

Meaghan Young-Stephens

Research Seminar in Political Science

Dr. Sheri Breen

March 16, 2012

The Gift of Knowledge:

Epistemology in the Political Writings of al-Afghani and Gandhi

The British argued that they had brought to India the unique and most precious gift of civilisation ... and initiating people into it is necessarily an educational enterprise. Following the logic of the language of civilisation, the British justified their rule in educational terms and used pedagogical and tutorial metaphors with great regularity in their descriptions of what they thought they were doing. They were not masters but headmasters; the Indians were their pupils; the whole of India was one big public school... (Parekh, 1989, p. 13)

Throughout the 19th century, European powers acquired more and more control over the Asian and African countries under their thumb. One underlying assumption of their quest for political and economic power was that the West had access to a type of universally-valued knowledge that they alone could bestow upon less developed countries with less fortunate peoples; in this way “educating” colonized people with Western conceptions of knowledge went hand in hand with “civilizing” them. However, the assumptions of imperialism did not go unchallenged, especially by those they oppressed. Among the many responses to the foreign dominance emerged the desire to reclaim and legitimize forms of knowledge native to the traditions of the oppressed themselves. The movement advocated the acknowledgement of the value of different approaches and the use of these shared epistemologies as a foundation for unifying the population and fighting—through violent or nonviolent means—for independence.

Among the most influential political thinkers to take on this challenge were Sayyid Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani (1839-1897), whose thought emerged from the Islamic tradition, and Indian thinker and activist Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948). Though coming from different traditions, both thinkers responded to the same external threat—European imperialism—and advocated for reflection and change within their own oppressed communities in order to combat this threat. To be a “true” Indian or Muslim, in the minds of the theorists, was not to be weaker than one’s European oppressors; instead, realization of these identities involved new interpretations of rich historic traditions to preserve the integrity of the citizens and the strength of the nations they form.

Though colonialism in its most literal, political sense was all but eliminated decades before the dawn of the 21st century, the power structures it left in its wake continue to privilege some cultures and some knowledges over others. Work from a variety of disciplines examines and re-examines epistemologies in a postcolonial context, including that by Mustafa Dike (2010), Sandra Harding (2008), and Amin Alhassan (2007), to name a few. In spite of the vast amounts of literature that have already been produced, the fact that postcolonial issues continue to hold such weight in the humanities and social sciences attests to the work that still needs to be done. Though Eurocentrism is recognized as a pitfall to be avoided in today’s scholarship, the exact definition of the term—and, more to the point, what alternatives it leaves—is still being negotiated, even decades after Europe’s formal empires have collapsed. The ways in which colonized knowledges and theories fit into the Western-dominated world of academia are still far from settled. In his work on Gandhi’s contribution to the Indian canon, for example, Anthony J. Parel opposes “political thought in India” to “Indian political thought” (2010,

p. 147). But how can we distinguish between the two? What is it that makes one type of thought—or one Indian person’s thought—authentically “Indian,” when others are not? What does it mean to live up to Parel’s criteria that “the framework of thought and analysis [must be] Indian and modern at the same time”? (2010, p. 147). These issues strike to the heart of identity and epistemology. Contemporary, informed analyses of the subversive works of the colonial past allows us to re-examine the relationships between power structure and ways of knowing that are still very much alive in culture and politics today; the writings of al-Afghani and Gandhi provide a useful vehicle for such an investigation.

The Theorists

Al-Afghani’s approach to knowledge was one deeply rooted in what he saw as the inherent compatibility between Islamic scripture and scientific thought. Having first been exposed to scientific modes of learning during his travels in India, al-Afghani dedicated much of his life to arguing that these tools of knowledge, used by European imperialists to justify their oppression of other peoples, actually belong to the *umma*, the pan-Islamic community, and should be used to revitalize an Islamic civilization that had decayed in recent years. The scientific knowledge that was—and continues to be—primarily associated with Western culture, he argued, is not only compatible with Islamic tradition, but essential to Muslim identity. Al-Afghani thus wrote of a need to reclaim the modes of learning that had become monopolized by Europe and use this knowledge to establish a great pan-Islamic civilization.

Gandhi also strove to create a vision of modernity for his nation, yet the knowledge about which he wrote had a different focus. Rather than reclaiming the models found in Europe as being illustrative of Indian tradition (as al-Afghani did with Islam), Gandhi argued that the West's focus on science and rationality was limited and that a more complete view of knowledge and truth would recognize the importance of spiritual¹ knowledge in addition to empirical claims and rational arguments. Rather than viewing India as having a more or less legitimate claim to knowledge than Western countries, he envisioned a symbiosis between the respective forms of knowledge in which the peoples could learn from each other's traditions in a way that did justice to the capacity for *swaraj*, or self-rule, of the individuals and the countries they compose.

Of course, even among theorists who come from and write about colonized places, there are very different responses to Western empiricism and very different understandings of truth. Al-Afghani and Gandhi both looked to the past, re-interpreting and re-valuing long-held cultural traditions in order to cope with the newer challenge of imperialism; however, they arrived at very different conclusions as to what this meant as a result of their dissimilar views of what constitutes knowledge. This complex relationship between the theorists' ideas makes the two interestingly fitted to be analyzed comparatively. Al-Afghani and Gandhi come from two different traditions (both suppressed through colonialism) and represent two distinct and established models for undermining colonial powers: whereas Gandhi advocated the use of knowledges dismissed and devalued by Western powers, al-Afghani attempted to reclaim Western ways of knowing in order to destabilize imperial authority.

Though they advocated very different approaches to knowledge and to learning, the two theorists had much in common. Both men challenged the conventions of their time by envisioning a postcolonial world where Western modes of thought were no longer viewed as the only means to progress and civilization. Although both had a familiarity with Western knowledge and education—Gandhi was educated in London and al-Afghani spent much time in Paris—neither theorist was looking down from an ivory tower, isolated from the community he was bent on protecting; instead they were both political activists as well as theorists, spending most of their lives amongst those peoples with whom they identified, simultaneously celebrated and persecuted within these communities for the revolutionary ideas they advanced. Though there is much to analyze in the anti-imperialist activism and scholarship of both thinkers, their respective views of knowledge were central in determining their views of the relationship between the oppression they witnessed and the cultural empowerment they envisioned. An examination of these approaches to knowledge illuminates the theorists' opinions as to whom this knowledge belongs; whereas the universal accessibility of knowledge sets apart Gandhi's claims as visionary of a post-colonial world, the limited ownership of knowledge in al-Afghani's view limits its scope and its inter-cultural relevance.

In the following pages, I conduct a comparative analysis between the two theorists' epistemologies. I begin by arguing that the theorists' views of knowledge arise out of their assumptions about human nature; it is the balance between the capabilities and the limitations of humans that determine the knowledge they can access. Secondly, I examine the specific ways, as presented by the theorists, that knowledge is to be disseminated. I conclude by turning to the issues of identity and ownership: To whom do

these truths—both spiritual and scientific—belong? In answering this question, both theorists turn to differing conceptions of the ways that knowledge is gifted and shared; while al-Afghani views the *umma* as the recipients of the divine gift of reason, Gandhi's conception is internal at the level of the individual, allowing all bearers of cultural knowledges to share these gifts with their fellow human beings.

Knowledge and Human Capability

Perhaps it seems peculiar that a discussion about knowledge begins with an exploration of human nature; however, closer examination shows that the former is deeply rooted in conceptions of the latter. Views about human nature determine views of people's "natural" inclination and capacity for knowledge and how this knowledge fits more broadly into the human project. Because knowledge is traditionally conceived of as a uniquely human enterprise, human nature's role in defining, acquiring, and disseminating knowledge is a significant one. The thinkers' respective views of what it means to be human shape the capabilities and limits they see in human learning.

Interestingly, both theorists explicitly address what it is that distinguishes human from non-human life. To al-Afghani, it is rational and intellectual thought—philosophy, as he phrases it—that determines humans' place in the natural order. In his "The Benefits of Philosophy," he makes this clear:

Philosophy is the escape from the narrow sensations of animality into the wide arena of human feelings. It is the removal of the darkness of bestial superstitions with the light of natural intelligence; the transformation of blindness and lack of insight into clear-sightedness and insight. It is salvation from savagery and barbarism, ignorance and foolishness, by virtue into the virtuous city of knowledge and skillfulness. In general, it is man's becoming man and living the life of *sacred rationality*. Its aim is

human perfection in reason, mind, soul, and way of life [emphasis added].
(1968, p. 110)

Although al-Afghani concludes this passage by citing the pursuit of perfection more broadly, his description by then has already established a hierarchy of knowledge. He gives some credence to the presence of a broader idea of knowledge with his mention of perfection of the soul, but it is clear that, in al-Afghani's view, reason lies at the heart of humanness; it is "rationality" that is sacred, that defines the life of man.

Gandhi's vision resonates with al-Afghani's assertion that it is knowledge that distinguishes us from animals. However, it diverges from al-Afghani's views in the spiritual vision at its base; whereas the knowledge that defines humans is, for al-Afghani, primarily rational, Gandhi focuses on moral knowledge as most integral to human achievement and most fundamental in setting us apart from non-human life. Whereas "the activities of eating, drinking, sleeping, feeling afraid, etc., are common to man and beast," Gandhi argues, "man has the power of distinguishing between good and evil and can also know the self" (*Selected Writings*, 1996, p. 69). To Gandhi, one must look then not only to empirical observations and rational conclusions of the external world, but also consider the broader implications of knowledge as derived from one's own internal learning.

Gandhi's theories of knowledge and humanity both build upon and challenge the Indian canon. Anthony Parel aptly describes Gandhi as an "innovator" of the old political tradition, a fact illustrated in the way Gandhi's understanding of human nature differs from his predecessors (2010, p. 153). Traditionally, Indian scholars have seen society as ruled by the "law of fishes," which both offered an interpretation of human nature and justified the old political order (Parel, 2010, p. 153). According to this

doctrine, coined *matsya nyaya* in the fourth century BC, the strong will inevitably swallow the weak; the “natural tendency of humans to dominate one another unilaterally” is checked only by political order (Parel, 2010, p. 150). However, Gandhi’s re-interpretation of the tradition transforms Indian thought from a defense against the evil of humanity to a testimony of its capability. Rejecting the negative role of human nature depicted in the law of the fishes, Gandhi instead advocates a view of human nature based on the *swaraj*, or self rule, of every individual. Though challenging many conventions of Indian tradition, he selectively adheres to Hindu scripture that teaches that humans are capable of “self-determination, self-development, and spiritual liberation,” which means that Indians, as individuals and as a people, are capable of establishing a nation and a culture free from imperialist oppression (Parel, 2010, p. 154). He rejected British rule in India because he believed that, contrary to the law of the fishes, domination was *not* the natural state for human beings; Indians simply had to understand the strengths that lay within their own traditions and its knowledges in order to exercise their own capacity for self-rule.

The Role of Learning

The idea of knowledge coming from an internal source—the self—is central to Gandhi’s understanding. According to his view, the self is embedded within the world it observes, and a vision of knowledge that neglects this fact is flat and incomplete. Akeel Bilgrami argues that, to Gandhi, science—and the experimental methods with which he equates it—involves a “conception of nature whose pursuit left us disengaged from nature as a habitus, and which instead engendered a zeal to control it rather than merely

live in it” (2009, p. 17-18). Subjectivity, Bilgrami argues, is thus to be celebrated rather than dismissed in Gandhi’s vision. The world is seen as connected to the self and thus “suffused with value” and capable of making normative demands on those who occupy and connect with it:

It is in this sense of forming commitments by taking in, *in our own perceptions*, an evaluatively “enchanted” world which—being enchanted in this way—therefore *moved* us to normatively constrained *engagement* with it, that dissenters contrasted with the outlook that was being offered by the ideologues of the new science [original emphasis]. (p. 19)

It is thus the conception of engagement between self and all else that constitutes for Gandhi the foundation of knowledge; Western science’s neglect of this fact is its greatest failure. The symbiosis of spiritual knowledge of the self and observations of the world in which we live forms human beings’ capability of learning. As Parel succinctly puts it, “[Gandhi’s] view of what the modern world needed most was a working harmony between secular pursuits and spiritual pursuits” (*Philosophy and Harmony*, 2006, p. x).

Even as Gandhi strove to learn and value the strength of the self and the spiritual pursuits it allowed, he recognized its limits; in fact, this humility is a central theme of his writing. In his descriptions of nonviolent activism, he writes, “The greater the progress, the greater the recognition of our unworthiness” (*Selected Writings*, 1996, p. 41). Gandhi applied the same mentality to his quest for knowledge. Readily admitting that he had not found Truth, but was merely its seeker, he explains, “I am painfully conscious of my imperfections, and therein lies all the strength I possess, because it is a rare thing for a man to know his own limitations” (1996, p. 36). The humility he exhibits demonstrates the breadth of his view of knowledge and the complexity of his spirituality; he is aware of his correct place within a natural order and accepts its limitations.

Al-Afghani admits human limitations as well—limitations which, in his case, can be attributed to the values of Islam. Although Euben cites many scholars who debate the authenticity of al-Afghani's religious commitment to Islam (1999, p. 58), Albert Hourani, who remains one of the primary scholars and interpreters of his work, argues that his faithfulness is beyond question: "Indeed it is impossible to understand either al-Afghani's thought or his political activities unless we realize that he accepted the fundamental teachings of Islam with all his mind" (1970, p. 124). However, al-Afghani's writings contain inconsistencies and contradictions, and it is often observed that his arguments seem to vary widely depending on his audience (Euben p. 58, Keddie p. 36). It is unlikely that either Hourani or his dissenters will ever come to an agreement regarding the authenticity of al-Afghani's religious identity; however, because he worked to persuade Muslim audiences, al-Afghani's adherence to Islamic tradition—whether genuine or pragmatic—required that he respect the central Islamic virtue of voluntary submission, at least in its most basic form. Hourani explains that al-Afghani is thus thought to have recognized some limits on the capabilities of human reasoning: "While reason can attain to truth in principle, human nature by itself cannot observe the rules which reason teaches it" (1970, p. 127). It is this rationale by which al-Afghani justifies the need for God in addition to the rationality with which He endowed His human creations.

However, although al-Afghani acknowledges the limits of people to understand knowledge, this is not his focus; instead, he is primarily concerned with the potential of human learning. In fact, he attributes Islam itself with the great capability it allows

people for reason. Hourani interprets al-Afghani's views of Islam as unique in the capacity it recognizes in humans for knowledge:

No other religion teaches in this way that reason is capable of knowing and testing all, and that every man's reason is so capable; no other therefore gives men the self-respect and sense of equality which Muslims possess—or should possess, did they but know their religion.... Human reason therefore can fulfill itself in Islam alone. (1970, p. 126)

Al-Afghani's assertion that humankind as a group—rather than only elite ministers—is capable of reason and interpretation of the Quran was revolutionary within the Islamic canon and reminiscent of Christianity's Martin Luther. In fact, al-Afghani himself spoke often of Islam's need for a Luther; Hourani even suggests that perhaps al-Afghani saw himself in that role (p. 122).

In addition to his high praise of Luther, al-Afghani also drew inspiration from Western Christian thinker François Guizot, who lived from 1787 to 1874 (Hourani 1970, Euben 1999, Kohn 2009). As illustrated by the title of his book, *The History of Civilization in Europe*, Guizot was primarily concerned with notions of European civilization and progress, and, although al-Afghani was in many ways critical of the West, he saw in Guizot's writing an idea of civilization much like he envisioned the *umma*. When, years later, al-Afghani articulated his own ambitions for Islam, one could hear echoes of Guizot's descriptions of the “certain unity [that] pervades the civilization of the various European states ... notwithstanding infinite diversities of time, place, and circumstances” (Guizot, 1997, p. 10). Guizot's vision resonates with al-Afghani's idea of an international community of Muslims, an *umma* in its truest form, united by the knowledge that Guizot claims for those who make up the great European civilization.

Also, like al-Afghani, Guizot values the religion of a people—though Christianity rather than Islam—as being central to this unity and this idea of civilization.

However, they had even greater similarity. For Guizot and al-Afghani alike, rationality is central to civilization and human progress, and this, to al-Afghani, ties both visions to the idea of a single universal knowledge. Speaking against the fact that many in the *ulama* (the elite body of Muslim scholars) divide sciences into two separate parts, al-Afghani writes the following:

One they call Muslim science, and one European science. Because of this they forbid others to teach some of the useful sciences. They have not understood that science is that noble thing that has no connection with any nation, and is not distinguished by anything but itself. Rather, everything that is known is known by science, and every nation that becomes renowned becomes renowned through science. Men must be related to science, not science to men. (1968, p. 107)

If knowledge is perceived this way as a universal enterprise that all humans are capable of using for good ends, it stands to reason that al-Afghani would also believe that “every government for its own benefit must strive to lay the foundation of the sciences and to disseminate knowledge” (p. 103). Knowledge, it seems, breaks down national and cultural barriers and brings people together in their universal capacity for its attainment.

Ownership of Knowledge

Al-Afghani’s descriptions of the universality of scientific knowledge seem at first to imply that he sees all of humanity as equally capable of accessing this knowledge; however, such a vision differs significantly from some of al-Afghani’s other writing. Though Margaret Kohn identified the rationality inherent in both Islam and post-reformation Christianity as a primary reason for al-Afghani’s affiliation with Guizot

(2009, p. 414), al-Afghani makes clear in his own writing that the two were not equivalent. Instead, to al-Afghani, Islam is not only conducive to reason, but is its natural counterpart. “The Islamic religion,” he argues, “is the closest of all religions to science and knowledge” (p. 107). In fact, as Hourani summarizes in his analysis of al-Afghani’s work, even Christianity in its most idealized form would not enable the fruits of science to blossom; its appearance of doing so stems from its incorporated pagan beliefs and virtues, which, in al-Afghani’s view, made Christianity of his time inauthentic and fundamentally unchristian (1970, p. 129). However, if *Muslims* were to realize the true implications of their religion, argues al-Afghani, they would embrace reason and rationality. “Christians are strong because they are not really Christian,” Hourani summarizes. “Muslims are weak because they are not really Muslim” (p. 129).

Therefore, what begins as a view of knowledge that seems almost as universal as Gandhi’s quickly becomes less so. This is especially apparent if one looks at al-Afghani’s account of the original dissemination of knowledge. It all began, he explains in “The Benefits of Philosophy,” with the Prophet Muhammad and the “Precious Book,” the Holy Quran. Through his Prophet and the Precious Book, according to al-Afghani, the God of Islam “planted the roots of philosophical sciences into purified souls, and opened the road for man to become man. . . . When the Arab people came to believe in that Precious Book they were transferred from the sphere of ignorance to knowledge, from blindness to vision, from savagery to civilization, and from nomadism to settlement” (al-Afghani, 1968, p. 114). Knowledge was first, in al-Afghani’s understanding, given to people by God—and the people to whom it was given were an

exclusive group rather than humanity at large. This illustrates a decided departure from his other claims that science is not to be related to man but only man to science.

Gandhi, on the other hand, presents what seems to be a far more consistent account of a universal knowledge derived from the self rather than an external entity. He argues that no individual is denied the capacity for knowledge, regardless of culture or creed. In Gandhi's view, knowledge is thus universally accessible because it is internal; everyone has a self and is therefore capable of attaining knowledge of that self. The concerns of education thus become centered on allowing that knowledge to flourish by respecting and valuing the diverse ways it is realized; as a result, teaching people in their native language and exposing them to the canons of their own traditions are central tenets of an extensive Gandhian literature about education policy (*Gandhi in India*, 1987, p. 257).

Knowledge and self-determination, according to Gandhi, operate at the community and national levels much in the same way they do on the individual level. He rejects essentializing people into groups and making assumptions about human capabilities when he writes, "I do think that independence of each country is a truth in the same sense and to the same extent that independence of each man is. There is, therefore, no inherent incapacity for self-government in any country..." (*Selected Writings*, 1996, p. 31). Envisioning Indian identity as a network of concentric circles, Gandhi argues that the individual would dwell in the middle of the network, occupying as many circles as he or she desires. All would be encompassed in the inclusive "oceanic circle" of India as a civic nation, "becom[ing] one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are

integral units” (qtd. in Parel, 2010, p. 156). Though the people of India share a special bond, according to Gandhi’s vision, even this outer oceanic circle is not detached from the rest of the world nor from the human project; on the contrary, Gandhi advocated a “universal interdependence” among nations rather than absolute independence between them (qtd. in Parel, 2010, p. 156). At every level, Gandhi was therefore committed to humans’ capacity for understanding, self-rule, and cooperation.

Gandhi was not averse to the sharing and mixing of knowledges, and he saw this mixture embodied in India itself, which represented for him a fusion of the Hindu, Muslim, and Christian traditions all existing—for the most part harmoniously—within the nation’s borders (Parekh, 1989, p. 39). He thus viewed Indian tradition as far from monolithic; and, in contrast to al-Afghani’s vision of an *umma* united under “science,” a singular—and singularly valuable—conception of knowledge, Gandhi celebrated the diversity he found in Indian civilization. Bhikhu Parekh describes this “pluralism” underlying Gandhi’s vision:

In Gandhi’s view, civilisation was not only plural but pluralist, that is, committed to pluralism as a desirable value; not just a collection of different ethnic, religious and cultural groups but a unity-in-diversity. Since it held that different men perceived the ultimate reality differently and that a richer view of it could only be attained by a dialogue between them, it not only tolerated but respected and welcomed diversity and encouraged discussion between its constituent groups. (1989, p. 39)

The diversity that Gandhi saw within his own beloved tradition informed his sense of Indian civilization more broadly. In stark contrast with the linear project envisioned by colonialist forces at the time (in which cultures ranged from most to least “civilized” in accordance with their similarity to European states) and even with the exclusive civilization of the *umma* advocated by al-Afghani, “civilization” to Gandhi was inclusive

and flexible. In Parekh's words, Gandhi's "was an open civilisation with permeable boundaries allowing new influences to flow in and vitalize the old, so that the new became part of the old, the old was discarded or vitalized, and the whole civilisation renewed itself" (1989, p. 39). It was upon this sense of historical traditions informing—but not dominating—contemporary ways of knowing that Gandhi based his entire literature on Truth.

Whereas Gandhi's conception of Truth is derived from the unification of several sources of religious doctrine in addition to his individual views of self knowledge, al-Afghani sees Islam as unique in its compatibility with science and in its ability to bring about the greatest possibilities of civilization. Although he speaks of sciences as universally valued, it is clear that al-Afghani's conception of their ownership is narrow and fixed; only those within the *umma* given the capacity for knowledge by their God can reach the greatest heights of knowledge. Gandhi, on the other hand, sees knowledge as truly universal in its ownership; though imperialism can stifle the diversity of available knowledges, it is unable to suppress completely humanity's aptitude for learning or the quest for truth, which extends across both national and religious lines.

Conclusion

The conclusions both theorists reach about knowledge offer us an interesting lens through which to view their relationship with imperialism more broadly. In a discussion of the Islamic political tradition, Fred Dallmayr describes the various responses to imperialism, which he envisions as comprising a wide spectrum, ranging from "rejectionism" (in which the "gifts" from the West are considered worthless and

corrupting) to “assimilation” (in which these gifts are considered liberating and often superior to native traditions) (2010, p. 27-28). It is quite evident that both theorists discussed would fall more closely to the former end of the spectrum than to the latter; however, their comparative locations on this spectrum would be more difficult to determine. Examination of the arguments as a whole might reveal al-Afghani as the more obviously radical figure; his dismissal of Western thought is overall more emphatic, and he is far less willing than Gandhi to acknowledge the value of the Christian tradition that had become central to Western thinking.

However, in spite of his contempt for the West, al-Afghani’s ideas about knowledge interestingly and paradoxically mirror its imperialist mindset. His claim that there is a single population (in his case, the *umma* of Islamic tradition) whose customs and beliefs are most conducive to the acquisition of knowledge in an all-inclusive form echoes—although inversely—British sentiment during the time of his writing. Like authorities in colonial powers, al-Afghani boasted his own membership in a society that had been gifted with knowledge and civilization (al-Afghani, 1968, p. 114); in this way, even the terminology he used (so heavily infused with Guizot’s vision) mirrored that of the British, who “wrapped their gifts in the language of civilisation” (Parekh, 1989, p. 11). Although the Islamic basis for his vision makes al-Afghani’s perspective different from his colleagues in Europe, he too relies on a conception of a linear scientific project that is bestowed by the divine upon a single group of people who has special access to the knowledge. Knowledge, in al-Afghani’s perception, thus remains trapped by the very system he so vehemently protests.

On the subject of knowledge, Gandhi is therefore arguably more radical than his Middle Eastern counterpart. Unlike al-Afghani, he challenges not only the idea that Western conceptions of knowledge are superior, but also the assumption that knowledge necessarily exists in a zero-sum relationship; to Gandhi, the valuing of the knowledges expressed in one tradition does not necessarily result in the devaluing of all others. In fact, he expresses respect for these forms of knowledge when he identifies that his *swaraj* is “to keep intact the genius of [Indian] civilization” (qtd. in Parel, *Emergence of Indian Canon*, 2010, p. 153). The genius of which he writes is not exclusive; instead, he implies, it is merely one of many civilizations, each with its own valuable tradition. Although it is deeply important to his project to communicate an epistemological tradition that is uniquely Indian (“writ[e] on the Indian slate,” so to speakⁱⁱ), he explicitly values other traditions, even the one that has justified the oppression of his people. “I would gladly borrow from the West when I can return the amount with decent interest” (qtd. in Parel, p. 153). Gandhi’s ultimate objective in his search for knowledge can thus be seen as a symbiosis of modes of thought that, though different, are complementary rather than competitive.

Gandhi applies new ideas and different modes of thought as a successful innovator within his own tradition, modifying and transforming the Indian canon in order to meet the new needs of India. In Parel’s words, “If Gandhi had anything to say about it, there would indeed be an Indian version of modernity” (2010, p. 160). Out of modernity and as a response to colonialism, a new Indian canon did thus emerge, and Gandhi was instrumental—the most instrumental, in the minds of Parel and others—in bringing about this change. The magnitude of this shift and the centrality of Gandhi’s role in it are

reinforced by the very framework of Parel's argument; Parel divides his discussion of Gandhi into the relationship between his ideas (the "new" Indian canon) and the tenets of the old canon—the ideas he added, the ideas he deleted, and the ideas he retained. Gandhi seems to understand the importance of updating and renewing traditions of old, taking full advantage of what Parel describes as the "real connection between canon, stability, and change" (2010, p. 152). In contrast to al-Afghani, whose vision involves what he sees as strict adherence to a tradition that was lost, Gandhi advocates change as part of a healthy cycle; to cling too closely to a static version of a culture would be, in Gandhi's own words, to drown "in the waters of our ancestors' well" (qtd. Parel, 2010, p. 153).

However, while Gandhi is willing to make changes to the canon in order to make India stronger and better equipped to face the challenges of modernity, there is much he is not willing to sacrifice. He always strives, as Parel notes, to "liberate the Indian mind from intellectual dependency and give Indian political thought a new direction" (2010, p. 148); it is for this reason, and Gandhi's adherence to an Indian framework and analysis, that Parel considers Gandhi—as opposed to many of his Indian liberal and Indian Marxist contemporaries—a producer of genuine "Indian political thought" (2010, p. 152-153). Unlike these other strands of thought in India, Parel sees Gandhi as committed to incorporating and changing Western conventions only on India's terms: "His sense of identity was so authentic that he could integrate Western ideas without undergoing postcolonial angst that afflicts so many today" (2010, p. 163). Though it is hard to say whether Gandhi's ideas are as free from "postcolonial angst" as Parel claims, it is clear

that his work is innovative and subversive, effectively undermining the assumption that knowledge and learning are privileges of the West.

When Dallmayr describes the spectrum of responses to Western imperialism, he does so by explaining the customs and practices imposed on the colonies with the word “gifts” (within quotation marks to mark its ironic usage)—the “gifts of the West” range from welcomed in some cultures to thoroughly rejected in others. Interestingly, Gandhi’s desire to “borrow” and “return with decent interest” the modes of thinking of other societies echoes Dallmayr’s sentiment, but in a way that is deeply sincere rather than ironic. To Gandhi, particular knowledge is associated with particular peoples, but this is not to say that these peoples’ ownership of the knowledge is at the exclusion of others. Instead, the sharing of these modes of thought between equals—like gift-giving expected to be reciprocated—adds a thoroughly innovative dimension to a traditionally destructive mentality.

By limiting to the *umma* ownership over a particular brand of knowledge deemed to be correct, al-Afghani cemented his position in history as one whose influence also has its limits. Although very influential as an Islamic political theorist, al-Afghani will likely never escape this narrow designation. Because his conception of knowledge is accessible only to a specific population, it is within this population that he has left his mark in history. Gandhi, on the other hand, is a thinker who, though firmly situated in the Indian tradition, has been able to gift his own knowledge to peoples all over the world. Even to this day, it is seldom that gifts from formerly colonized nations are received as readily and embraced as wholeheartedly as Gandhian thought has become. Although few in the United States have a firm grasp of the views Gandhi advanced, they still, at the very least,

acknowledge the extent of his influence. And, whereas we relegate al-Afghani's work to university courses on thought of specifically Islamic origin, Gandhi's writing comes up more broadly in studies of contemporary political thinkers. There are few people, it seems, whose gifts have been so greatly shared.

Bibliography

Al-Afghani, Sayyid Jamal ad-Din. *Refutation of the Materialists*. Translated by Nikki R.

Keddie and Hamid Algar. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968.

Alhassan, Amin. "The Canonic Economy of Culture and Communication." *Canadian*

Journal of Communication 32, no. 1 (2007): 103-118.

<http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.morris.umn.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=24326906&site=ehost-live>

Bilgrami, Akeel. "Gandhi, Newton, and the Enlightenment." In *Values and Violence*,

edited by Ibrahim A. Karawan, Wayne McCormack and Stephen E. Reynolds, 15-29: Springer Netherlands, 2009.

<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.morris.umn.edu/stable/27644139>

Dallmayr, Fred. "Introduction: Islamic Political Thought." In *Comparative Political*

Theory: An Introduction, edited by Fred Dallmayr, 23-32. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Dike, Mustafa. "Colonial Minds, Postcolonial Places." *Antipode* 42, no. 4 (2010): 801-805.

<http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.morris.umn.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=53051555&site=ehost-live>

Euben, Roxanne L. "A View across Time: Islam as the Religion of Reason." In

Comparative Political Theory: An Introduction, edited by Fred Dallmayr, 55-69. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999.

Gandhi, Mahatma. *Mahatma Gandhi: Selected Political Writings*, edited by Dennis

Dalton. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1996.

Gandhi, Mahatma. *Gandhi in India: In His Own Words*, edited by Martin Green.

Hanover: University Press of New England, 1987.

Guizot, Francois. *The History of Civilization in Europe*, edited by Larry Siedentop.

Translated by William Hazlitt. New York: Penguin Books, 1997.

Harding, Sandra. "How Many Epistemologies Should Guide the Production of Scientific

Knowledge? A Response to Maffie, Mendieta, and Wylie." *Hypatia* 23, no. 4

(2008): 212-219.

<http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.morris.umn.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=34839095&site=ehost-live>

Hourani, Albert. *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1798-1939*. London: Oxford

University Press, 1970.

Keddie, Nikki R. *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings*

of Sayyid Jamal Ad-Din "Al-Afghani." Los Angeles: University of California

Press, 1968.

Kohn, Margaret. "Afghani on Empire, Islam, and Civilization." *Political Theory* 37, no. 3

(2009): 398-422.

<http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.morris.umn.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=39565637&site=ehost-live>

Parekh, Bhikhu. *Gandhi's Political Philosophy: A Critical Examination*. Notre Dame:

University of Notre Dame Press, 1989.

Parel, Anthony J. "Gandhi and the Emergence of the Modern Indian Political Canon." In

Comparative Political Theory: An Introduction, edited by Fred Dallmayr. New

York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Parel, Anthony J. *Gandhi's Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Notes

¹ Because I use the word “spiritual” throughout my paper when I refer to Gandhi’s epistemology, I should clarify my use of this term. I define the phrase “spiritual knowledge” very broadly in the way that Anthony J. Parel does in his analysis of Gandhi’s writing, as all “that which concerns the pursuit of truth in all its diversity” (2006, p. 196). In the most basic sense, the term is used here to denote a way of knowing that lies outside of or serves as an alternative to the scientific/rationalistic/empiricist paradigm often associated with the truth in the West; the specifics of truth and knowledge in Gandhi’s vision are laid out in more detail in my paper. However, I think it is worth noting a few of the problems that the term raises. One of the complications of discussing Gandhi’s work and its intercultural relevance is the fact that the concepts that Gandhi discusses, centered in Indian tradition, do not often have satisfactory equivalents in English; such is the case with a term such as “spiritual.” In Western thought, spirituality is often used to denote a relationship with an external religious power; this is directly contrary to Gandhi’s view, in which the most fundamental of truths come directly from an internal source, a self whose subjectivity is rooted in certain cultural traditions. In addition, the words that we may use to describe Gandhi’s philosophy—such as the word “spiritual”—are problematic in even more fundamental ways, as they often hold the connotation of being irrational or anti-empirical. Parel points out that modern Western philosophy (including, I would argue, political philosophy) is “liable to be hostile to

spiritual philosophy generally—a liability that Indian philosophy, ancient and modern, does not carry”; instead, philosophy according to this canon “remains neutral between spiritualism and materialism” (2010, p. 149). Thus, even after the end of formal colonialism, the devaluing of non-Western, non-“scientific” modes of thoughts continues to shape popular belief—and even academia. The prevalence of such assumptions in our language and our philosophy demonstrates the continuing need for more work to be done examining the effects of colonialism, particularly in the field of political theory.

ⁱⁱ Another phrase Gandhi used, as quoted in Parel’s 2010 “Gandhi and the Emergence of the Modern Indian Political Canon,” p. 153.