THE IMPACTS OF TAHTAWI ON THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES REFORM MOVEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

One of the greatest challenges faced by the Muslim Ummah in the 19th and 20th centuries was the decline of the Ottoman Empire. Many reformers attributed the causes of such decline to Muslim disunity and political backwardness. This, however, called for reform movements from various parts of the Muslim world. While some reformers tried to harmonize Islam with modernity, others blamed modernity and Western civilization for such decline. Amidst this controversy, Tahtawi believed that Western scientific and technological advancement may help Muslim world put its house in order without compromising Islamic principles. He stressed that Muslims must be politically educated in order to cope with the current trend of modernity. This paper discusses the impact of Tahtawi on the 19th and 20th centuries reform movements with particular reference to four main reformers namely Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Rashid Rida.

Field of Research: Tahtawi, Reform movement, Afghani, Muhammad Abduh

Background

The 19th and 20th centuries reform movements were not limited to religious or spiritual aspects alone, but had also addressed much needed political, economic and educational problems facing Muslim Ummah. Tahtawi was among those reformers who addressed the most complex and controversial Educational, economic and political problems facing Egypt in particular, and the Muslim world in general. Tahtawi was an outstanding literary figure of the 19th century. He was a prominent historian, man of letters, translator and journalist. He was characterized by conscious thought; penetrating insight and his ideas were highly advanced for his time. He was able to address the most difficult economic, social and political problems of his time, expressing his worthy views to solve them. Newman, (2004).

Borrowing a leaf from Tahtawi, almost all nineteenth century Islamic reformists took up the issue of political reform as a prerequisite of overcoming decline and backwardness Islamic civilization. However, it had become clear that the remedy is not to be found only from within but should be sought elsewhere as well. Khayr al-din al-Tunisi (1810-99), Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838–1897), Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865-1935) followed Tahtawi’s footstep in stressing the need for Muslims to be spiritually and technologically well versed to enable them cope with modernity. This paper discusses and analyzes the impact of Tahtawi on the 19th and 20th centuries reform movements led by Khayr al-din al-Tunisi (1810-99), Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838–1897), Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865-1935), with particular reference to political reform.

Tahtawi

Tahtawi (1801-1873) was an Egyptian scholar who was sent by Muhammad Ali to Paris to oversee the students sent to study French military techniques there from 1826 to 1831. During his time in
Paris, Tahtawi studied and wrote about French developments and society. Returning home in 1831 from Paris after a five-year absence, Tahtawi could not help but to express his admiration of what post-revolution France had accomplished. His admirers insist that this was in no way a blind infatuation. His French experience enabled him to diagnose the illness of the Ummah as being due to the lack of political freedom and that both the rulers and the ruled must abide by the law of the state, contrary to the dominant trend where rulers are above the law and they can do whatever they want. He said:

“The role of the ruler is either restricted or unrestricted. The restricted rule is for the ruler to rule within the law of the state and under no circumstances should he follow his wimps and caprices. While, on the other hand, the unrestricted ruler is the one who possesses absolute and unrestricted power, whose interest is above the interest of the state, and will be allowed to violate the rules of the state without objection”. Tahtaway, (1945).

To achieve this political freedom, he, according to Hijazi (1985), suggested multi-party democracy as a remedy. At the same time, he criticized those who opposed the idea of taking knowledge from Europe by saying: “Such people are deluded; for civilizations are turns and phases. These sciences were once Islamic when we were at the apex of our civilization. Europe took them from us and developed them further. It is now our duty to learn from them just as they learned from our ancestors.” Hijazi, (1985). Tahtawi was among the first intellectuals to campaign for interaction with the European civilization. Being an Islamic scholar, he insisted that such interaction should aim at borrowing elements not in conflict with the established values and principles of Islam.

In 1834, shortly after his return to Cairo from Paris, Tahtawi published his first book “Takhlis al-Ibriz fi Talkhis Bariz”. The book summarized his observations of the manners and customs of modern France, and praised the concept of democracy as he saw it in France and as he witnessed its defense and reassertion through the 1830 revolution against King Charles X1. Tahtawi tried to show that the democratic concept he was explaining to his readers was compatible with the law of Islam. He compared political pluralism to forms of ideological and jurisprudential pluralism that existed in the Islamic experience. Amir, (1959).

Another important area handled by Tahtawi was political education. He believed that political education of citizens in the modern country is the main pillar of education. That’s why he stressed on the importance of promoting political awareness among individuals in the modern country. If the rule is based on declared laws, there is no other way but to promote political enlightenment to let every individual realize his/her rights and duties and what the state demands from him. Political education is not only limited to the ruling class but it has also become a necessity to all citizens. Tahtawi stressed that the people are one of the pillars of the state, so they have the right to know their rights and duties. To him, political education aims at promoting awareness of citizenship among the people and what it required from them in the form of social behaviour to achieve public interest. Amir, (1959).

The concept of political education, according to Tahtawi, shows that he had focused on overcoming cultural illiteracy, backwardness and oppression. He had to make political education centralized in educating the individual to be an effective member in a modern society. Through such a means, individuals become aware of their civil rights and duties, imposed on them by the public interests of the country to which they belong in order to enjoy its material potentialities and achieve their own ambitions. As such, they will be able to contribute to the development and progress of their country.
Khayr Al-Din Al-Tunisi

Among the intellectuals and reformers whose Tahtawi’s impact could be clearly seen in their thought was his contemporary Khayr al-din al-Tunisi, whose political reforms were directed to the Ottoman Caliphate in the second half of the 19th century.

Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi was the prime leader of the nineteenth century reform movement in Tunisia. In 1867, he formulated a general plan for political and administrative reform in a book entitled Aqwam al-Masalik fi Taqwim al-Mamalik (The Straight Path to Reformation of Governments). He appealed to politicians and scholars to explore all possible means to improve the status of the community and develop its civility, and cautioned the general Muslim public against shunning the experiences of other nations on the misconceived basis that all the writings, inventions, experiences or attitudes of non-Muslims should simply be rejected. He called for an end to absolutist rule, which he blamed for the oppression of nations and the destruction of civilizations. Euben, (1966).

Some faces of similarity between Khayr al-Din and Tahtawi can be seen in the concept of “Watan” or “Wataniyyah”. While Tahtawi interpreted the concept of Watan as “nation”, Khayr al-Din interpreted it as “Ummah” in the communal meaning. His view was that the concept of Watan or Wataniyyah has a wider meaning than the similar concept perceived by Tahtawi. To him, this concept did not only include the Tunisian or Arabic civilians, but also the communities united by religious ties. In other words, the Wataniyyah intended by Khayr al-Din is Wataniyyah Islamiyyah (Islamic Nationalism) and not only Wataniyyah Shu’ubiyyah (Tribal nationalism). Oleh, (2002).

Khayr al-Din’s view of concept of nation was the reflection of his loyal political conduct in supporting the Ottoman Caliphate. To him, Muslim countries must be united under one political power: the Caliphate. This view is related to Khayr al-Din’s experience when he was the Prime Minister of Tunisia when France had almost colonized Tunisia at that time. Had he not announced, albeit diplomatically, that Tunisia was an integral part of the Ottoman Empire, France may have had attacked Tunisia (it was after the decline of the Ottoman Empire that France had later in 1881, invaded Tunisia).

Khayr al-Din’s conception of Ummah was probably the origin of “Pan-Islamism” which was developed later on by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and his followers. Khayr al-Din seemed to be tied of the paradigm of caliphate, just like al-Afghani, even though he had lived in and sensed the democratic atmosphere in France. His childhood and intimacy with the royal family has influenced his political conduct to support the sustainability of the Ottoman Caliphate. However, he had, actually, tried to be critical of the caliphate system enforced in Turkey. He, for instance, talked about the excessive power of the sultans, which made them difficult to be controlled when they make mistakes. His acceptance of the Islamic political concept was not only because of his intimacy with the Ottoman authority, but also due to his belief that if the Islamic political system is enforced appropriately, it will be similar to the political system found in European countries.

However, the concept of Wataniyyah to both Tahtawi and Khayr al-Din refer to the same ideology but with different perspectives. Tahtawi mostly emphasized on Egyptian nationalism to the extent that he was known as the brain behind the Egyptian nationalism, while Khayr al-Din extended the concept to include all Muslims. One can infer the influence of the state in both of them, Tahtawi’s emphasis on Egyptian nationalism may have been due to his relationship with Muhammad Ali and his desire to assist him to actualize his dream of building modern Egypt. As one of the prerequisites to achieve this dream, is, of course, to instill the spirit of nationalism into the hearts and minds of the Egyptians. On the other hand, Khayr al-Din was busy calling for support to the Ottomans, apparently because of his close relationship with Sultan Abd al-Hamid II (1842-1918) coupled with his desire to protect Tunisia from French invasion. Moreover, Azzam argued that both Tahtawi and Khayr al-Din were seemingly genuine in their advocacy of Wataniyyah and effort to address the
political turmoil of their time. But, in one way or another, their mission and understanding of the concept of Wataniyyah differs, where each one of them looked at it from a different direction based on the problems and challenges that faced his community.

**Jamal Al-Din Al-Afghani**

Beside Khayr al-Din, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani has also derived some political aspirations from Tahtawi, especially on the issue of political awareness to the citizens and the right to participate in the political process. He attributed the causes of decline in the Muslim world to the absence of justice and Shura and non-adherence by the government to the constitution. One of his main demands was that the people should be allowed to assume their political and social role by participating in governance through Shura and elections. Al-Afghani had squarely blamed despotism, which blocked the attempts of Muslim thinkers to enlighten the public about the essence and virtues of republican government. Azzam, (2000).

However, Afghani’s version of Wataniyyah could be seen in his effort to propagate Pan-Islamism to help unite the Muslims in order to face the challenges of their time and to save the Ottoman Caliphate from declining. To this end, Afghani sent a number of letters to various Islamic countries and leaders to mobilize and unite them against the British rule, while, at the same time, strive to establish the foundations of a mutual rapprochement between the Sunnah and the Shi’ah. Vatikiotis, (1991).

Contrary to Tahtawi, Afghani believed that Muslims must unite against colonial powers, specifically Britain, and he was greatly disappointed by the failure of the 1857 Indian revolt against Britain, which propelled him to come to the following three conclusions:

- a. Having conquered India, European imperialism represented direct threat to the Middle East.
- b. Asia, including the Middle East, could prevent the onslaught of Western powers only by adopting the modern technology of the West.
- c. Islam, despite its traditionalism, was an effective creed for mobilizing the public against the imperialists.

The persistent call made by Afghani to acquire modern technology of the West, was not contradictory to the Islamic worldview. It was, in one way or another, affected by Tahtawi’s clarion call to objectively evaluate Western scientific development in order to acquire some of it as it will help Muslims to put their house in order. This, however, shows that both Tahtawi and Afghani are conditional supporters of the Western scientific and technological advancement. The only difference between them is that Afghani limited his view only to scientific and technological advancement of the West, while Tahtawi widened the scope to include other aspects that can be beneficial to Muslims and are not against the teachings of Islam.

**Muhammad Abduh**

Muhammad Abduh was one of the distinguished figures of his time. In his defense of Islam, he argued that Islam’s relationship with the modern age was the most crucial issue facing Islamic communities which they need to address. In an attempt to reconcile Islamic ideas with their Western counterparts, he argued that Maslahah (interest) in Islamic thought corresponded to Manfa’ah (utility) in the Western thought. Similarly, he equated Shura with democracy and Ijma’ with consensus. Addressing the question of authority, Abduh refused to accept the existence of a theocracy in Islam, and insisted that the authority of the Hakim (ruler), the Qadi (judge) or the Mufti was strictly civil. He demanded that Ijtihad be revived to enable Islamic thought address the emerging priorities and problems. He was a proponent of the parliamentary system. He defended pluralism and refuted the claims that it would undermine the unity of the Ummah. He argued that
the European nations were not divided by it. The reason, he concluded, is that their objectives are the same. What varies is only the method they pursue toward accomplishing them. Hourani, (1970).

Shura, according to him, must be followed and not just be an issue of debate. Practicing Shura will be equivalent or even better than the spirit of democracy. It is the lost wisdom which has been rediscovered. The calamity of the Ummah then and now is the absence of the system of Shura and the adoption of an oppressive dynastical ruling systems. In the modern era, dictators stay in power by the force of arms and gold.

However, what captures my attention in this respect is Abduh’s perception of the concept of Shura as being compared or regarded as democracy in the West. This, however, could not be traced in Tahtawi’s thought, but what we need to consider here is the fact that both men (Tahtawi and Abduh) believed that not all Western political aspects are bad, but, rather, some are within the Islamic worldview and could be adopted and implemented in the Muslim world in order to get rid of the political ills that needed to be removed. In addition, both of them were of the opinion that the Muslim world should look at the West objectively so as to benefit from their experience. Azzam (2000).

The gist of democracy is that the public can choose the rulers who are going to administer them. The people, having the right to select, criticize and terminate the post of a ruler, should not be forced to accept systems, trends, and policies to which they do not agree to. They are free to hold elections, referendums, ensuring majority rights, protecting minority rights, having opposition, have multi parties, have press freedom and safeguarding the independence of the judiciary. But once again to constantly uphold and safeguard the principles of Islam, the firm rulings, the determined laws and the essentials of religion must not be compromised or neglected.

But, on the same ground, Abduh warned Muslims against blind imitation of the West as European influence grew in Egypt. This was due to blind imitation of Western civilization by some Egyptians in the areas of politics and education. But he was in no way opposed to Western science and technology. Abduh advocated the introduction of modern sciences together with the local sciences into al-Azhar University. He described the strength of prejudice against modern sciences in al-Azhar and related that al-Ghazali (1058-1111CE) and others considered the study of logic and similar disciplines obligatory for the defense of Islam. He said:

“There is no religion without a state, and no state without authority, and no authority without strength, and no strength without wealth. The state does not possess trade or industry. Its wealth is the wealth of the people and the people’s wealth is not possible without the spread of these sciences amongst them so that they may know the ways for acquiring wealth.” Rida, (1973).

He said that new and useful sciences are essential to our life in this age, they are our defense against aggression and humiliation and they constitute the basis of our happiness, wealth and strength. He said, “These sciences we must acquire and we must strive towards their mastery.” Rida, (1973). Abduh emphasized this issue on several occasions, this is just to show how the political and national unity of the Ummah was deep-rooted in his heart. But in a nutshell, the spirit of such political awareness and emphasis on the nationalism and Wataniyyah were mobilized by Tahtawi through his clarion call for the political awareness of the Muslim world. In addition, Tahtawi believed that rulers of the state will be the first to reap the benefit of such awareness as they will no longer have problem with the general public, because each and every one of them knows his rights and duties, and therefore carry out his duties and responsibilities without being told to do so. But according to Abduh, political awareness is very important but not enough to provide solutions to the political turmoil of his time. He asserted that there is need to add modern sciences to political awareness in
order to be fully independent of the Western hegemony in Egypt in particular and the Muslim world in general. Abu Hamdan, (1992).

Muhammad Rashid Rida

Another figure of the 20th century and a disciple of Abduh was Muhammad Rashid Rida who played a vital and a significant role towards mobilizing Muslims to protect the Ottoman Caliphate from imperial powers. Rida believed that the underlying factor for the Ummah’s backwardness was the Muslim’s disregard for the truth of their religion. True Islam involves two things, acceptance of Tawhid (the creed of monotheism) and Shura (consultation) in matters of state. But despotic rulers have strove to make Muslims forget the second by encouraging them to abandon the first. Azzam, (2000).

Like his predecessors, Rida focused on the sharp weakness of Muslim societies vis-à-vis Western colonialism, blaming Sufi excesses, the blind imitation of the past (Taqlid), stagnation of the Ulama (Muslim scholars), and the resulting failure to achieve progress in science and technology. Rida argued that the abolition of the Caliphate was an imperialist conspiracy. The West, in his view, had considered the Ottoman Caliphate as a symbol of Muslim unity that constituted a stumbling block in the way of its imperialist design. He cited Lord Cromer who believed that the Muslim unity was a challenge and a source of resistance to the forces of the Christian countries, which it had to be watched carefully. Dawudi, (1999). Rida’s major concern was to maintain the only tie that gathers all Muslims under one umbrella, which is the Caliphate, to confront the waves of challenges facing the Muslim Ummah.

At this juncture, we find similarity between Rida’s concept of nationalism or Wataniyyah with that of Khayr al-Din al-Tunisi and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, as all of them believed that the concept of Wataniyyah should be widen to incorporate all other Muslims in order to form one single entity to effectively address the issue of decay. But what I want to emphasize here is that all the above-mentioned reformers, including Tahtawi himself, believe that Wataniyyah plays a vital and a dominant role in the political arena, due to its ability to strengthen the spirit of social bond and instill in the heart of the people the love of the state, be it Caliphate or nation.

However, it is difficult to establish any direct contact between Rida and Tahtawi and consequently trace the root of his political ideology. But we have sufficient evidences to argue that Rida’s ideas are an extension of Abduh’s thought, and therefore, he might have been inspired by his teacher (Abduh) who’s political and educational activities could have a very strong link with the reform ideas of his predecessor Tahtawi.

Another point to be noted here is that all of the above-mentioned reformers have once lived in Egypt for some period of time after Tahtawi. So it might be possible, having Tahtawi’s reform ideas spread all over Egypt, that they have gone through some of his writings and perhaps got inspired by his keen interest to transform Egypt in particular and the Muslim world in general into a knowledge center where the local citizens will be well educated in all aspects of live, especially political education. One more point to be taken into consideration in this respect is the fact that all of these reformers believed in extracting and adopting some Western political principles and scientific advancement in the Muslim world, but with the condition of having being within the Islamic worldview. To my best understanding, it will be highly impossible that the abovementioned reformers, who worked tirelessly to create political awareness in the hearts and minds of the Muslims, and to advocate the acquisition of Western scientific knowledge, not to inspired by the architect of the drive, namely Tahtawi. Moreover, these ideas initiated by Tahtawi, had subsequently
spread to all nooks and cranny of Egypt as they were supported by the Khedive and popularized in the school of language and other modern schools that he established and patronized.

**Conclusion**

It is evidently clear from the above presentation that none of these reformers condemned politics or political awareness in totality as we found them embarking on political reform to make sure that each and every citizen knows his rights, duties and responsibilities accordingly. The pioneer of these ideas was Tahtawi who stressed in his works the need for the Muslims to acquire political education in order to get rid of political backwardness which had dragged them into the mud. Such great zeal and innumerable efforts of Tahtawi inspired many reformers around the Muslim world, and as such contributed their own quota in creating awareness to the Muslim Ummah in general and to the Caliphate in particular. Their reforms have succeeded in reshaping and reorienting Muslim minds in the 19th and 20th centuries respectively.

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