

Chapter 4

Islamic Modernism in the Works of Jamaluddin Al-Afghani and Syed Ahmed Khan: Contrast and Relevance

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ABSTRACT

Linkages between religion and politics have engaged the interest of scholars for centuries. Two thinkers, whose works are central to these inter-linkages are Jamaluddin al-Afghani and Syed Ahmed Khan. Both were Islamic modernists in the late nineteenth century who sought to reform religion by engaging with modernity. They have also contributed significantly to shaping the nationalist movements in West Asia and India respectively. This chapter will examine their ideas on important issues like religious and educational reform, nationalism and Pan-Islamism, differences and contrasts in their ideologies and their contributions to Islamic modernism. Through this examination this chapter will highlight the relevance of their contributions to the study of contemporary political Islam.

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INTRODUCTION

Jamaluddin al-Afghani is an important figure in the history of Islamic modernism, and has influenced numerous thinkers and movements down the centuries. Born in the late 1830s¹, he came to be known as a political activist and Islamic reformer as well as thinker. Having himself been influenced by the rational school of thought through the works of Avicenna and Ibn Khaldun as well as the earlier Salafi² tradition, he is known for his contribution to the ideas of Islamic reform and pan-Islamism, and his staunch opposition of colonial rule. His discourse on Islam and politics has influenced ideas of identity of the self, pan-Islamism and the concept of *umma*³ and anti-colonialism. His ideas of reform influenced subsequent thinkers, political activists and reformers through the centuries. His most famous disciple was Muhammad Abduh, who in turn contributed significantly to reform and reinterpretation in the fields of Islamic education and jurisprudence among others. Together Afghani and Abduh also propagated the concept of *ijtihad* or reinterpretation of Islamic texts and law, as opposed to the then prevalent practice of *taqlid*. He was one of the major advocates of Pan-Islamism, a concept that held varied but important political connotations in the following decades. He gave a lot of emphasis to the centrality of rationality to interpreting Islam, theologically as well as politically.

He is often known as the father of Islamism and some of his followers in later decades include Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt which is still the strongest political organization opposing the military regime in Egypt. Sayyid Qutb, whose writings are believed to have incited radicalism and extremism within the Muslim Brotherhood, was also influenced by the works of Afghani and Abduh. In the South Asian region, Abul A'la Maududi, an eminent political Islamic thinker and political activist whose influence in India and Pakistan has been significant on the colonial and post colonial eras, was deeply influenced by ideas of political Islam propagated by Afghani.

Syed Ahmed Khan was born in 1817 in India, and in the early years of his life witnessed the decline of the Mughal empire, and the ascendance of the British colonial empire. This had a significant impact on his mindset, and he came to identify the decline of the Mughal empire with the stagnation of the Muslim community in the India subcontinent as a whole. He was also deeply impressed with key aspects of the British rule, most notably the British education system, which he sought to imbibe in his programme of educational reform for the Muslim community in subsequent years. His reform programme was aimed at proving the confluence of religion with science and reason, and on his appreciation of Western modernity. His

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