**Al-Tahtawi, Rifa’a**

**By Mahmoud AA Ibrahim**



Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi (1801-1873) was an Egyptian reformer and thinker who is widely recognized as the pioneer of the Egyptian “Awakening” (*nahda*)in the nineteenth century. He stands at the cultural heart of the intellectual awakening of Egypt's modernization movement that sought to import and implement military, scientific, technical, and educational innovations from the West. His thought influenced many later scholars including prominent sheikhs such as Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida. Al-Tahtawi was born in Tahta in Upper Egypt into a family of prominent scholars*.* In 1817 he moved to Cairo to join the renowned al-Azhar University. His professor sheikh Hasan al-`Attar (1766-1834) had the greatest influence on him. In 1824, Rifa`a was appointed as animam.

In 1826, the governor of Egypt, Muhammad Ali Pasha, dispatched forty-four young men to Paris to learn French, study military science and other subjects, and return home to modernize his army and administration along Western lines. Al-Tahtawi, who was by then a twenty-four-year-old graduate of al-Azhar, accompanied the group as an Imam. Having quickly mastered French, al-Tahtawi read widely and began translating many works into Arabic.

Al-Tahtawi’s five years in Paris were devoted more to the study of science and history than to serving as an imam. Therefore, he returned from Paris competent in physics, geometry, astronomy, and political science; he also returned with a new world of experience, a great deal of which he viewed in the frame of liberal ideals learned from his French tutors Caussin de Percival, Sylvestre de Sacy, and E. F. Jomard, and from the works of the philosophes. In Paris, he studied Voltaire, Racine, Condillac, Condorcet, Rousseau, and Montesquieu, in addition to the famous *Muqaddima* of Ibn Khaldoun. Al-Tahtawi's study of philosophy and the *Muqaddima* under his French tutors acquainted him with an understanding of the interrelationships of law, justice, social cohesion and affluence that complemented his understanding of the Enlightenment's vision of science in its social context. His witnessing of the French revolution of 1830 was itself an education in political science that practically concretized the ideas of Rousseau, whose social ideas especially appealed to al-Tahtawi.

During his five-year stay in Paris, he wrote his exceptionally famous book *Takhlis al-lbrlz fi Talkhis Bariz* (*The Extraction of Pure Gold in Summarizing Paris*). In this work, al-Tahtawi provided descriptions of daily life in Paris; aspects of French civilization, administrative, social, and political institutions; and various sciences that were previously unknown to him. During his stay in Paris, he also translated twelve books from French to Arabic and composed a treatise on astronomy which introduced him to the physical world of Descartes and Newton. As a translator, new scientific terms that did not exist in Arabic were a problem for al-Tahtawi, who searched for appropriate Arabic terminology to stand for Western technological and cultural materials and to express ideas with which he had become familiar through his residence in Paris between 1826 and 1831, and upon his return to Egypt. This and other dilemmas are most strikingly apparent in his *Takhlis al-ibriz*, which was first published in 1834, three years after his return to Egypt.

Another less common title for *Takhlis al-Ibriz* is *Al-Diwan al-Nafis bi-Iwan Paris*, and it is also sometimes referred to as *Rihlat al-Shaykh Rifa'a al-Tahtawi*. Since its first publication in 1834, several editions of this book have been issued. Due to its popularity, it was translated into Ottoman Turkish and published by the Bulaq Printing Press in 1839, into German by K. Stowasser as *Ein Muslim entdeckt Europa*, Leipzig-Weimar 1988, and into French by A. Louca as *L’Or de Paris*, Paris 1988. Al-Tahtawi divided the book into six chapters, each of which he called "essay" (*maqala*). Each *maqala* is further subdivided into sections called *fasl*. In addition, there is a Preface (*khutba*), an Introduction (*muqaddima*), and a Conclusion (*khatima*). The *muqaddima* is further divided into "parts" (*bab*).

Over the course of a forty-year career after returning to Egypt, al-Tahtawi held important posts in education and publishing; he also headed a bureau that translated books into Arabic and Turkish for use in new European-style government schools. Four years after the publication of his *Takhlis al-Ibriz* work, al-Tahtawi published another book, *Al-Kanz al-Mukhtar fi Kashf al-Aradi wa al-Bihar* (*The Chosen Treasure in Unveiling Lands and Seas*). A geopolitical handbook of sorts, in question-and-answer form, the book appears to have been a reworking of the treatise on astronomy that he wrote as a student in Paris. It mentions the names of countries, their capital cities, names of rulers, forms of government, and names of the seas and oceans. It also offers bits of current and recent history, and includes the New World, the thirteen Colonies and the American Revolution.

In addition to the above works, Al-Tahtawi wrote several other books that together created a reformist literature and laid the basis for a continuing appeal for Muslim society to embrace the natural sciences to revive the glory when Muslim scientists, philosophers, and physicians led and enlightened the world. Al-Tahtawi’s entire works are collected and annotated by Dr. Muhammad Imara in one massive multi-volume book under the title *Al-a`mal al-Kamila li Rifa`a Rafi` al-Tahtawi* (*The entire works of Rifa`a Rafi` al-Tahtawi*) The extraordinary position of a conservatively raised and educated sheikh arguing the cause of Westernized innovation is most sharply presented in the history of Tahtawi's regard for Western science and its underlying principles. However, due to his religious conservative background, he had serious reservations about embracing the new Western sciences.

However, it is worth mentioning that there is a wide divergence of views on al-Tahtawi's rank as a leading reformer and advocate of science in the nineteenth century. Several scholars have viewed him as a reformer who initiated a form of intellectual synthesis by interpreting the essentials of Islamic belief within a modern worldview, which paved the way for the Egyptian renaissance. On the other hand, some others see that al-Tahtawi was superficial in his understanding and approach to Western science because he lacked the historical consciousness that is necessary as an intellectual basis for an assimilative process. Therefore, according to this view, al-Tahtawi's ideas of science were rigid and inflexible. Some other writers even see him as a tool used by the regime to justify its policies and measures.

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