Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani Responds to European Critiques of Islam (1883)

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 Mohammadan society will succeed in breaking its bonds and marching resolutely in the path of civilization someday 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 Mr. 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. [. . .]

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. How could one therefore hope that they would agree with each other when the Christian religion, under the most modest and seductive forms, entered Athens and Alexandria, which were, as everyone knows, the two principal centers of science and philosophy, trying to stifle both under the bushes of theological discussions, to explain the inexplicable mysteries of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and Transubstantiation? It will always be thus. Whenever religion will have the upper hand, it will eliminate philosophy; and the contrary occurs 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 intelligent members of the elite, and because, also science, however beautiful it is, does not completely satisfy humanity, which thirst for the ideal and which likes to exist in such dark and distant regions as the philosophers and scholars can neither perceive nor explore.

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