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The West in the Travel Journal of an Imam in Paris*

The Industrial Revolution that occurred in Europe, notably in England, during the late 18th and early 19th century influenced other parts of the world which were eager to participate in the process of becoming modern. The movement of reformation and renewal, or *islah*, of Jamaluddin al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh in Egypt at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, as well as Khayruddin al-Tunisi in Tunisia, emerged as a result of the interaction of Orientals with Europe and the advanced Western world.

In fact, the dazzling splendour of the white man's land had already flooded the East since the early 19th century. Egypt, one of the most important territories in the Turkish Ottoman Empire, was among the Eastern countries that opened itself to Western trade. As is elucidated inch by inch by Peter Gran in *The Roots of Capitalism in Egypt*, capitalism budded in incipient form during that century in Egypt, spurred on especially by the writings of the Al-Azhar ulama, foremost amongst them Syeikh Hassan al-Attar, who held the position of Syeikhul Azhar from 1830 to 1834.

Al-Attar, as the leader of the *ulama*, played the conventional role of an *ulama* of that time. His views and counsel were often sought by Muhammad Ali Bey, the Ottoman vizier who is hailed as 'the Founder of modern Egypt'. Through the support of *ulama* like al-Attar, Muhammad Ali implemented modernisation. His process of modernisation can be characterised as being built upon two platforms: firstly, to enable the adoption of the benefits of progress in the West, achieved as a result of modernisation. Secondly, as a strategy to challenge the central regime in Istanbul, which at that time was headed by Sultan Selim III, the Caliph of the Ottomans.

Among Muhammad Ali's endeavours was a programme of sending Egyptian students to Europe. Between Italy and France, the latter was the preferred choice. Taking advantage of his good relationship with Muhammad Ali, al-Attar put forward the name of his cherished student, Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi, to join the first group to Paris. Upon the orders of his teacher, Rifa'a noted down his experiences in Paris and published them not long after his return to Egypt.

Taking Tahtawi's journal as a starting point, as the most comprehensive record of European society and culture by an Arab, although not the first (the first being the record of Ya'qub al-Turtushi, an Andalusian Jew in the mid-10th century, only part of which has been found), this essay attempts to outline several elements which remain, till today, the basis of Oriental views of the West. Judging from recent world phenomena, the nature of these elements are often ideological, psychological and inhumane, and have the potential to destroy lives, incite conflict and disrupt peace processes.

Criticism of Tahtawi in this essay is limited to the *Takblish*, and does not apply to his other works, for instance, *Minhaj*, which demonstrated his admiration of European civilisation and

culture, nor to Tahtawi's post-Paris activism in Egypt and his immense contribution to the modernisation of his country.

To 'read' Tahtawi through the *Takblish* requires a cautious attitude toward the nature of the work as a travel journal. Daniel L. Newman, the translator of *Takblish* [into English] reminds the reader that it is a descriptive work. It is therefore not reasonable to hope to find in the pages of this book an elucidation of the religious issues that emerged as a result of the adoption of Western science. In fact, the situation at that time does not require such an elucidation because the mark of Western science in Egypt only became evident 30 years later. Thus, this essay will only attempt to trace Tahtawi's psychology and thought based on the structure and tone of his writing which bears resemblance to Eastern modernist views of the present age.

The programme of sending Egyptian students to Paris

As mentioned earlier, this programme was not initially implemented with the intention of getting to know the West or to imbibe all knowledge that formed the foundations of modernity. Muhammad Ali sowed more inclination and paid more attention to students in the fields of the army, public administration, the navy and political science. Upon their return from Paris, students from these fields were placed in higher positions with far higher salaries.

Besides challenging the Caliphate, Muhammad Ali also had ambitions of establishing his own dynasty. Indeed, in Egypt's history, the Fatimiah and Mamluk dynasties had quietly grown more mighty than the central government. To achieve his goal, Muhammad Ali was drawn to the military strength of the West. France's greatness in military fields caused it to be Muhammad Ali's country of choice for the programme of sending students abroad, even though some parties at that time were lobbying for Italy.

The interest towards modernisation in this era in fact alternated between the desire to achieve progress for the kingdom's subjects and the competition of 'the wiser' and 'the stronger' between the vizier and the caliph. Among the events that verify this statement is the Ottoman Sultan's order to send a group of 150 applicants to Europe in 1881, after the programme implemented by his governors in Egypt proved successful.

The Western powers at that time also wished to approach the East, for various reasons. Napoleon Bonaparte, for instance, emphasised the teaching of French as a way to colonise the thoughts of the people and to spread the principles of the French Revolution. In France several research and educational institutions concerned with the Orient, particularly Arabia and Egypt, were established. The most well-known among these was the Ecole des Langues Orientales. This mutuality made it possible for Edme-Francois Jomard, editor of *Description d'Egypte*, to write and present a proposal paper through Bernardino Drovetti, the French Consul, to request Egypt to send a group of Egyptian students to France to learn modern science.

Muhammad Ali's wish to modernise Egypt received the support of Al-Attar. Taking advantage of his closeness to the vizier, he included his cherished student Rifa'a Rafi' al-

Tahtawi in the first group of students to be sent to Paris. Tahtawi was placed among the second class students (who were of little importance from the governor's point of view). However, it turned out that, upon return, he played a critical role in the modernisation of Egypt and produced the only record of the first group of students' trip to Paris. His notes were published in 1832 with the title *Takhlīsh al-Ibriz fi Takhlīsh Bariz* (the complete English translation by David L. Newman was in 1991, with the title *An Imam in Paris*).

At first, the 40 students of the first group were selected not based on merit and ability but based on close relations with the court. The students were divided into two groups. Tahtawi was placed in the second group.

In his foreword to the *Takhlīsh*, Tahtawi tells of the emergence of objections to Muhammad Ali's decision to welcome the French with open arms and to send students to Paris. These objections give us a sense of the social climate of the time, particularly the attitudes of Egyptians towards Westerners who were considered infidels, the worldview of their religion, as well as a deep-seated distrust of Christians – a distrust that was partly rooted in the understanding and interpretation of the Crusades and the unity of the Ottoman Caliphate by Arab Muslims. Tahtawi's association with Muhammad Ali marred his good relationship with the renowned Egyptian historian Abdul Rahman al-Jabarti, who was against the teaching of the science of the infidels to Egyptians. (It is interesting to note that their falling out was also caused by Tahtawi's close relationship with the rulers, something al-Jabarti frowned upon.)

In defense of Muhammad Ali and also to justify his own journey to Paris – especially since he was an *imam* and *ulama* – Tahtawi wrote the following in the foreword to his book: “What [the people of Egypt] do not know is that he [Muhammad Ali] – may God protect him – does this only because of their human qualities and because of their sciences – not because they are Christians.”

Takhlīsh al-Ibriz

The main role of Tahtawi in his group, at first, was not really as a student. A more important role for him in Paris was an imam and advisor of religious affairs. Even then, thanks to his diligence in studying the French language, reading books in diverse fields of knowledge, as well as his translation activities, his achievements surpassed many of his peers. Beside the testimony often given by leader, Jomar, the *Takhlīsh* is proof of Tahtawi's brilliance. This book was highly praised by the literati of that time, among them the French intellectual Silvestre de Sacy and Arabic language lecturers at Biblioteque Royale Caussin de Perceval.

This book should be viewed foremost as Tahtawi's personal effort to introduce the West to his countrymen. In simple style interspersed with humour, he provides detailed observations of the city of Paris, from its architectural styles, the clothing and socialising customs of women, the cuisine as well as the method of eating with spoon and fork, their passion for knowledge, scientific and technical achievements, fair system of justice and so on.

Tahtawi also describes their routine as students, praises Muhammad Ali's conscientiousness, and tells of the goodwill of the teachers. He also includes 74 articles stated in the Charter which he translated himself from French to Arabic. These articles concern the rights of

French citizens, the order of government, ethics of ministers and judges and other matters that could serve as an example to Egyptians. What makes this work even more valuable is a section that records a sequence of events from the second French revolution (in 1830, also known as the July Revolution), which Tahtawi witnessed with his own eyes.

Newman, in his preface, highlights the significance of the *Takhlīsh*: “Time and again, I was struck by the huge importance of al-Tahtawi’s book to modern Arabic literature and the development of modern Arab political and social thought, as well as its essential value as a source for any historical study in the field of Muslim Alterist discourse. Furthermore, the author is inextricably linked with the cultural Renaissance (*nahda*) of Egypt, in which he was one of its driving forces, and has rightly been called the father of Egyptian nationalism ...”

Nevertheless, the *Takhlīsh* clearly has fundamental flaws which, if not for its historical value and Tahtawi’s stature in the eyes of Egyptians, would almost certainly have caused it to be disregarded. The *Takhlīsh* is weak primarily because it is written by someone who states early on (in the preface to his notes) that he has determined the precondition, “I shall only approve that which does not run counter to the prescriptions of Muhammadan law” – Muhammadan law, a specific, static term encompassing *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) – without acknowledging that law, even Muslim law, is formulated by man and is not excluded from historical change and transformation over the ages. In fact, Tahtawi, as a student cum traveler, should be willing to open himself to ‘know’ his ‘adopted country’.

After being published and distributed to government officials in Egypt, at the order of Muhammad Ali, the *Takhlīsh* was translated into Turkish and published in Istanbul when the winds of reformation were stirring there, with the proclamation of the *batt-i serif* (Noble Rescript) in Gulhane marking the beginning of the period of *tanzimat* (constitutional reform). It is not difficult to discern the political purpose of distributing the *Takhlīsh* in Turkey at that time. Nevertheless, it was not much later that Muhammad Ali himself began to demonstrate uneasiness with the *Takhlīsh*, especially when attention was paid to Tahtawi’s political commentary, which was inspired by European ideas against absolute monarchy.

The Land of Infidels

*If I were to have a final divorce from Paris
it would only be to return to Cairo
Each of them is a bride to me –
however, Cairo is not the daughter of unbelief!*

I sense that Tahtawi’s involvement in the daily life of Paris never reached the level of empathy, even though there were times when he walked along the alleys at night and was almost beaten up by drunkards. I suspect he also did not make an effort to see Parisians as human beings of different ethics, who Saidina Ali considered ‘siblings in creation’. His love for Paris, symbolised in the term ‘bride’, was that of a youth infatuated with a beautiful virgin, elegant and red. Also intelligent because she likes to read. Whereas Cairo was an ugly, dusty and stupid maid, but more cherished because she is a native and kindred.

Territories and people are classified exclusively, according to external religious definition, not inclusively and extensively. Certain sections of the *Takhlisb* such as the poem above caused de Sacy to remark, in a letter that otherwise praised the book, that the *Takhlisb* contained “a few Islamic prejudices”.

The *Takhlisb* begins with the Preface and is followed by the ‘First Chapter: Regarding what seemed to me to be the reason behind our departure to this Land of Infidelity and Obstinacy . . .’

In the specific context of the *Takhlisb* the definition of infidel for Tahtawi, as well as the problems that accompany this label, can only be clarified in several statements in the book itself.

Firstly, it is clarified in the account of the death of a man named Abd al-‘Al, a former French officer who had been a Muslim for 15 years and later converted to Christianity. On his deathbed, al-‘Al is said to have called out: “Help me, O, Messenger of Allah.” It is possible that he was granted a peaceful end after returning to his original religion. He is reported to have said: “Praise to Allah! My sect is Hanafi, Allah is my God and the son of Aminah is the Prophet.”

Secondly, in the story of General Menou’s wife. Menou, the French Consul in Egypt, embraced Islam and took the name of Abdullah. Tahtawi claims that the General’s ‘Muslimness’ was false, and that he returned to Christianity as soon as he returned to his homeland. While in Egypt, Menou married a Muslim woman. In France they had a child and Menou wanted it to be baptised. His wife protested: “I will not let my son become Christian and expose him to the false religion.” Menou asked his wife to refer to de Sacy, the most eminent scholar of Arabic in France. De Sacy read some phrases from the Quran and Menou’s wife eventually agreed to the baptism of her child. Tahtawi states: “It is said that, in the end, she [Menou’s wife] became a Christian and died an infidel.”

When explaining to his countrymen about the parts of the world, Tahtawi classifies Asia as the best continent because Islam exists in it. According to him, the evil of humanity and freedom caused the formation of colonies in America! A country whose citizens are strongly religious and even puritan (indeed, today chapels and churches are scattered everywhere in America – a fact not seen in Hollywood films) is classified by Tahtawi as “a land of infidels” originally “populated by nomadic idol-worshippers”. Compared with other places, he puts America on the lowest rung because “Islam does not exist there”.

Here, the metaphysical perspective--ultimately represented by Sufism in the Muslim tradition, with its esoteric interpretation-- appears to be completely ignored. In fact, if metaphysics is considered too elitist, it would not be unreasonable for us to expect a religious cleric like Tahtawi not to forget to interpret phrases from the Quran related to Muslims, believers, infidelity, and polytheism in the exoteric methodological framework of interpretation.

Take for instance God’s decree promising salvation in the next world for the devotees of all religions – the same sentence was quoted by de Sacy to Menou’s wife: “Surely they that believe, and those of Jewry, and the Christians, and those Sabians, whose believes in God

and the Last Day, and works righteousness – their wage awaits them with their Lord, and no fear shall be on them, neither shall they sorrow.”

Notice also Syeikh ‘Abduh who explains the meaning of faith in the *Surah* (Quranic chapter) *al-‘Asr*, before the *ulama* of Algeria: “The meaning of faith in this chapter is of a general nature, in an absolute sense encompassing all religions, all races and all times, that is belief about good and evil, belief that there exists in nature an omnipotent essence, that loves good and abhors evil... Here, faith does not mean consent followed by submission to the laws of our own religion only, but to the laws that govern all of humanity in all places at all times; it does not solely refer to the followers of Muhammad, but includes all races, past and present, as well as those to come.” And where will we reject God’s assurance for the consanguinity of the scriptures, which has been extended by several interpreters of the Quran, including Abdullah Yusuf Ali and Rashid Rida, as encompassing the devotees of holy scriptures such as the Veda, the teachings of Confucius, as well as other teachers of ethics? Tahtawi also does not act fairly in his account of Christians in Paris and libertarians. Among other things, he criticises people in Paris who only depend on reason and frankness in determining the good or bad elements of a matter as well as their belief that religion comes to lead human beings to goodness only for a limited period, after which they can naturally determine their own path. According to Newman, a similar comment was made by an al-Azhar *ulama* before Tahtawi, Abdullah al-Sharqawi.

Tahtawi goes on to say that, among the bad customs of the French is their claim that the mind of philosophers and physicists are greater and sharper than the mind of prophets.

The rejection of religious teachings by Parisians (often equated with fable and falsehood) actually originates from the philosophical attitudes of the encyclopaedists such as Voltaire, Diderot, Holbach and the frequenters of salons in the age of Enlightenment. I find it strange that Tahtawi was unable to provide a clearer representation of the situation of Parisians, since he was in Paris, the main city of the Enlightenment. If this movement, and the century leading up to it, was truly understood, Tahtawi certainly would have given a different explanation; for instance, that the Parisians’ance at that time was a reaction to the absolute power of the church and its close association with absolute monarchy. Instead, Tahtawi seems to be dishonest when he briefly explains why Parisians do not like religion – the main reasons include absurd religious ceremony and a mocking of the public which was encouraged by the royal family – towards the end of the *Takhlis* and not immediately after his criticism (which appears at the beginning of the book).

Nevertheless, what is important is de Sacy’s criticism that Tahtawi is generalising, because many people in Paris hold firmly to their religions. De Sacy’s criticism is mentioned by Tahtawi himself; he does not deny it.

An Age Wedded to Philosophy

After many years in Paris, Tahtawi still failed to grasp the main lesson of that age, about progress and its relation to philosophy as well as the courage to liberate oneself from inherited belief – belief not rooted in observation, questioning and study. Indeed, the *Takhlis* directly demonstrates the confusion of its author when he reminds those who wish

to learn French to equip themselves beforehand with the Quran and Sunnah so that they will not be ‘mised’, because the French language contains elements of philosophy. He then offers a poem:

*Is there another place like Paris
where the suns of knowledge never set
where the night of unbelief has no morning?
Forsooth, is this not the strangest of things?*

It is clear, in this matter, that Tahtawi holds to the teachings of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, who thought philosophy led people astray and regarded philosophers as infidels.

In this section Tahtawi clearly distinguishes diverse experiences of the members of the Arab race itself. To Tahtawi’s statement, I reply “ Indeed, there are differences!” In the districts of Abbasiah, when knowledge flourished, many people shifted from religion to philosophy. Among them was Abu Bakar ar-Razi, whose achievements are lauded by Muslims when they need to contend with the achievements of non-Muslims, while at other times he is regarded as an infidel.

Al-Ghazali’s attack on philosophy, which also accuses philosophers of infidelity, is put forth in the *Tabafut al-Falasifah* (The Incoherence of the Philosophers), a work which has nearly paralysed philosophical activity in the Arab world, until today. After more than three centuries, al-Ghazali’s attack was answered by Ibnu Rusyd in the *Tabafut al-Tabafut* (The Incoherence of The Incoherence [of the Philosophers). Ibnu Rusyd, from the Andalusian era, championed philosophers by showing that there is no contradiction between reason, as the foundation of philosophy, and revelation, as the foundation of religion. Others, such as Jalaluddin ar-Rumi and Ibnu Arabi of the Sufi sect and custodians of theosophy such as Mulla Sadra and Hafiz in Persia, merged religion and philosophy.

As a travel narrative, the *Takblish* ought to show a sensitivity and receptivity to the background of the visited region, especially when discussing the culture and way of thinking of the local inhabitants. Instead, it shows a deliberate nonchalance – and even skewed judgement. Tahtawi at times is certainly aware of, yet is reluctant to consider, the reality that the Western mind so inclined to philosophy, and which later encouraged modernisation, received its life-breath from a disciple of Ibnu Rusyd – the mufti of the Maliki sect whom they called Averroes; the translator, restorer, and great commentator of Aristotle’s works.

Or, if proving the truth is indeed made shorter through the *hadith*, the author of the *Takblish* and those of similar views intentionally ignored the instruction of the Prophet regarding *hikmah* (another term for philosophy): “*Hikmah* is something that has been lost by people of faith, therefore anyone who comes across it should pick it up.”

Even more perplexing, while Tahtawi praises the libraries in Paris which store countless volumes of books of untold value, in his amazement at the existence of various editions of the Quran that cannot be found anywhere else, in his joy over the respect the French show towards these holy books, he feels it is dangerous that copies of the Quran are given to anyone who wishes to read or to translate it.

Newman explains that Tahtawi needed to insert negative comments amidst his praise, in order not to be accused of allowing the Quran to be disrespected by letting it reach the hands of infidels. According to Newman, some of Tahtawi's fellow travelers, among them al-Hajari, felt disgusted to see the Holy Book in the hands of "a filthy infidel!"

This fact is not so different from the prohibition of selling a Malay language Bible to Malay Muslims in Malaysia. It is an absurdity that stems from the belief that Islam is always being watched by its enemies, within and without, whose purpose is to eliminate it.

Ironically, Tahtawi acknowledges that in this land of unbelievers, there is freedom of religion. Certainly, according to him, there should be rules for the safe travel of believers. And in the case of Paris, this bride should only be associated with as far as the absorption of knowledge (which, in fact, was not pure knowledge because the main purpose of students of that time, as is the case with most students from the East who go to study in the West today, was to learn skills – craft, architecture, printing, translation, language, military, engineering, natural science – not to deepen their understanding of the source of thought and philosophy which enabled Westerners to achieve progress in those fields).

Arab-centric/ Islam-centric/ romantic/ apologetic

Till today we still hear declarations such as "the return of the Golden Age of Islam", "the great achievement of Muslims in the fields of science", "the glory of Islamic Art", and so on. In the *Takhlīsh*, we find an assertion that is not only circumspect, but almost arrogant: "They admit that we have been their teachers in all fields of knowledge, and that we have preceded them. Intellect and observation prove that credit should be given to predecessors. Is it not true that those who follow should pick up from where their predecessors left off, and are guided by their example?"

After presenting two poems to embellish his logic, Tahtawi adds: "In fact, during the age of the Caliphate (Abbasiah), we were the most perfect of all nations."

It is incredible how easily people swallow, without chewing, this kind of circumspect rhetoric. In the recent controversy over Wahabism in Malaysia, we read on the front page of the newspapers about how Muhammad Abdul Wahab was castigated for starting a religious movement fused with politics which caused the fall of the Ottoman Empire. As though the Ottoman Empire was the last bastion of Islam and there were no other concrete factors that led to its downfall – for instance, the cruelty of the rulers or the weakening of the subjects' belief in the royal system (with the idea that there was no difference between the Caliph and the members of the *shura* or between the king and the knights of the roundtable). On a television documentary on learned Muslims in Islamic history that was aired on a local TV channel a few years ago, an early Muslim scholar is hailed as the 'Father of Modern Medicine' without demonstrating any link that can connect his religion with his scientific achievements. True, the Arab world was a teacher in many fields of knowledge. In the field of philosophy, al-Kindi, Ibnu Sina, and al-Farabi were the heirs and interpreters of Greek philosophy. Muslims also developed algebra, discovered trigonometry, discovered the lens and founded the study of optics. The question is: what is the relation of religion, race and the caliphate to all these achievements? Nurcholish Madjid says that the factor that

compelled these discoveries is related to their understanding of concepts such as *ummatan wasatan* (the middleman devotee), *syuhada'a 'ala al-nas* (witnesses to human beings) and the conviction that the teachings of their religion should bring benefits to all of humanity. Here, we can immediately raise another question: is this connection particular to Arab and Muslim people and does it not also apply to other races and religions? Is it really impossible to find similar concepts in the religions and beliefs of other races, in the concept of *pekunan* or *tenbaq* of the Semai (an indigenous people in Malaysia), or in Confucius' value of *shu*, or in the *sewa* of the Sikhs?

Another example, in the field of fine art, the artistic creations of the Mamluk period are claimed to be the highest achievements of 'Islamic art'. And many believe this unquestioningly, while others are perplexed by the lines without beginning or end in drawings that are supposed to symbolise the infinite and eternal nature of the Divine, as though God is only known this way in Islam and not in other religions, and as though such manifestations do not exist in the work of non-Muslim artists. For a rather long period at the Mara Institute of Technology (now Mara University of Technology), figurative painting, drawing, and sculpture were unofficially prohibited because they were 'un-Islamic' and 'opposed to the teachings of Islam'. Today, figures – even nudes or semi-nudes, like a certain painting about Anak Raja Gondang [The Conch Shell Prince] of the Mak Yong I saw at an exhibition of final years students from the Fine Art Department at the university – are once more in vogue everywhere. The question is: is it absolutely impossible for the figure of a brutally killed half-naked woman, in a painting depicting the cruelty of rulers, created as a record of a vanquished struggle against tyranny, to be considered Islamic?

Generally, what are called Islamic values, or Eastern values, or Asian values, all of which are placed on the opposite side of Western values, after looking at its core characteristics, are in fact universal values which do not belong to any one group of people. Perhaps what are called Asian values, the importance of unity for instance, are simply universal values which at a particular time in history were more prevalent in Asian societies than in societies of other continents. Therefore, I regard the call of Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana or Taha Hussein, which can be roughly paraphrased as "towards Westernisation" to actually mean "towards universalisation". What more if we consider that the hierarchy of importance of social values changes with the times. 'Unity' may have been the cardinal value for Asian societies in order to fight the rulers during the colonial period, but this value is less significant today compared to 'individual freedom', a universal value which happens to be more prominent in Europe today, for instance.

Qasim Amin, who continued the struggle of Abduh's *islah* (renewal effort/movement), criticised the view that held up past Islamic civilisation as a model. For him, Islamic civilisation developed to its full long before the discoveries of pure science, and was therefore not sufficient to fulfil modern human needs. The formulation of new morals should be based on the contemporary development of knowledge. Religion, in Qasim's view, is one factor in the rise of civilisations, but it is not its sole determining factor.

Tahtawi, Muslim Modernists and the West

Tahtawi is often accused of being among those who brought secularism and liberalism to the Islamic world. It is likely that this accusation is based on Tahtawi's active involvement in the process of modernisation in Egypt, as well as his translation endeavors. Although, upon close examination, it is clear that Tahtawi had not changed and was still a loyal servant of the vizier and sultan.

His loyalty to the king and the monarchy (known as the Caliphate in the Islamic tradition) reverberates in statements such as: "And what is more splendid than the fact that science and art receive the patronage of the King?" or: "In any period, science is not disseminated other than through the support granted by the ruler to his subjects." These statements are not entirely true, except if the empathy of patrons during the Renaissance period towards intellectuals and artists can be equated with the support of rulers to their subjects.

What did Tahtawi actually learn from his experience in France? The two statements above are meant to soften the hearts, draw the attention, or give a sign to the king, caliph or governor. But they also reflect Tahtawi's failure to understand (or his reluctance to understand) the changes of the time. The maxim used by him, *an-nasu 'ala dini mulkihim* (the people follow the religion of their kings), sounds rather awkward at a time when the world was witnessing the fall of absolute monarchies.

His praise of Muhammad Ali, for instance, "from the beginning of his reign – may God Almighty protect him – he has striven to find the cure of a certain disease, which without him would have remained incurable..." echoes the praises of the *ulama* and court poets of past ages. Compare this praise with the following poem by Farazdaq in praise of the Caliph Hisyam bin Abdul Malik:

*Hisham is Allah's choice for mankind
With him darkness departs from the face of the earth*

This kind of praise for the rulers became the target of Ali Abdul Razik's criticism and enabled him to justify the separation of religion and state.

Looking at the *Takhlis*, as well as Tahtawi's involvement in modernising Egypt, he can be considered a modernist at most. Even then, his inclination towards modernity is still concerned with external, physical and material aspects, not with basic matters that form the core of modernity such as freedom and the capacity of reason. He appears like a romantic who faces the future yet is unable to forget the past.

Although Tahtawi translated Voltaire's works it is unlikely, based on his background, that he was influenced by Western rationalism. Newman expresses his certainty in this matter. Tahtawi was unlike his countrymen who came after him, such as Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, Qasim Amin, and Salama Mousa who were liberal and secular, or Taha Hussein, or those of other countries, such as Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana from Indonesia, further in distance from the West or Europe compared to Egypt, but who overcame the boundaries of distance and skin colour to grapple with the substance.

In considering the problem of Egypt, Lutfi al-Sayyid, also a student of Abduh, believed that the true political issue was not to bridge the gap between Islam and the modern world or to chase the British out of Egypt, but to grapple with the question of the people's freedom. Lutfi was of the opinion that Islamic, Ottoman, and Arab nationalism was unrealistic and imperialistic. For the sake of people's freedom, the government role must be limited, based on laws that could delineate moral relationships between the rulers and the people.

The language used by Lutfi was the language of European liberals, not very different from Karl Popper, the Viennese liberal of the early 20th century, who stressed that "State is a necessary evil: its powers are not to be multiplied beyond what is necessary."

Perhaps some will claim that it is unfair to compare Tahtawi with Lutfi, who lived in different centuries. They should be reminded that the founders of the liberalism studied by Lutfi were even older than Tahtawi: the philosophers of the Enlightenment.

As a product of the interaction of an Oriental with the West, the *Takblish* presents symptoms of, to borrow Cak Nur's phrase, "the psychological complication of confronting the West, the former rival, if not enemy, for all of history." It also shows the failure to grasp the view that "all cultural poles, including those that developed based on religion, exist as a dynamic dialogue, always historical in nature, because that is humane. One of the meanings of that statement is that a cultural pole, however much it is rooted in religion, should be understood as ever-evolving, not static, and not made 'once and for all'." According to Cak Nur, modernity is not opposed to religious values, but should rather be seen as being antithetical to the religious cultural pole, which consists of human and historical interpretations of the points of religious teaching.

If the *Takblish* represents a starting point, the Eastern views of the West today-- which are becoming increasingly negative despite more than 170 years of interaction--invite us to consider more seriously Cak Nur's remark when discussing the relationship of modernity with tradition: "If cultural action also takes place at the level of tradition, and if tradition is 'a living dialogue grounded in common reference to particular creative events,' then the effort of modernisation is an important form of cultural action which also occurs at the dynamic, dialogic level of tradition. That is the process that took place in Western Europe at the beginning of modernisation, and that is what should take place in countries outside Western Europe."

Translated from the Malay by Pauline Fan.

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