

Is Islam Responsible for the Backwardness of Muslims?

This is a provocative question, but it has to be asked. Islam is what we understand it to be. Different people understand Islam differently. Historically, Arabs, Persians, Indians, etc. have understood Islam quite differently. Hence when I say "Islam" I only mean to refer to a particular understanding of it. To say that Islam is what the Holy Quran teaches is not always a final answer in that the Quranic teaching calls for interpretation. At any rate, whether or not the understanding of Islam by Sayyid Jamaluddin Al-Afghani, who died in 1897 and of whom Iqbal thought so highly, was correct, he certainly thought that Islam had been an obstacle in the path of progress in the Muslim culture. In 1883 Afghani was in Paris. There he read the text of a lecture on "Islam and Science" by Earnest Renan. In this lecture, Renan argued that Islam is inherently hostile to science and the philosophic spirit, and the Islamic dogma of the unity of the spiritual and the temporal spheres of life is "the heaviest chain that humanity has ever borne." Provoked by Renan's thesis, Afghani decided to write a response to him. His response was published in the form of an article in the *Journal des Debats* of May 18, 1883 in which Renan's article had been published. What was remarkable about Afghani's response was, which most surprised the Frenchman, that he altogether entirely agreed with him, who published his rejoinder the very next day in the same journal and was happy to welcome Afghani as "a fellow rationalist thinker and infidel."⁸ Anyway, here is what Afghani wrote:⁹

If it is true that the Muslim religion is an obstacle to the development of sciences, can one affirm that this obstacle will not disappear someday? How does the Muslim religion differ on this point from other religions? All religions are intolerant, each one in its way. The Christian religion, I mean the society that follows its inspirations and its teachings and is formed in its image, has emerged from the first period to which I have just alluded; thenceforth free and independent, it seems to advance rapidly on the road of progress and science, whereas Muslim society has not yet freed itself from the tutelage of religion. Realizing, however, that the Christian religion preceded the Muslim religion in the world by many centuries, I cannot keep from hoping that Muhammadan society will succeed someday in breaking its bonds and marching resolutely in the path of civilization after the manner of Western society, for which the Christian faith, despite its rigors and intolerance, was not at all an invincible obstacle. No, I cannot admit that this hope be denied to Islam. I plead here with M. Renan not the cause of the Muslim religion, but that of several hundreds of millions of men, who would thus be condemned to live in barbarism and ignorance.

A few pages later, Afghani asked the Frenchman.¹⁰

It is permissible, however, to ask oneself why Arab civilization, after having thrown such a live light on the world, suddenly became extinguished; why this torch has not been relit since; and why the Arab world still remains buried in profound darkness.

Here the responsibility of the Muslim religion appears complete. It is clear that wherever it became established, this religion tried to stifle the sciences and it was marvelously served in its designs by despotism.

Most of us would not have agreed with Afghani. But it may be that the man, from whom Iqbal received so many pearls of wisdom in his imaginative journey through the heavens, knew and understood something about Islam that we don't. If Afghani is right, we are in a

predicament. By the way, this writing of Afghani was and has been hailed as a great defense of Islam which I cannot quite comprehend. It should instead be considered his offence against Islam. But that is neither here nor there.

Be that as it may, my considered opinion is that the correct explanation of the decline of Muslims is that they un-forgivably defaulted by not keeping pace with the progress in human thought, especially scientific thought. This is altogether their own failing for which whatever is responsible—it might even be in part or whole Islam itself, as Afghani alleged in his Paris article, though elsewhere he expressed just the opposite views—its outcome certainly left Muslims backward, powerless, vulnerable, and impoverished. Other factors—military, political, sociological, economic, moral, and religious—may have contributed to their decline, but of all of them the most decisive was their failure to sustain and maintain their leadership, or even an operating competency, in science and technology.