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Preface
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ORIENTALISM, IMPERIALISM AND THE RENAN DEBATES: THE FORMATION OF MODERN MUSLIM NARRATIVES ON ISLAMIC SCIENCE

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When Ernest Renan made his provocative speech on Islam and Science in 1883, his arguments became a transnational topic of discussion in the Muslim world and beyond. From the moment of its publication in *Journal des Débats* on March 30, 1883, Muslim students in Paris were infuriated and criticized Renan for advocating misjudgments and fallacies on Muslims.[1] In the following years, several Muslim intellectuals from Russia, Ottoman lands, Egypt and India wrote direct refutations or responses to Renan's claims. [2] What was it about Renan's ideas that made them so provocative and political? Why did Muslim intellectuals from Istanbul to Cairo and Kazan feel the need to respond to Renan, despite the obvious contradictions, weakness and errors in Renan's thesis?[3] Renan's reputation as a prominent secular European intellectual of the late nineteenth century cannot alone explain this intense Muslim response to his ideas on the history of Islamic science.

This essay argues that the whole "Islam and Science" debate which Renan's speech initiated cannot be fully understood without attention to what it symbolized in the international politics of the 1880s. As Renan's thesis about the history of Islamic science was seen as a symbol of a

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1 Renan gave his speech on "Islam and Science" in March 29, 1883 at the Sorbonne, and published it in the March 30th, 1883 issue of *Journal des Débats*. Soon afterward in the same year, the speech was published as a 24 pages long booklet separately.

2 For the most comprehensive discussion on the direct and indirect refutations of Renan, see Dücane Cündioğlu, "Ernest Renan ve 'Reddiyeler' Bağlamında İslam-Bilim Tartişmalarina Bibliyografik bir Katkı," *Divan*, No: 2. Istanbul 1996: 1-94.

3 Expectedly, there were immediate reactions from Muslim intellectuals, three of whom are well known: Jamal ad-Din Al-Afghani, Namik Kemal and Ataullah Bayezidof (Mufti of Russia). For the discussion, see, Ernest Renan, "Islamlık ve Bilim", in Nutuklar ve Konferanslar, Trans: Ziya Aslan, Sakarya Basimevi, Ankara, 1946. For Namik Kemal's response, see Namık Kemal, *Renan Müdafaanamesi: Islamiyet ve Maarif, Milli Kültür Yayınları*, Ankara, 1962. For Afghani's response, see, "Answer of Jamal ad-Din to Renan" in *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, ed. Nikkie Keddie, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1968. For the response of Ataullah Bayezidof, see Ataullah Bayezidof, *Islam ve Medeniyet*, TDV Yayınları, Ankara, 1993.

larger Orientalist justification for Europe's "civilizing mission" in the Muslim world, Muslim refutations against Renan expressed a challenge to the intellectual legitimacy of the Eurocentric and imperial world order. Only by remembering this global political context of the 1880s can we fully comprehend why Muslim intellectuals attributed to Renan's ideas so much power that they felt the urgent need to respond and why they could not ignore his thesis as the biased opinion of a racist French thinker. Revisiting both this political context and the historiography developed by Muslim modernists in response to Renan will alert us to the continuing legacy of the Renan debate in contemporary Islamic thought.

I will first depict the predominant Muslim perceptions with regard to the rise and decline of Islamic Science before the Renan debate. This section will argue that in the first half of the nineteenth century, for the generation of Muslim reformists identified with the Tanzimat reforms, the issue of compatibility between the Islamic faith and modern European science was not a major question. This generation internalized the Eurocentric view of world history with slight modifications, making it a Euro-Islamic-centric narrative of world history. It was only after the 1870s, and especially during the intensification of European imperialism, that Renan's arguments symbolized a rejection of the earlier Muslim narratives of Euro-Islamic-centric world history and the accompanying optimist Muslim reformism by the new European discourse of racism and Orientalism. The specific arguments Muslim intellectuals developed in their response to new European discourses of race and Islamic Orient represented by Renan shaped the content of both nationalism and modern Islamic thought for the next century.

Islamic Universalism of the Early Tanzimat Generation: "Rise of the West" and "Decline of Islam" literature before Ernest Renan

It would be anachronistic to see the early Tanzimat era Muslim reformist project of adopting European institutions and ideas as a betrayal of their own civilizations. Since the late nineteenth century Muslim intellectuals commented on the superficiality and naiveté of Tanzimat reformism, or judged it simply as pragmatic efforts to counter external European pressures. However, these later retrospective evaluations of early Muslim reformism overlook the fact that the image of the West as well as the relationship of the Western powers with the non-Western world changed dramatically during the high age of

imperialism (1882-1914), when a global image of an untrustworthy, racist and imperialist West emerged. Despite the resistance and reactions to the European economic and political hegemony in Asia, the global image of Europe was more positive in the first half of the nineteenth century, as it seemed more of an open and inclusive model. During this period, most of the Muslim reformers saw values, institutions and international norms in Europe as universal, not peculiarly Christian.

In many ways, Europe in the minds of Muslim reformers was more of a universal example than some of the European intellectuals would accept. Such an identification of the European model with universal civilization permitted Muslim Ottomans to adopt this example without any need for conversion to Christianity. The fact that the Muslim world was weaker in world politics in relation to Europe and thus the Muslim political elite had to consider these unequal power relations in their decisions did not mean that all Muslim thinking were merely reacting to the European challenge, and lacked any universality. In fact, Muslim intellectuals of the early nineteenth century produced new internationalist and universalist aspirations, as they reflected on the paradigmatic changes in politics and cultural relations of the world due to the forces of globalization. The best example of the new Muslim universalism was the text of the Tanzimat Declaration, which contained a redefinition of Muslim universalism in harmony with the commitment to implement the "standards of civilization" necessary for the self-strengthening of the Ottoman State and its peaceful relations with the European powers.

In the speeches and writings of leading Tanzimat bureaucrats and intellectuals such as Mustafa Reşit Paşa, Sadik Rifat Paşa and Şinasi, we can see an attempt to define a universal world civilization, represented by then contemporary Europe, and the way Ottoman Muslims should relate to this world civilization.[4] In Egypt, Rifaah Rafi al-Tahtawi (1801-1873) formulated a universal vision of liberal civilizationism in Islamic terminology, though most of his ideas were inspired by his observations in Europe.[5] Similarly, Khayr al-Din Tunisi (1810-1889) implemented liberal reform ideas with the strong conviction that parliamentary

[4] Sadik Rıfat Paşa, "Avrupa Ahvaline Dair Risale", in *Müntehabat-i Asar*, Istanbul, 1275. For an earlier, similar example of reassessment of global realities and notions of civilization, see Mustafa Sami Efendi, *Avrupa Risalesi*, Takvim-i Vekayi Matbaası, Istanbul, 1840.

[5] Tahtawi, Rifa'a Rafi', *Paris Gözlemleri*, Ed. Cemil Çiftçi, Sey Yayınları, Istanbul, 1992.

government and modern European ways were compatible with the Islamic tradition. The worldview of the Tanzimat generation contained the vision that Ottoman Muslims should encounter no religious, cultural or racial obstacles to being as civilized as the Europeans, if they completed the necessary set of reforms.

The first Ottoman encyclopedic journal, *Mecmua-i Fünun* (1862-1867) encapsulates the early Tanzimat perception of the relationship between the European example, the new world order and the Islamic tradition. It was published under the editorship of Münif Paşa by a group of Ottoman bureaucrats/intellectuals in Istanbul, who were organized within a learned society called Cemiyeti Ilmiyeyi Osmaniye. About two hundred seventy five articles published in this journal immediately give the impression that the authors of *Mecmuaii Fünun* were composed of Ottoman officials and translators who viewed contemporary Europe as a model due to its industry, advanced communication and transportation techniques, political institutions, science and technology. They were also thinking that modern science and technology, together with modern educational institutions and economy were the pillars of the new civilization that made Europe progressive and powerful. Furthermore, they wrote about the new developments in the civilization of Europe not as a description of a foreign land, but as offering a path to be followed by Ottoman society and government. Thus they wrote specific articles on the process of commercialization, insurance system, banking system, pension system and similar institutions in mid-nineteenth century Europe so that Ottoman bureaucrats could institute similar systems in the Ottoman lands. As a reformist bureaucratic elite of a large, relatively strong Ottoman State that saw itself as part of the European powers, *Mecmua* authors had a strong belief in the transformation of predominantly Muslim society into their vision of a universal higher civilization by benefiting from European models and experience.

Interestingly, *Mecmua-i Fünun* authors never discussed the issue of relations between Islam and modern civilization. Thus, most historians interpreted *Mecmua's* silence on issues of Islam as a sign of their "Westernist", progressive, and enlightened character.[6] However, given the fact that even the most Westernist intellectuals of the next

[6] M. Şükrü Hanioğlu, "Osmanlı Aydını ve Bilim," *Toplum ve Bilim*, Sayı: 27, Güz 1984, 183-190 and Yesim Isıl, *Bir Aydınlanma Hareketi Olarak Mecmua-i Fünun*, I. Ü. Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Siyasal Bilimler Fakültesi, Kamu Yönetimi Bölümü, Basilmamis Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Istanbul, 1986.

generation, such as Abdullah Cevdet, had to address the question of Islam and modernity, the Westernist character of the *Mecmua* cannot alone explain the absence of any discussion on this issue.[7] Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu was the first to problematize *Mecmua-i Fünun*'s silence on issues of compatibility between Islamic culture and Western civilization and asked why the authors of *Mecmua Fünun* did not show any creative attempt at all to make imported Western ideas compatible with the Islamic tradition of thought.[8] Although the journal was addressed to the Muslim-majority Ottoman educated elite, it contained only two articles related to Islamic history and culture while there were several series of articles about Greek philosophers and the kings of ancient Egypt.[9] With these questions in mind, the present author conducted a thesis research on *Mecmua-i Fünun* journal under the supervision of Professor Ihsanoğlu.[10] What became clear from that research is that the silence of *Mecmua-i Fünun* on issues of the relationship between Islam and Western civilization was a characteristic of the first generation of Tanzimat intellectuals, as they did not see Islamic faith, identity and tradition in any contradiction with the European inspired self-civilizing reforms.

The only area where *Mecmua-i Fünün* authors had to make creative modifications to European ideas was in the field of the Enlightenment view of world history, which relegated Islamic history into a marginal position in the main narrative of the centrality and the rise of the Western civilization. *Mecmua* authors accepted the view of Eurocentric world history, but modified it to accommodate Ottoman and Muslim identities within a Euro-Islamic vision of world history.

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7 For example, Abdullah Cevdet thought that he could use Islam as a tool for modernization. See Sükrü Hanioğlu, *Bir Siyasal Düsünür Olarak Abdullah Cevdet ve Dönemi*, Üçdal Nesriyat, Istanbul, 1981.

8 Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu,, "Cemiyet-i Ilmiye-i Osmaniye'nin Kurulus ve Faaliyetleri", in *smanlı İlmi ve Mesleki Cemiyetleri*, ed. Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu. Edebiyat Fakültesi Basımevi, Istanbul 1987, 219.

9 These two articles were about Muslims in others parts of the world. Ebubekr, "Bu Defa Ümid Burnundan Vürud Eden Bir Mektubun Hülasa-i Meali", *Mecmua-i Fünün* (*MF*) nr.33, Ramazan 1281/ January 1865. Münif Efendi, "Ümid Burnundan Mektub-u Mahsus', *MF* nr.10, Sevval 1279/ March 1863. In contrast, there were more articles on ancient Greek and European history. See Münif Efendi, "Tarih-i Hükema-yı Yunan" (History of Greek Philosophers), *MF*, nr. 41. Şaban 1283-December 1866.

10 Cemil Aydın, *Mecmuai Fünün ve Mecmuai Ulum Dergilerinin Medeniyet ve Bilim Anlayışı*, M.A. Thesis, supervisor: Ekmeleddin Ihsanoğlu, Istanbul Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü. 1995.

According to *Mecmua-i Fünün* articles, Europe had achieved the highest level of civilization[11] thanks to the industriousness of its people.[12] The continents of Asia and Africa had great civilizations only in the past, before the rise of Europe. It was the lineage from Greek thought to modern Europe civilization that mattered most in this narrative of world history.[13] Following the destruction of the Roman Empire by the Barbarians, the development of science and civilization in Europe was halted in a long period of stagnation during the medieval ages.[14] It is in their narratives about the dark ages of Europe that *Mecmua-i Fünun* authors noted how Muslims played an important role in the development of contemporary civilization in Europe. They underlined how the Islamic world preserved the ancient wisdom and sciences, and then transmitted them to Europe to render the later development of European civilization possible.[15] While emphasizing Muslim contributions within a Eurocentric vision of world history, *Mecmua* authors had to accept that there was a period of the dark ages of Islamic civilizations from the decline of Islamic Spain until the reforms of Mehmed Ali Paşa in Egypt.[16]

Mecmua-i Fünun authors looked at other civilizations from a similar Eurocentric perspective as well. Because the Europeans brought "civilization" to wherever they went, their colonization of other societies was not seen as negative by the authors of *Mecmua-i Fünun*. On the contrary, it was seen as a positive factor for the acceleration of the

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[11] Kadri Bey (From the Translators of Meclis-i Vala), "Avrupa Tarih ve Cografyas›-1" (History and Geography of Europe), *MF* nr.3, Rebiülevvel 1279/ August 1862, 111.

[12] Mehmed Sevki, "Avrupa Devletlerinin Ahval-i Hazirasi" (Current Situation of the European States), *MF* nr.29, Cemaziyülevvel 1281/ October 1864, 186.

[13] Mehmed Said (Hace der Mekteb-i Bahriye-i Sahane-Teacher in the Imperial Naval Academy), "Nazari ile Ameli Aras›nda Olan Cihet-i Vahdet", MF nr.9, Ramazan 1279/ February 1862, 368, *MF* nr.29, 187-188.

[14] Kadri Bey, Ibid., 117-118. Also see Mehmed Şevki, Ibid., *MF* nr.29, 190.

[15] Aleksandr (Meclis-i Vala Mütercimlerinden- From the Translators of Meclis-i Vala), "Tahrir-i Müsennefat-i Atika", MF nr.14. Safer 1280/ July 1863, 25-26. Kadri Bey, "Avrupa Tarih ve Coğrafyas›-2", (History and Geography of Europe-2) *MF* nr.4, Rebiyülah›r 1279/ September 1862, 146. For example, in the introduction to the series on Greek philosophers, Münif Efendi first emphasized the importance of Greek philosophy for the history of civilization and for the contemporary world. Only in this context, he underlined how Muslim scholars in the past also respected Greek philosophers, and how Abbasid rulers encouraged the translation of their works into the Arabic language. Munif Pasa, "Tarih-i Hükema-yi Yunan", (History of Greek Philosophers) *MF*; nr.13. Istanbul 1280, 21.

[16] "Mısır Etibbasından Hasan Mahmud Efendi'nin 'Mısır Mekteb-i Tıbbiyesi' Ünvanıyla Fransızca Olarak Yazmış Olduğu Bir Risalenin Tercümesidir" (A translation of the article written by Mahmud Efendi, an Egyptian Physician, in French on "Medical School of Egypt") *MF* nr.40, Receb 1283/ October 1866, 272-273.

civilizing process in these societies.[17] For example, Münif Efendi saw the British domination in India and China as a natural result of higher status of British civilization.[18] For the independent countries not colonized by European powers, such as Japan, they thought that only their interaction with European nations could bring them to higher levels of civilization.[19]

In short, a Eurocentric view of world history was consistently depicted in the *Mecmua-i Fünun* pages, only with a slight modification that emphasized the contribution of Muslims to this world civilization through the inheritance, protection and transmission of the Hellenistic legacy for modern Europe. The nature of early nineteenth century European supremacy made it easier for Muslims to accommodate Islam into Eurocentric world history, because the European belief in their own essential superiority was mostly based on the ability of the different races to produce science, technology and arts. In that sense, it was mostly directed against the natives of new colonies and did not include peoples of Middle East.[20] For example, in his categorization of races according to their capabilities for science and civilization, Münif Efendi argued that the Caucasian race was unique in terms of its high intellectual capacity and contribution to civilization. He counted Turks and Arabs as among the superior Caucasian races,[21] while contending that the black race, "by its very nature and creation, (is) not capable of grasping the issues of science and philosophy".[22]

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[17] Mehmed Sevki, *Ibid.*, *MF* nr.29, . Also see Mehmed Sevki, Ibid., *MF* nr. 32. Saban 1281/ December 1864, 305.

[18] Münif Efendi, "Mukayese-i Ilm ve Cehl", *MF* nr. 1. Muharrem 1279/ Haziran 1862, 21.

[19] Mehmed Sevki, "Japonya Memleketi" (Japan), MF nr.41, Saban 1283/ December 1866, 314.

[20] Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Man: Science, Technology and Ideologies of Western Dominance*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989, 11-12.

[21] It is difficult to trace the origins of Münif Pasa's theory about Caucasian races. He might have synthesized this notion from different popular history works in European languages. As for the origin of the idea of a Caucasian race, see Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1987, 215-223. According to information given by Bernal, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach from the University of Göttingen classified human races in his book *De Generis Humani Varietate Nativa* in 1775, and there he put the white race to the top ranking. In the third edition of his book in 1795, he called this superior race Caucasian, the first, most beautiful and talented race in the world. According to him, the other races, such as Black and Chinese, emerged due to the degeneration of this first race. On the other hand, Georgians in the Caucasus are argued to be the finest race, based on a thesis proposed by Vico that Noah's Ark landed on Mount Ararat, in north Caucasia, after the Flood. Münif Efendi's argument is, of course, not exactly the same.

[22] Münif Efendi, "Mahiyet ve Aksam-ı Ulum", 7-9. For similar racist comments on blacks and natives of the West Indies, see Mehmed Şevki, "Avrupa Devletlerinin Ahval-i Hazirrası", *MF* nr.32, 305.

As for the relationship between Europe and the Muslim world, *Mecmua-i Fünun* articles stated that Europe learned much from Muslim science and civilization through Spain, Italy and Istanbul, and only through these contributions, Europeans progressed in science and civilization. Europeans translated Arabic works into their languages, and further developed this scientific heritage, because of their rising economy, state support and the permanent relations they established between pure sciences and practical technology. As for the Ottomans, one *Mecmua-i Fünun* article mentions that the large book holdings in Ottoman libraries were evidence of past Ottoman achievements in science and learning, which were in turn attributed to state encouragement and material support for learning, while the decline of Ottoman learning was vaguely explained as due to "some obstacles."[23] They approached the issue of scientific progress among Muslims on a purely sociological basis and did not associate rise and decline of scientific success in Islamic history with mentality, culture or religion.

Thus, in the early reflections on the history of science, Muslim reformists usually showed external, social, economic or political reasons for the rise or decline of science among various peoples. According to their vision of the world history of science, the Greek civilization established the basis of contemporary civilization, yet it did not invent all the sciences, rather it borrowed from the Egyptian, Assyrian (*Süryan*) and Chaldean civilizations. After the Greeks, the Romans continued their path, but declined due to outside barbarian attacks from Northern Europe. Thus Europe entered its "Dark Age", while, after some centuries, Muslims revived the old civilization and science, and became the center of it. Muslim achievements were explained by the impact of translations from Greek into Arabic and the practical requirements of keeping large territories under one political unit.

These explanations of *Mecmua* articles indicate that they neither argued for an essentialized harmony between the principles of Islam and the progress of science, like the Young Ottomans and later Muslim modernists did, nor did they see Islam as an impending force against the development of science. In one place, the positive contribution of the Islamic religion to the development of science is mentioned, but again in a sociological way by emphasizing the unifying role of Islam in creating a large centralized state from small Arab tribes. Similarly, the decline of

[23] Münif Efendi, "Mahiyet ve Aksam-ı Ulum", 7.

Islamic science is also explained by outside influences, like the Mongol attacks in the thirteenth century. Besides this outside effect, a lack of attention on the part of the Muslim rulers, and internal political anarchy are cited as other reasons for the decline of science among Muslims.

We can conclude that the first generation of Ottoman reformists did not see their reformist Westernism as contradictory to their religious identity. They saw global unevenness and disparity as a result of the natural and moral consequences of the civilizational hierarchies in science and civilization. They accepted the fact that the norms of international relations were regulated according to the "standards" of civilization, which prescribed that colonial tutelage and unequal treaties were natural laws of the world. Initially, this discourse allowed Ottoman reformers to be optimistic that they would one day gain equality by fulfilling all the required standards of civilization, thus not only becoming an equal members of the Eurocentric international community, but also living prosperous civilized lives.

Muslim Responses to New Discourses of Empire, Race and Orientalism

The mood of early Muslim reformist thought changed around the early 1880s. Especially after the British invasion of Egypt, not only Muslim intellectuals, but also other Asian intellectuals perceived a more aggressive, racist and exclusivist Europe. They had to rethink and redefine the meaning of universal civilization and the prospects for their society to attain equality in the international order. In this period, several world historical developments shattered the earlier belief in liberal civilizationism. On a global scale, the period from the early 1880s to 1914 was not only the peak of European imperial expansion, it was also the formative period of modernist thought in Europe, in the Muslim world and Asia.

In her reflection of this period, Hannah Arendt considers the three decades from 1884 to 1914 separate from the nineteenth century, which, for her, "ended with the scramble for Africa and the birth of the Pan-movements".[24] The rapid imperialist turn in European history was partly due to the global economic competition among European states, while the rise of Christian and racist identities paralleled the democratization

[24] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York: The World Publishing Company, Meridian Books, 1962, 123.

of European politics. The peak of European imperialism brought a new self-definition of European superiority over the non-European races and non-Christian civilizations. With the full colonization of Africa and Asia, European public opinion employed the ideologies of racial and religious superiority to explain and legitimize their worldwide supremacy. Contrary to a more open and liberal mood that had prevailed in the first half of the nineteenth century, Christian and white racial identity was becoming an increasingly conspicuous aspect of internal and international politics of European powers. The invasion of Egypt and Tunisia, and intensified imperialism in the rest of the world was accompanied by anti-Muslim remarks by European politicians such as Gladstone and a larger European cultural discourse on Muslim inferiority. Muslim reformists felt that they were pushed away by the very Europe they were trying to emulate. In the special Ottoman context, the three decades of the Tanzimat reforms not only failed to close the gap with advanced Western modernity, but the reforms were often paralyzed by the interventionist policies of the very Western powers that the Ottomans tried to emulate.

The new European discourse on civilization and Islam in the age of high imperialism implied that, no matter the success of the rate of non-Western reforms, the non-Christians and non-White nations would never perfectly fulfill all the required standards of civilization due to defects in their racial makeup, religious dogmatism or cultural character. In that sense, new Orientalist and racist discourses began to contradict the idea of the universality of modernity and Europe's own idea of civilizing mission. If non-Western societies were permanently relegated to the inferior status in international hierarchy due to their faith or race, what could be the meaning and ultimate goal of their reforms? Would they have to live, forever, under the tutelage of European masters? In this context, intense competition among the European powers for the control of the previously non-colonized territories in Asia and Africa further created a sense of insecurity for countries like the Ottoman Empire, Japan and China. Leaving aside the question of being an equal member of the international order, Ottoman, Chinese and Japanese leaders were not even sure about the future security of their own states in the context of ambitions and rapid Western expansion in Africa and Asia.

It was in this global context that Renan's speech formulated all the basic arguments of new European Orientalist and racist thinking on the

future of the Muslim world with reference to its past. Therefore, the debates on the relationship between Islam and progress initiated by Renan in 1883 were not merely a scholarly discussion about the impact of a certain set of religious values contained in the Islamic faith on the production of scientific and technological knowledge. Rather, they were about a set of grand questions on globalization, imperial international order and Muslim societies. As ideas of European racial and cultural supremacy offered legitimacy to the Eurocentric imperial world order, Muslim intellectuals, as other Asian intellectuals, followed carefully and responded seriously to what Europeans were thinking about Muslims and colored races. It was during this period that Muslim reformists had to be anti-Orientalist and partly anti-Western in order to ask for equality in international affairs and affirm their belief in the universality of modernity.

Renan's credentials as a famous secular European intellectual meant that he was not seen as part of the missionary campaign against Islam, a fact which contributed to the appeal of his ideas. Ernest Renan was born on February 28, 1823 in France and studied theology, philosophy and Oriental languages. He published his dissertation on Averroes and Averroism in 1852. He was already famous for his secular critiques of Christianity and the Church. Furthermore, Renan was not a marginal Orientalist whose only reputation relied on his knowledge of the languages and cultures of the exotic distant East. On the contrary, Renan was at the center of mainstream European intellectual life and even today he is known more for his ideas on nationalism than on his reflections on Islamic civilization.

At its core, Ernest Renan's anti-Islamic comments were no different than the widespread anti-religious ideas of scientism and positivism predominant in Europe. He argued that Muslims could never reach the level of the European civilization while remaining loyal to their culture, religion or even ethnicity.[25] He suggested that only by denying their religious dogmatism and getting rid of the influence of Islam, Muslims could come to terms with contemporary European modernity, which was based on rationality and science.

What made Renan's ideas different from the frequent anti-Muslims writings in the European media was their precise attack on the

[25] Ernest Renan, "Islamlık ve Bilim" in *Nutuklar ve Konferanslar*, tr. Ziya Ihsan, Sakarya Basımevi, Ankara, 1946.

historical consciousness of optimist Muslim modernism, which saw their own history as part of the history of European civilization and progress. If Muslims had achieved a Golden Age in science and technology, Muslim reformism believed, there was no reason why they could not reach the similar achievements in progress and science if they were given the right circumstances. The debates on the conflict between science and religion were just intensifying in Europe due to the impact of Darwin's book on evolution. Muslim achievements in science in the first five centuries of Islamic history, at the time when their religious zeal was strong, gave encouragement to Islamic modernists from Jamal ad-Din Al-Afghani to Namık Kemal that Islam and modern civilization were already compatible, and the argument of conflict between science and religion was relevant only for Christian societies, not for Muslims.

Renan was familiar with this optimist reformist Islamic thought and Muslim anti-imperialism before he made his speech. In fact, initially, it was the European intellectual Renan who was reacting to the optimist Muslim modernism. He personally met several Muslim reformist in Paris, such as Şinasi and Afghani. Afghani was publishing his magazine *Urwatul Wuska* in Paris during 1883-1884, championing both a vision of Islamic modernism and a call for decolonization of the Muslim world. Afghani believed that independence and autonomy from Western colonial rule was a precondition for Muslim revival and gaining their rightful position in the international scene as equal and respected members. Afghani's bold anti-colonialism was taken with precaution even by his most illustrious student and coeditor of *Urwatul Wuska*, Muhammad Abduh, who saw an intellectual rejuvenation and educational progress as the precondition for both decolonization and equality with the Western powers in the international scene. Ernest Renan later commented that Afghani's optimism about the compatibility between Islam and science was one of the reasons why he gave his speech on the conflict between Islam and science in the first instance.

In his speech Renan first declared his general conviction that religion in general and Islam in particular are hostile to science and progress. Challenging Islamic modernist belief that the Golden Age of Islam proved that Islam and science were compatible, Renan argued that the scientific achievements in Islamic history were not "due to Islam" but in fact it occurred 'in spite of Islam." As such, Renan was declaring the impossibility of Muslim modernism, as he was specifically attacking the Muslim appropriation of Enlightenment history into a form of Euro-

Islamo-centric world history. According to Renan, the historical achievements of Muslims in the sciences did not contradict the "science vs. religion" principle, since this success had nothing to do either with Islam or with the Arab race. He offered an alternative historical explanation for the past achievements in science and progress in Muslim societies, arguing that the flourishing of science in Islamic history was due to Christians Arabs and the superior Aryan race (Iranians). Thus, Renan cast a pessimist theory that Muslims could never fulfill the standards of civilization as Muslims. The political saliency of this Orientalist argument, which meant Muslims needed colonial tutelage to overcome their backwardness, explains the infuriation of Muslim reformers.

Going beyond the anti-religious and anti-Islamic arguments, Renan's speech also reflected the anti-Semitic racist mood of his generation. He claimed that the Arab and Turkish-Mongolian races are incapable of scientific progress. According to him, most of the Islamic science was produced not by Arabs, but by the non-Arab Aryan Iranian race. In this second set of arguments, Renan offered a set of inconsistent claims. The Iranian race could produce science even when they became Muslims, because as the Aryan race, they could somehow protect their genetic genius from religious fanaticism. Moreover, Christian Arabs, by virtue of being Christian, still had the chance to produce scientific activity and progress, because Christianity was less anti-rational than Islam. Hence, for a secular rationalist Renan, Christianity would always be superior to Islam in its contribution to modern progress.

The first response to Renan's speech came from Al-Afghani, who sent a letter to *Journal des Debates* in the same week. Afghani indicated all the contradictions in Renan's arguments, and then urged Renan to be consistent in his views on religion and science. Afghani cautiously noted that, if Christianity finally became compatible with modern civilization and science, then with time Islam would be capable of doing that as well. Renan wrote a letter to the same journal two months later to respond to Afghani. This time, Renan pushing his argument forward, suggesting that it would only be the decline and eradication of Islam from the minds and cultures of Muslims that could liberate them from the chains of backwardness. This letter became the last comment by Renan on this issue, and his direct response to Afghani remained as a rare instance in which a late nineteenth century European intellectual directly responded to a critique by a Muslim intellectual.

Upon the translation of Renan's speech into various Muslim languages, a large group of Muslim modernists wrote on this issue, all emphasizing the following common points, though they diverge in other details of their refutations. First they contended, it was true that the Muslim world is in a grave state of decline and backwardness, yet the real cause of this is not Islam as Renan argued. Second, Muslims had a great civilization in the past and the main inspiration of this Golden Age was Islam itself. Relying on the first two axioms, it is a fallacy to argue that Islam is against reason, thinking, progress, science and technology. Fourth, it is a revival of earlier progressive Islam, not an abandonment of it, that can again bring Muslims close to progress.

The last consensus point of Muslim modernists, namely the belief that Islam fosters progress, were partly a product of the literature of refutations to Renan. While Renan was claiming that Islamic beliefs and dogmas are an obstacle to the development of science and philosophy, as a response to him, Muslim modernists argued that Islam supports and encourages progress and science. In both arguments, the development of science and civilization is assumed to be directly related to the religious beliefs and the mentality of a society. Since Renan's debate, the polemic was shaped around the issues of whether "Islam stifles progress" (*Islam terakkiye manidir*) or "Islam fosters progress" (*Islam terakkiye mürebbidir*),[26] in contrast to the earlier generation of Muslim reformists' approach to the issue of scientific progress in the Muslim world on a largely sociological basis.

The fact that this debate started during the 1880s reveals a lot about the changing climate of opinion on a global scale regarding the relationship between religious-cultural identity and Euro-centric world order. The fury and radicalism of the Muslim refutations of Renan demonstrated the rising momentum of anti-imperialism in the intellectual domain. By reversing Renan's argument, and insisting that Islam fostered the rise of scientific activity, Muslim anti-Imperialists felt the need to defend Islam as a civilizational legacy and as a faith against Orientalism and argued for Islam's progressive nature.

While Muslim intellectuals in the age of high imperialism were combating with European Orientalism, they also popularized the concept of "Islamic civilization", as different from "Western civilization," a

[26] Namik Kemal, *Renan Müdafaanamesi: Islamiyet ve Maarif*. Prepared by Fuat Köprülü. Milli Kültür Yayinlar, Ankara 1962.

distinction that could not be found in the early Tanzimat era reformist writings. The new discourse on "Islamic Civilization" was politically utilized to challenge the "civilizing mission" ideology of the imperialist era and the notion of the superiority of the Western civilization. This new Muslim reformist discourse did not mean the abandonment of the vision of universal progress in science and technology. In fact, together with the globalization of economic forces, scientific progress has been seen as an inevitable force. Yet, what post-Renan Muslim modernists created was a narrative of Islamic civilization, based on the religion of Islam, which was judged to be superior to the Christian faith simply because Islam was claimed to be more conducive to modern rationality and science.[27]

Conclusion

The imperial context of Renan's arguments on the historical and future incompatibility between Islam and modern science would explain why Muslim modernists and later all Muslim nationalists reversed Renan's thesis to create an ethos of essential compatibility between Islam and science. Since then, proving that Islam as a faith has fostered, and if correctly practiced, will again facilitate scientific activity became a hallmark of the specific characteristic of modernist Muslim thought. It must be emphasized that the way Japanese, Chinese and Indian intellectuals responses to Western discourses of race and civilization did not exhibit such a revived ethos about the harmony between their faith-civilization and modern science. This peculiarity of Muslim modernism led to further "sacralization" of science among modern Muslim intellectuals, who produced a rich amount of literature on the Muslims contribution to science and technology in the medieval ages, Europe's indebtedness to Islamic science, great pioneers of Islamic science or scientific miracles of in the Quran etc. While the post-Renan politicization of the literature of Islamic science popularized the history of science literature in Muslim societies, it also precluded a more scholarly approach to the topic due to the essentialist nature of the questions posed. Therefore, even long after the disappearance of the

[27] The most ironic example of this attitude can be seen in Ahmet Midhat Efendi's notes added to the translation of John William Draper's book *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science*. Midhat Efendi agrees with Draper's argument that Christianity conflicted with modern sciences, but added his commentary to the translation saying that this was not true for all religions, and Islam, as a pro-scientific and rational faith, never conflicted with science. See *Niza-yı Ilim ve Din*, translated and introduced by Ahmet Midhat, Tercümanı Hakikat Matbaası, Dersaadet (Istanbul), 1313 (1896-1897).

original imperial context of the Renan debates, the literature on the history of Islamic science continued to be characterized by an essentialist debate on the relationship between Islam and the "rise" or "decline" of the sciences.[28] More importantly, even after the era of decolonization, contemporary Muslim thought exhibited the legacy of Renan refutations in various forms of faith endorsed sacralization of science, and scientific confirmation of the Islamic faith. While the awareness of the international political context of the Renan speech and the Muslim refutations of it would allow us to understand the positions of both sides, it should also help to overcome the legacy of the strategic essentializing and polarized thinking about Islam and science in contemporary Muslim thought.

[28] For a critique of the scholarly historiography on the history of Islamic science in Turkey, see Cemil Aydın, "Beyond Culturalism? An Overview of the Historiography on Ottoman Science in Turkey" in *Multicultural Science in the Ottoman Empire* (Ed. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, Kostas Chatzis, Efthymios Nicolaidis), Brepols, Belgium, 2003, 201-215.