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Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn Asadābādī Revisited: Reinvigorating the Emancipatory Potential of Post-Islamism

Simin Fasihi 

Department of History, Faculty of Literature, Alzahra University, Tehran 19938 93973, Iran; fasihi@alzahra.ac.ir

Abstract: This article seeks to provide a framework for rereading the works of Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn Asadābādī/Afghani in accordance with the main characteristics of “post-Islamism”, which was coined and conceptualized by Asef Bayat. Although the term “post-Islamism” was not explicitly used by Asadābādī/Afghani himself, I argue that we may find some of the main features of a post-Islamist discourse in his works. Hence, in this article, post-Islamism does not refer to an era or a historical period, but to an intellectual discourse or project; it is understood conceptually rather than historically. I argue that, while Asadābādī/Afghani foresaw the need to acknowledge the legitimacy crisis of Islam, he nevertheless rejected the adoption of a purely secular perspective as a response. After identifying the fundamental pillars of Asadābādī/Afghani’s thought, I shall demonstrate how his approach corresponds to the reconciliatory position of post-Islamist thinking, which seeks to marry Islam with more modern values of individual choice and freedom.

Keywords: Asadābādī/Afghani; post-Islamism; emancipatory potential; reconciliatory project; multiple modernities



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1. Introduction

This article seeks to provide a framework for rereading the works of Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn Asadābādī/Afghani in the context of “post-Islamist” discourse. Building on Asef Bayat’s definition of the concept, I proceed in the next section to trace the roots of post-Islamism in Asadābādī/Afghani’s thought—though he did not explicitly use the term. Here, of particular importance is the role Asadābādī/Afghani accorded to philosophy and critical thinking in his interpretation of religion. Although he was not a great philosopher, he is known for his critical thinking. As Haj Mirza Muhammad Hossein Amin al-Darb al-Sani, who knew Asadābādī/Afghani in person, puts it, he was “a bold and brave, but not a significant philosopher” (In [Mahdavi and Afshar 1963](#), p. 43).

This article is therefore not a praise of Asadābādī/Afghani’s philosophical acumen, but a rethinking of his influence in elucidating the role of philosophy in religion. It is in this vein that I focus precisely on the philosophical aspects of Asadābādī/Afghani’s works, including his works on the benefits of philosophy, the truth on Naturalism, Islam and science, and human determinism and prosperity. As will be shown, Asadābādī/Afghani was both a fierce critic and an arduous defender of Islam. He sought to modernize religion with what he referred to as “the Philosophical spirit”, whilst ascribing an important role to religion in public life and democratic deliberation. Hence, I will conclude in the final section that the integration of philosophy and religion in his work may contribute to a progressive reading of Islam in the contemporary Muslim contexts.

2. Reinvigorating the Emancipatory Potential of Post-Islamism

Post-Islamism seeks to transcend Islamism. The term was first used descriptively by Asef Bayat, to account for the religious and political transformations occurring in Iran during the 1990s; later, however, this concept developed to denote a critique of Islamism and its vision of state order, founded on Islamic doctrines and religious authority ([Bayat 1996; 2013](#)).

The term *post-Islamism*, accordingly, shall refer to a shift away from Islamist politics. As Asef Bayat notes, however, this shift is neither anti-Islamic, nor even strictly secular; Post-Islamism is rather a constructive attempt to unify democratic principles with fundamental tenets of Islamic ethics (Bayat 1996, p. 9). Contrary to Islamism, as Mojtaba Mahdavi argues, post-Islamism “rejects the concept of *Islamic state*. While religion might play a constructive role in civil society, the state is a *secular* entity no matter who the statesman is. Islamic state in theory is an oxymoron; in practice it is no less than a clerical oligarchy, a Leviathan, which protects the interests of the ruling class. Hence the concept of Islamic state marks a distinction between post-Islamism and Islamism,¹ including moderate Islamism” (Mahdavi 2011, p. 95). In what follows, I will briefly outline some key features of this vision of post-Islamism.

As suggested, post-Islamism is reconciliatory in essence: it seeks to construct a secular-democratic society whilst reserving an active role for religion with regard to questions of value, morality, and societal cohesion. In this vein, post-Islamism designates a *project* that attempts to “marry Islam with individual choice and freedom [. . .], democracy and modernity” (Bayat 2013, p. 8). At the heart of the post-Islamist project lay a blend of republican ideals and religious ethics, with “religious democracy” as its political mission. Through this prism, the association of Islam and democracy was not only possible, but also imperative (Bayat 2007, p. 49). As a reconciliatory project, post-Islamism is not post-Islamic, but it advocates for “the separation of religious affairs from the affairs of the state” (Bayat 2013, p. 25). Post-Islamism is rather post-Islamist in that it understands Islam as important but not absolute, inclusive rather than rigid, diverse instead of monolithic, and accommodating of difference rather than totalizing phenomenon. “The post-Islamic discourse is neither anti-Islamic nor un-Islamic, nor is it a *radical* break from Islamism. It implies that Islam is neither *the* solution nor *the* problem. Post-Islamism is a combination of “Islamism” and “Islamwasm” (Mahdavi 2011, p. 95).

The emancipatory promise of post-Islamism is articulated against the background of existing social realities. The project of post-Islamism, in other words, is underway when, “following a phase of experimentation, the appeal, energy, and sources of legitimacy of Islamism are exhausted even among its once-ardent supporters” (Bayat 2007, pp. 10–12). While Islamism is more concerned with a fulfilling of duties and responsibilities to the divine state, post-Islamism seeks to merge and marry *rights* with the *duties* of all citizens. The emerging post-Islamist trends in the Muslim world may contribute to the alternative concept of, and path to, modernity in Muslim contexts (Mahdavi 2013, p. 67). Post-Islamism is thus also a *condition*, signifying a “legitimacy crisis” of Islamism “for ignoring and violating people’s democratic rights” (Bayat 2013, p. 30). As examples of popular movements signifying such crises of legitimacy that foster post-Islamist movements, Bayat refers to the Green Movement in Iran and the Arab Spring uprisings (Bayat 2013). Post-Islamist politics highlights the “secular exigencies” (Bayat 1996, p. 46) of the modern world and belies validity to religious fundamentalism.

Post-Islamism, then, is a project borne out of a condition. In this vein, it must also be understood as a *critique*. It designates not only a vision but also a critical (self) reflection. It is for this reason that Bayat argues that the terms “Islamic Liberalism” or “Liberal Islam” ultimately fail to encapsulate the full meaning and connotation of post-Islamism, for such terms merely refer to the positive formulation of post-Islamist principles, such as the marriage of Islam and democracy; they do not designate what post-Islamism transcends, what post-Islamism is not, that is, Islamism (Bayat 2013, p. 27).

To be sure, the marriage of Islam and democracy that is represented by a post-Islamist vision should not be conflated with an Islamist co-opting of electoral politics. The goal, in other words, is not to bring about an Islamic state through the ballot box, thus ascribing to democracy merely a strategic significance (Bayat 2013, p. 26). On the contrary, democracy

¹ Abul A’la Maududi of Pakistan, Hassan al Banna and Sayyid Qutb of Egypt and Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran are among the classic examples of Islamism in the modern and contemporary era, whose Islamist alternatives respond to modern problems (Mahdavi 2013, p. 61).

is to be treated as an end in itself, as the basic structure that is able to legitimize Islamic principles by ensuring the free participation of right-bearing autonomous subjects in the sociopolitical order. Indeed, a crucial realization of post-Islamist thought is that the survival of Islam *depends* on maintaining and strengthening the democratic order, and “achieving compatibility” with democracy (Bayat 1996, p. 45) as, in moving away from absolute religious truths, the question of justification is transmitted to the public sphere. It is worth mentioning that “clerics—the main factor of political stasis—are precisely the religious actors who have been the most immune to the naive belief that the Islamic state will provide a solution to all of the Muslim’s problems” (Pierret 2013, p. 332).

Finally, while there is an element of temporality in post-Islamism in that it follows “a phase of experimentation”, Bayat emphasizes that the term should be understood conceptually, rather than historically. This is simply due to the empirical observation that “Post-Islamism may historically come after Islamism or may operate simultaneously alongside of it; it may be observed in contemporary times or in the past” (Bayat 2013, p. 29).²

Post-Islamism, in other words, does not refer to an era or a period, but to combinations of phenomena and events in specific, distinct, and varied sociocultural and political contexts at a given point in modern history. By utilizing modern reason as the normative basis for science, technology, justice, rule of law, civility, and humanity in the modern world, this social and political project can be advanced through social democratic mechanisms (Mesbahian 2010, p. 178). It is in this ideational sense that I will explore the roots of post-Islamism in Asadābādī/Afghani’s thought. As will be shown, Asadābādī/Afghani’s approach to Islam was bold against superstition, affirmative of the fundamentality of rationality, and an attempt to establish a society based on human dignity and rooted in intellectual and spiritual ideals as indicators of human excellence.

3. Revisiting Asadābādī/Afghani

Asadābādī/Afghani’s influence on the Islamic thought of his day is undeniable. He was fluent in seven languages, including Farsi, Hamadani Turkish, Ottaman Turkish, French, Russian, English, Arabic, Afghani, and Hebrew (Nazim al-Islam Kirmani 1988, p. 80). His breadth and depth of knowledge of history, politics, and philosophy, which informed his rejection of the superstitious beliefs of his time, has been compared to that of Ibn Khaldun (Modaresi Chahrdehi 1977, p. 451). Etemad al-Astana writes: “he has gained a lofty status in the new and old sciences and is the pride of Iranians. Among his disciples were a group of Al-Azhar University scholars, and several Egyptian newspapers were impacted by his rhetoric and personality” (Etemad al-Sastana 1984, p. 224). Asadābādī/Afghani’s influence on the Islamic world did not merely stem from his works and ideas, but also his activism. He is known as “a patriotic leader and an enemy of oppressors and tyrants” (Halabi 1977, p. 7). Contemporary Arab writers, from every party and group, regard him as one of the main founders of the Arab movement for unity and independence. Asadābādī was at the forefront of the Soudan revolt as its “prime mover” and “principal director” (Nicoll 2016, p. 264). Asadābādī was also pivotal to the Constitutional Revolution in Iran as he undoubtedly influenced many younger members of Islamic and intellectual communities of the day (Abū Zayd et al. 2006, p. 27).

Asadābādī/Afghani was also a staunch anti-imperialist, which is evidenced by his scathing criticisms of the British empire in the Arab weekly newspaper *Urwa Al Wuthqa* in Paris. Moreover, Asadābādī did not shy away from sharing his anti-imperialist views to the French and British press, which rendered him a formidable figure against the political figures of Britain and France (Browne 1997, p. 28). He was thereby undoubtedly

² Mojtaba Mahdavi, for instance, argues that “the historical roots of post-Islamism can be traced back to the nineteenth century. Ali Abd al-Raziq (1888–1966), in his classic book *Islam and the Foundations of Power* (1925), argued that the Quran does not offer any system of government and that Muslims may choose any form of government. Prophet Muhammad’s authority was only spiritual and social in nature. Post-Prophet political systems had no basis in Islamic fiqh (jurisprudence); they were expedient tyrannical structures adopted by the Arabs. However, Abd al-Raziq’s ideas were lost in the midst of revolutionary Islamist trends, including those of Hasan al-Banna and others” (Mahdavi 2011, p. 94).

a “global player” in the intellectual and political discourse that evolved in the context of nineteenth-century Middle Eastern–European relations (Seidel 2018, p. 335). As expected, Asadābādī/Afghani was also a vocal critic of Iran’s social and political makeup, fearlessly taking on the issue of corruption and calling for widespread reforms (Jamali 2000, p. 221; Nazim al-Islam Kirmani 1988, p. 80).

It is fair to say that Asadābādī/Afghani’s unconventional life³ and his controversial philosophy has been subjected to extensive scrutiny in recent years.⁴ However, his call for what I identify as multiple modernities has remained unexamined. In this section, I revisit Asadābādī/Afghani’s call for a variety of modernities (a call for re-examination and restructuring), and interpret his thesis in light of the post-Islamism doctrine. It is significant to note that, in recent decades, cultural studies have dealt with a “new” stage of modernity, termed “liquid modernity”,⁵ “later modernities”,⁶ and “multiple modernities”.⁷ In sociological and philosophical writing, the notion of modernity has often been criticized for its forcefully Eurocentric essence. The desire for a re-evaluation of modernity came with the fundamental postmodernist criticism, appearing at the beginning of the 1970s, which has been newly adopted into non-European intellectual debates. Consequently, the all-too-familiar disparity between Western and non-Western civilization, which was, in the end, based on attributing modernity to “the West” and tradition to “the East”, vanished. In this situation, by revisiting Asadābādī/Afghani’s thought, we can learn from him: first, modernity should be understood as a historical period in which a distinction was made between tradition and modernity within the structure of a specific discursive formation. Second, historical discursive formation must apply in all places. The historiography of modernity must recognize that there are no foundations for treating modernity as a European precedent: the basis for a tradition/modernity dichotomy appears to have existed in all societies and cultures.

3.1. Acknowledgement of Islamism’s Crisis of Legitimacy

Examples of Asadābādī/Afghani’s critical attitude towards religious leaders, Muslim societies, and prevailing understandings of Islam abound. In his analysis of the reasons for the decline of the East, he identified ignorance as the main cause. Ignorance has two major consequences: the stagnation of philosophy and the distancing of religion from its original

³ On Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn Asadābādī’s life and works, the researcher pays special attention to six works: 1. *Zendegi va Mobarezat-i Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn Asadābādī* (Jamali et al. 2000); 2. *Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn Asadābādī va Bidari-i Mashriq zamin* (Muhit Tabataba’i 2000); 3. *Complete Majmoeh-yi Kamel-i Asnad Vezarat-i Omour-i kharejeh-yi Engelis darbareh-Yi Sayyid Jamal al-Din. Asadābādī* (Khosrowshahi 2000); 4. *Tarikh-i bidari-yi Iranian* (Nazim al-Islam Kirmani 1988); 5. *Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn Asadābādī Bonyangozar-i Nehzat-i ehya-i Tafakor-i Dini* (Sahebi 1996); and 6. *Iranian Constitutional Revolution*, Mehri Qazvin (Trans.) (Browne 1997). It is intended that this bibliography will demonstrate that there is no consensus on the life of Sayyid Jamāl al-Dīn Asadābādī. Other resources also narrate Asadābādī/Afghani’s life differently.

⁴ With regard to the ambiguity of Asadābādī/Afghani’s hometown, he is probably the most to blame for this, as—on different occasions—he considered himself a citizen of Kabul, Afghanistan, Istanbul and Assad Abad. Being a political activist, he probably intended to remain anonymous. In light of today’s published documents, reports and memories, as well as the research done by historians and scholars, Asadābādī/Afghani should be considered an Iranian from Assad Abad, Hamadan. Among those who have done extensive research on Asadābādī/Afghani’s nationality is Mohit Tabatabai. He argues that Asadābādī could not have come from Assad Abad in Herat or Kunar. It was inferred from Sayyid Jamāl’s signature in a letter to Muhammad Abduh and Adib Ishaq and Jurji Zaydan that he was from Assad Abad. Successive investigations over the past 50 years, however, did not find a place known as Assad Abad in Kunar. However, when Asadābādī lived in Egypt, he sometimes signed his letters as al-Assad Abadi. Assad Abad does appear in some of the writings of scholars from Hamadan. According to research done by high school history and geography teachers in Hamadan, Assad Abad is pronounced “Sa’adawa” and “Sudawa” in the local dialect. Saadabad is the local and ancient name of Assad Abad. Both pronunciations are probably related to an older name, Soudabeh, with a passive /u:/. See (Muhit Tabataba’i 2000, pp. 333–34). Mirza Lotfollah Khan Assad Abadi, Sayyid Jamāl’s nephew, also identifies him as a citizen of Hamadan when mentioning his family tree (Asadābādī 2000a, pp. 23–25; Taghizadeh 2000, pp. 181–82).

⁵ Liquid modernity is the modernity of uncertainty (regarding ethics and our belief in expert systems), flexible forms of work and organization, informational war, and de-territorialized politics and economy. Unlike the intellectuals of the Third Way (such as Anthony Giddens), the writer of *Liquid Modernity* is still involved with the political struggles articulated by Marx. See (Bauman 2000).

⁶ Distinguishing between original and later versions of modernity in the first place may seem to run parallel to the modernization theory. However, this paper does not start from the premise that original Western modernity provided a model for the rest of the world.

⁷ In his introduction to a Special Issue of *Dædalus*, entitled “Multiple Modernities”, the editor of the issue, S. N. Eisenstadt, writes that the idea of multiple modernities “goes against the views long prevalent in scholarly and general discourse [. . .]. The actual developments in modernizing societies have refuted the homogenizing and hegemonic assumptions of this Western program of modernity” (Eisenstadt 2000, p. 1).

messages, namely freedom, equality, and justice. Indeed, this emphasis on the significance of philosophy is the fundamental building block on which Asadābādī/Afghani articulates his criticism of religion. He writes:

“What we, Muslims, believe to be logical is full of superstitions and is indistinguishable from fallacies of common people. Our religious scholars know nothing about the most ordinary affairs. They do not question what we are, who we are and what we need [. . .]. This ignorance has resulted in equating questioning with blasphemy. Our blasphemy is that we believe that all organizations and treasuries of the Islamic nation should provide prosperity for all, instead of being in the hands of thugs who are destroying the nation and religion. Our great betrayal is that we believe that the ship on which our government sails will certainly be destroyed by this storm of foolishness. It is imperative, by every rational and religious standard, that the clergy immediately convene a National Council and establish (ascertain), in accordance with the principles of sacred law, the rights of the nation and the conditions of survival of the State as it ought to be”. (Qanoun Undated n.d., pp. 1–2)⁸

He argued for a rationalistic interpretation of the principles of Shari’a, which he ultimately believed would pave the way for a democratic society for the benefit of Iranians and Muslims (Farzaneh 2015, p. 163).

For Asadābādī/Afghani, this lack of self-investigation takes Muslims to a deluded place in which questions are repelled by predetermined answers. It is against this dogmatic construal of Islam that he emphasizes the necessity of a philosophical rendering of religion. But more than shining new light on the questions of “who we are and what we need”, Asadābādī/Afghani is concerned with the absence of such questions in the Islamic world in the first place. It is in the vein of this absence, this ignorance, that Asadābādī/Afghani is able to expand his critique of Islam and Muslims from philosophy to the realm of the empirical sciences.

Contemporary Islamic scholars have divided science into two categories: one is defined as the science of Muslims and the other is Western science. They prohibit others from teaching some of the sciences and do not understand that science is something noble that is not attributed to any clan or group. Rather, everything that is known is known due to science, and every tribe that is famous has become famous due to its use of science (Asadābādī 2000b, p. 133).

The point I wish to make here is that Asadābādī/Afghani’s criticism of Muslim society is less philosophical than it is a polemic on the lack of awareness of the philosophical spirit; he does not equate the role of philosophy with that of the empirical sciences. His writings on philosophy and religion show that he was at least influenced by European positivist ideas (Seidel 2018, p. 338). In other words, philosophy is not merely a scientific field with a particular subject and narrow scope that Muslims should become aware of like any other “science”. Philosophy is rather “the soul of the whole of the sciences” (p. 131); it is the perspective by which the realm of positivistic scientific information can be grasped in a meaningful manner, so as to shed light on the question of our existence and relation to the world; philosophy is universal across all sciences.

According to Asadābādī, the science that is considered as comprehensive and based on memory and reason is philosophy. “Philosophy, being a general subject, shows human necessities to human beings and reveals the need for sciences, and employs every science in its appropriate domain. If philosophy was not available to a nation, even if all its members were scholars, it would be impossible for the sciences to persist in that nation for a century. It would not be possible for that nation to draw conclusions from those sciences without the spirit of philosophy” (Asadābādī 2000b, p. 131).

⁸ An excerpt of the Petition in Qanoun newspaper Issue. 20, this issue of Qanoun was devoted to Sayyid Jamāl ad-Dīn Asadābādī’s publications after his expulsion from Iran, and following the Rezhi uprising. See (Qanoun Undated n.d., pp. 1–2; Keddie 1966, p. 132).

It is clear from the above that Asadābādī/Afghani is speaking of philosophy in the normative sense—as a call to critical thinking and deliberation. “Philosophy”, in other words, is precisely the term by which Asadābādī/Afghani seeks to inject a secular element as a necessary precondition to the survival of the religion of Islam. He exemplifies his reasoning and then concludes that “in the first Islamic century, Muslims had no science. However, through Islam, a philosophical spirit was found among them, and through that philosophical spirit, they discussed all matters of the human world and the things. That caused that all the sciences with special subject were translated from Syriac, Persian, and Greek into Arabic in Mansour Dawneghi’s era in a short period of time” (Asadābādī 2000b, p. 31). It is indeed plausible to claim that Asadābādī/Afghani had already identified elements of what came to be known as post-Islamism in the early days of Islam. If post-Islamism is a critique, the self-realization of Muslims that they had “no science” is indeed an indication of it and, if post-Islamism is a project, it can be seen in Asadābādī’s “philosophical spirit”, which brought about the urgency and will for translation.

Notice, however, that Asadābādī/Afghani claims that it is “through Islam” that “a philosophical spirit was found among [Muslims]”. At this point, we begin to see that Asadābādī/Afghani’s critique of Islam is by no means anti-religious. This is in line with the reconciliatory approach of post-Islamism, which transcends the dichotomy of reason and religion, utilizes democratic principles and acknowledges the rights of its citizens to engage rationally in civil society. While not articulated in terms of democratic rights, Asadābādī’s employment of the “Philosophical spirit” is a clear testament to his commitment to warding off superstition and conformism in the Islamic society. But since this philosophical spirit is given to us *through* Islam, a critique of the religious tradition is accepted so far as it maintains a religious identity.

Thus, while Asadābādī/Afghani criticizes religion against the background of a secular ontology, it is crucial to realize that his criticism of a pure secular society without religion is just as fierce. At the end of the article entitled “The Virtues of Islam”, Asadābādī/Afghani states: “if someone asks why the story of Muslims is so tragic if their religion is so progressive, I would say because they were Muslims, as they were, and the world testifies to their knowledge, [. . .] I just refer to these noble words: “God does not change what people do until they change themselves”” (Asadābādī 2000b, p. 102). But how can the fate of these people be changed? It can be done by following Asadābādī/Afghani’s proposal, stated in his other essay “The Interpreter’s Interpretation” (a description of the truth of the Qur’anic interpretation, known as the Natural Interpretation). This article is a critique of “On Interpreting of the Qur’an” by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. Asadābādī/Afghani disagrees with Ahmad Khan’s attempt to justify mystical affairs, and believes that this would devoid religion of facts. This criticism is, in my view, an excellent portrayal of Asadābādī/Afghani’s modernization of the religious tradition.

In this article, Asadābādī/Afghani first emphasizes that, undoubtedly, “all classes of Muslim people are in deep distress and misery these days”. He acknowledges the decline of the Muslim population, therefore signifying the legitimacy crisis of Islam. But Asadābādī/Afghani then announces the enthusiasm of all Muslims and his strong desire for a “resurrection”: “I, more than others, look forward to the day when the wisdom of a sage and the knowledge of an intellect illuminate the Muslim world; hopefully soon” (Asadābādī 2000b, p. 191). After being informed of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan’s interpretation, he asserts:

I heard that an old and experienced man who explored the Western world and put a lot of effort to reform the Muslims’ affairs, has written his interpretation of the Qur’an. I said to myself, “here is what you needed!” as he has grasped both Eastern and Western thoughts. I thought that this interpreter, in order to reform his own people, has interpreted the essence and nature of religion as required by wisdom. [. . .] when I read his interpretation, I realized that the interpreter has not discussed any of these issues. I was perplexed at what he intended with such an interpretation. If the interpreter’s intention, as he himself claims, is to

reform his people, why is he trying to make Muslims lose faith in their religion? (Asadābādī 2000b, pp. 193–94)

“Asadābādī/Afghani states that ‘the interpreter’ may have thought that this faith is the very cause of their decline, and if their faith is shattered, Muslims would regain their original honor and glory” (Asadābādī 2000b, p. 193–94). He criticizes this argument and concludes that “beliefs, whether righteous or wicked, are by no means incompatible with modernization and progress” (ibid). “Sayyid Jamal’s writings elucidates his unabashed support for Islam at the same time that he gave much credence to rationality and reason in interpreting divine law and forming Islamic values that were conducive to progressive reform” (Farzaneh 2015, p. 163).

Finally, he emphasizes that it became clear for him that this interpreter is neither a reformist, nor that interpretation is meant for reforming Islam and educating Muslims. In the remainder of this section, I will explore some religious elements in Asadābādī/Afghani’s thought, with reference to his debate with the French philosopher, Ernest Renan. Asadābādī/Afghani, who had learned some French during his stay in Paris, made his views known in the European press and participated in a philosophical debate on “Islam and science” with Ernest Renan (Browne 1997, p. 28).

3.2. *Moving Beyond the Binary of Dogmatic Islamism and Strict Secularism*⁹

In Renan’s view, generally speaking, Islam is a harsh, violent religion that reflects the spirit of people who are unaware of mythical beliefs. To him, Muhammad is a miracle-free prophet; a man like other people; and a man who sins and keeps asking God for forgiveness. According to Renan, it is only Shiite that has incorporated pre-Islamic mythology into Islam, thereby enriching traditions, magical traditions, miracles, and supernaturalism. Regarding the specific relationship between Islam and science, Renan believes that Islam has blocked access to science in Muslim countries, except for Iran, which is humiliated by other Muslims who reject the science of nature, which was considered a rival to God, and the science of history, which includes pre-Islamic times. Renan then continues to argue that it is an error to associate Islam with science:

“The Islamic civilization is mostly the result of Iranian thought and philosophy. Most of it is the result of Nestorian Christians, and idolatry Harrani as well as philosophers such as Al-Kindi, Farabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, none of whom, except for Al-Kindi, was Arab. It is wrong to attribute science and philosophy and civilization to the Arabs. Islam is far from the origin of reason or science. As long as Islam was in the hands of the Arab race, that was to say, during the time of the Rashid Caliphs and during the Umayyad period, no intellectual movement appeared. But after the Iranians revolted to overthrow the Umayyad dynasty and empower the Abbasids, the center of Islam was moved to the Tigris and Euphrates region and became the center of one of the most brilliant civilizations in the East”. (In Mojtahedi 1984, p. 60)

In his response to Renan¹⁰, Asadābādī/Afghani concedes that “no religion has complete tolerance for everything in any way”. While acknowledging that Islam may have been an obstacle to scientific advancement, Asadābādī/Afghani believes that, as long as humanity exists, struggles between dogmatic belief and free judgment and between religion and philosophy will exist (In Pakdaman 1966–1967, pp. 93–99, 178). One “may wonder”, Asadābādī/Afghani states, “whether these anti-scientific and anti-philosophical attitudes

⁹ This section is a summary of several pages of a doctoral dissertation by Homa Nategh: “Sayyid Jamal ad-Dīn Asadābādī, known also as Afghani: His Residence, Activities, and Influences on Iran Based on Persian Sources, with a French translation of excerpts from his Persian writings”. I am indebted to Sara Shariati for translating parts of Ms. Nategh’s dissertation.

¹⁰ Sayyid Jamāl Asadābādī’s response to Renan was very moderate and unexpected. In a note he published, he wrote that the remarks made by the French philosopher were “very much based on historical evidence”. He added that Renan “has respected and observed civilized manners and customs”. Consequently, in its later response to Renan published in Debats newspaper May 18, 1883, Asadābādī/Afghani identifies the attribution of intolerance to Islam only as unfair, a criticism that Renan later accepted.

in Islam are the result of Islam itself or the way it has spread throughout the world" (In [Mojtahedi 1984](#), p. 75), "for what has happened in Muslims' times has been exemplified in other religions, including Christianity: the respected Catholic Church leaders have not even laid down their arms to this day, still fighting what they call a spirit of error and vertigo", he says (In [Mojtahedi 1984](#), pp. 77–78). He continues: "I know all the difficulties that the Muslims will have to surmount to achieve the same degree of civilization, access to the truth with the help of philosophic and scientific methods being forbidden them" (In [Keddie and Afghānī 1968](#), p. 183). It is in this light that he criticizes advocates of pure secular society in Muslim communities, for such attitudes signify a reactionary abandonment of identity as opposed to a critical confrontation.

Asadābādī/Afghani also responds to Renan's remarks about Arabs:

"The Arab nation emerged from its savagery and was on the path to scientific and intellectual progress, and it progressed so rapidly that nothing like it could be found except in its political conquests. In fact, within a century, people absorbed almost all of the Greek and Iranian sciences, a science that progressed slowly over the centuries of their countries but expanded beyond the Arabian Peninsula to the Himalayas and the Pyrenees. It has to be said that the sciences expanded appreciably among the Arabs in all the countries under their control [. . .]. The Arabs, though ignorant and primitive at first, again took over what had been abandoned by the previous civilized nations and again ignited the extinguished torch of science and expanded the disciplines unprecedentedly. Is not this a sign of their natural love for science? It is true that the Arabs took philosophy from Greece and adapted what led to the fame of the Iranians, but in addition to expanding the sciences which were in fact their wages of conquests, they made them perfect attentively and trustworthily". (In [Keddie and Afghānī 1968](#), p. 183)

While Renan and Asadabdi shared an affinity for a secular–liberal society and the importance of science, they differed in their views regarding the place and significance of European powers for such society. As Norman states:

"Renan's racial concept of a primitive nation could be used to justify European colonial domination, since the rulers of such states would be from a more tolerant and advanced culture, and thus could impart their scientific knowledge and liberalism in a more efficient manner. Afghani instead looked for outside support for a reinvigorated, independent, Islamic nation would be able to accomplish a science-based modern society by going back to the pre-Ottoman times." ([Norman 2011](#), p. 713)

As can be seen, there is a robust defense of Islam at play. At the same time, however, it is abundantly clear that the Islam that Asadābādī/Afghani has in mind is eminently tied to critical thinking and deliberation on the existential conditions of Muslim societies. After all, it was "through Islam" that the "Philosophical Spirit" had emerged in the Muslims of the first century to set foot on the path of progress and scientific discovery. Indeed, as Homa Nategh argues, it is in Asadābādī/Afghānī's response to Renan that the fundamental elements of his core project—the unity of Islam and philosophy—become clear. For him, the world, a philosopher, and a poet all are Mahdī's incarnation and the savior of the Shiite religion. Above all, they have a social mission, and when their knowledge is known and realized, they must necessarily follow a social transformation to move the communities in which they live to the right path. She then concludes that philosophy is a perfect science for Asadābādī/Afghani. Philosophy makes social transformation possible. Philosophy is the art of living. It is philosophy which gives man essence, explains his needs, and draws on other indicators of science. Philosophers' tasks are the same as the Prophets' and differ only in three things: (1) for a Prophet, the truth of things is made clear by inspiration and revelation, to the philosopher by reason; (2) a Prophet cannot go wrong, but a philosopher can make errors; (3) the philosophical decrees are universal and are not

limited to the specific characteristics of any age, while a Prophet's decrees are relevant to the age (Pakdaman 1966–1967, p. 272).

Asadābādī/Afghani seeks to inject relativism into religion without undermining its sacredness; at the same time, he wants to assert the truth of philosophy without succumbing to pure secularism. The certainty of religion is not universal, but, at the same time, philosophy does not admit to grasping its universality with certainty. Hence, there is a need to “marry” religion and philosophy—which indeed runs parallel to the post-Islamist marriage of Islam and democracy—insofar as the latter can be interpreted as a manifestation of the “Philosophical spirit”. The Prophets themselves did not make mistakes, Asadābādī/Afghani argued, but it would be a mistake on *our* part to project *their* truth unreflectively, that is, without philosophy, in the here and now. Asadābādī/Afghani “accepted the final identification of philosophy and prophecy, that what the prophet received through inspiration was the same as what the philosopher could attain by use of reason, but coupled with this the distinction between two ways of communicating the truth—by clear concepts to ‘the few’, through religious symbols to the ‘many’” (Hourani 1983, p. 123).

In summary, the basis of Asadābādī/Afghani's thought is a strong premise that the modern world requires a belief in human agency, expressed in “belief action”, the free use of human reason, and political and military power. In Asadābādī/Afghani's approach to modernity, the critical aspect is broader than the positivist one (Vahdat 2002, p. 57). The central point is that Asadābādī/Afghani bases his philosophical conceptualization on the idea of logical suspense and reasoning. “The parents of science are proofs, neither Galileo nor Aristotle”, and “right is where the argument exists”. As I shall demonstrate in the following section, it is this *philosophical* Islam that forms the basis of multiple modernities in Asadābādī/Afghani's thought.

4. Conclusions: The Quest for the Plurality of Modernities

Throughout this article, I have attempted to demonstrate that: (1) the works of Asadābādī can be read in accordance with what Asef Bayat has called the post-Islamist discourse; and that (2) in light of this reading, it is possible to reinforce and develop the emancipatory potential of post-Islamism, a discourse that moves above and beyond dogmatic Islamism and rigid secularism.

The first claim is proposed on the basis of Asef Bayat's argument that post-Islamism may be a discursive concept and can be interpreted in a non-historical, discursive way. Building on Bayat's conceptualization, this article showed that Asadābādī's views can be read in connection to a post-Islamist discourse. In this vein, I first shed light on Asadābādī's critical standpoints of principles and concepts that are now referred to as Islamism. Second, by emphasizing the importance of concepts such as liberty, philosophical spirit, and enlightenment, I argue that Asadābādī sought to invigorate the emancipatory dimension of Islam, an undertaking now referred to as post-Islamism.

The second claim is proposed on the basis of an analysis that elucidates Asadābādī's fundamental critique of not only Islamism, but also hegemonic secularism and colonial modernity, especially imperialism. Asadābādī's views can be employed to both deepen and reinforce the main tenets of the post-Islamic discourse and to necessitate a critique of the domineering aspects of Western modernity. With this re-reading of Asadābādī, in other words, a two-pronged discourse of post-Islamism, which is a critique of the dogmatism of Islamism and hegemonic modernity/secularism, is very much alive in Asadābādī's thought.

As shown in the previous section, Asadābādī/Afghani has no qualms with accepting that Islam is in dire need of reform. This, however, is to be performed by the Philosophical Spirit that exists, though dormant, within Islamic society. What is at stake is a modernization from within that needs to be carried out via a collective, cultural identity and by Muslims themselves. He further makes clear that this assertion of identity is by no means in opposition to Western modernity, but rather in critical and constructive dialogue with

it. In other words, Asadābādī/Afghani made a distinction between modernization and colonization, admiring Western scientific and intellectual progress.¹¹

A reconciliatory and post-Islamist approach towards national identity, the religion of Islam and the West is evident in one of Asadābādī/Afghani's most important contributions, entitled "the Philosophy of the Unity of Gender and the Truth of the Wholeness of Language". In this article, he emphasizes the preservation of national identity as well as teaching English as a foreign language.

His approach stood in stark contrast with Akhundzade, a Western-minded Iranian intellectual, who had proposed to change the Persian alphabet to English. As Asadābādī/Afghani remarks:

These gladiators say that, whether in a native or foreign language, the purpose of the sciences is their benefits and that most of the sciences are written in English. They say that the British have long ruled India and obedience to authority is always necessary in every situation. So, in order to benefit from the ruling nation, we Indians should abandon our national identity and teach the sciences in the ruling nation's language, prioritize their language and use it instead of our own, and extend this to all other affairs as well. It must be said, first, that if this was the demand of the domineering power it would have been considered as oppression, arrogance, and departure from moderation. If the dominated party called for this, it would be nothing but flattery, and of course, this sort of cheap flattery would not even welcome by the domineering power. (Asadābādī 1981, p. 208)

In his critique of colonial modernity and religious dogmatism, Asadābādī/Afghani's key concepts are self-modernization and awakening the latent philosophical spirit in Muslim contexts. More specifically, his emphasis on spreading the spirit of philosophy in the Islamic world is evident here:

The Ottomans and Egyptians established institutions for teaching modern sciences sixty years ago, but have not benefited from those sciences to this day. The reason is that they don't teach philosophy in those institutions and the spirit of philosophy is absent in them. Undoubtedly, if the spirit of philosophy was harnessed in those schools, they would have become independent of foreign countries in these sixty years and would have reformed their own countries using their knowledge. They would not have sent their children to study abroad and would not have hired professors for their schools from abroad. I can say that if the spirit of philosophy prevails in a nation it would invite that nation to learn all the sciences, including the ones absent in that nation. It is philosophy that helps humans understand each other and speaks of human honour. [. . .] Every nation that has declined has first and foremost witnessed a damage to its spirit of philosophy, which has then spread to its other sciences and its people's way of life. (Asadābādī 2000b, p. 131)

The spirit of philosophy is universal; for Asadābādī/Afghani, it is the *form* of modernity. It is the task of each nation to cultivate philosophy in its societal culture. It seems that Asadābādī/Afghani is aware that excluding the non-Western world from the foundation of modernity belies the fundamental requirement of universality, namely the inclusion of the "other". This encapsulates what Hossein Mesbahian refers to as "the dichotomous logic of exclusive inclusion", which has engendered philosophical and historical criticisms in both

¹¹ In this vein, one can also refer to Albert Hourani's account of Sayyid Jamāl Asadābādī/Afghani's encounter with Western sciences: "If al-Afghani says nothing of the industrial and technical revolution, that does not mean he was not aware of it. He knew that the successes of Europe were due to knowledge and its proper application, and the weakness of the Muslim States to ignorance and he knew also that the orient must learn the useful arts of Europe. But for him the urgent question was, how could they be learnt? They could not be acquired simply by imitation; behind them lay a whole way of thought and more important still—a system of social morality. The Muslim countries were weak because Muslim society was in decay" (Hourani 1983, p. 114).

non-Western and Western schools of thought (Mesbahian 2020, p. 145).¹² The crucial point is that such criticism and cultural cultivation must be made in accordance with a collective identity with a national element. In my view, it is precisely at this point that the relativism of religion in Asadābādī/Afghani's thought becomes pertinent: Islam is the particular, relevant, and familiar, and the task of Muslims is to manifest a universal philosophy within Islam and Muslim identities. With the help of philosophy, a societal culture is able to achieve transcendence for this *irreducible* identity. The weight that Asadābādī/Afghani gives to the irreducibility of religion—in this case Islam—identifies him as a proposer of multiple modernities, for modernization—according to Asadābādī/Afghani—is the elevation of a particular and familiar cultural identity to the universal realm of philosophy. In other words, it is the enrichment of *what belongs to us and by us*, not the *otherizing* subjugation of Western colonial powers. Thus, as Albert Hourani notes: “The center of attention is no longer Islam as a religion, it is rather Islam as a civilization. The aim of man's acts is not the service of God alone; it is the creation of human civilization flourishing in all its parts” (Hourani 1983, p. 114).

The sacredness of religion thereby does not signify a dogmatic insistence on the truth of ancient text. It is rather a matter of asserting the pertinence of a framework for understanding one's identity and place within the world. Indeed, it is a testament to the philosophical spirit. As U.W. Kattan notes, religion for Asadābādī/Afghani is what allows us to step into the realm of spiritual matters, so to speak, in the first place, by revealing a “truth” that “our existence in this world is but a prelude to a higher life” (Kattan 2019, p. 24). Asadābādī/Afghani 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 we recognize the tension between religion and critical thinking as a potentially generative one (Kohn 2009, p. 417).

As discussed, Asadābādī/Afghani had continually sought to translate his conception of Islam, which is founded upon philosophy and justice, into practice. Asadābādī believed that Islam is in harmony with progress, reason and logic (Abū Zayd et al. 2006, p. 26). In this light, he strongly believed that Islamic reform, not dissimilar to that of the Protestant type, was indeed possible (Sukidi 2005, p. 404). Throughout his life, he encouraged Easterners to acquire knowledge and skills and think progressively. An advocate of freedom, equality, and brotherhood, Asadābādī/Afghani was highly admired by Indian students, who knew him as a nonconformist. In Egypt, “he was besieged in his lodgings by eager students to whom he expounded some of most advanced text-books on theology, philosophy, Jurisprudence, astronomy, and mysticism” (Adams 1933, p. 6). It should be stressed, however, that “in Iran Afghani never attained the popularity and the symbolic stature he enjoys in Egypt” (Matthee 1989, p. 152).

An “architect of Islamic unity”, Asadābādī/Afghani's “plea for Islamic renewal through solidarity never lost its relevance as a powerful symbol linking the past with hope for the future” (Matthee 1989, p. 151) He condemned colonialism and foreign invasion, but admired Western technology and knowledge. The significance of Asadābādī/Afghani's views is not in the robustness of his arguments, but in his call and quest for the modernization of tradition and his critique of colonial modernity. Asadābādī/Afghani embraced some aspects of modern philosophy, such as freedom of consciousness, freedom of expression, and human rights. At the same time, he acknowledged limitations and contradictions of

¹² For instance Dieter Misgeld criticizes the Eurocentric perspective of thinkers such as his own mentor, Hans George Gadamer: “I shall refer to representative critical views, views which express reservations about the “distinctiveness” of Europe as Gadamer perceives it and conclude by suggesting that the subtle “eurocentrism” of Gadamer's reflections on Europe has to be put aside, in order to open the way for a questioning European traditions on the basis of experiences made in the third world” (Mesbahian and Norris 2017, p. 234).

modern rationality, and resisted various forms of modern domination (Mesbahian 2019, p. 261).¹³

Asadābādī/Afghani's unstable life was marred by numerous adventures and conflicts. He was an active politician as well as a man of opinion, who made both loyal and sincere friends and disciples and rivals and enemies who loathed him and constantly forced him to relocate. Wherever he went, he got in touch with political and religious leaders as well as ordinary people, encouraging them to organize and become politically active. "His agitation in favour of indigenous constitutional reform and against European colonialism continued through visits to India, Afghanistan, Turkey and Egypt, resulting in serial expulsions by authorities that saw him as a dangerously qualified and articulate enemy" (Nicoll 2016, p. 261). For this reason, he was widely feared by political, cultural, and religious authorities, who did not hesitate to bombard him with false accusations. Against him, they wrote:

"pretending to be a man of science and wisdom, he hides his corrupt intentions under the guise of religion. He sits with wise men and scholars and pretends to be insightful and as such gains the trust of naive people. He started teaching and giving talks and gathered the lovers of knowledge around himself within a short time. Drunk by fame [. . .] he did heresy, rejecting the Prophet and his holy invitation". (Mahdavi and Afshar 1963, pp. 145–46)

The lesson that Asadābādī/Afghani tries to teach us is the promotion of the spirit of philosophy as a precondition for modernization. He was a critic of both tradition and modernity. And, despite the lack of depth in his criticisms (due to his political activities), this article has demonstrated how, through his work, he could be viewed as one of the pioneers of modernizing tradition and democratizing religion in modern Muslim contexts.

Lastly, we can learn from Asadābādī/Afghani that the dichotomy of tradition and modernity should not be directed to either universalism or cultural relativism. Western universalism ignores non-Western cultures, and cultural relativism can be used to legitimize any cultural practice. Accordingly, it is not only the perspectives of the universalization of modernity, but also those of relativism that need to be questioned. It is important to note that the distinctions between modernities do not necessarily mean that there are fundamentally incompatible modernities; rather, these distinctions mean that there are numerous formations of modernity and various answers to questions that arise during modern experiences. Post-Islamism may highlight and contribute to a Muslim concept of, and a path to, modernity.

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¹³ For a very distinctive interpretation on Iran's intellectual encounter with modernity during the Constitutional Movement see: (Gheissari 1998). For a historiographical account on Iran in 20th century see: (Atabaki 2009).

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