisms of this view, see Berry, *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment*. According to Larry Siedentop, Guizot was influenced by the “stadial” approach to history but modified it considerably to create a more pluralist account that emphasized the relationship between political institutions, social structures, and ethical values. See his introduction to Francois Guizot, *The History of Civilization in Europe* (New York: Penguin, 1997), xx.


69. Ibid., 109.

70. Ibid., 156.

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

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


77. Ibid.


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