Egyptian Enlightener Rifa'a at-Tahtawi

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Abstract

From the 19th c. in Arab countries, first of all, in Egypt, Syria and Lebanon, the political, economic and cultural life begins to revive, which is known as the Revival (the "Nahda"). In this process enlighteners played the crucial role. The aim of the present article is to focus attention on several questions of the world outlook of Rifa'a at-Tahtawi, the first Egyptian enlightener, in particular, his interpretation of the notions of "homeland" and "nation" and his views on the relationship between the West and the East, on the organization forms of states and societies. In order to demonstrate the question, a brief overview of the viewpoint of the enlighteners (al-Afgani, Abdo, Adib Ishaq, Mustafa Kamil, Farah Antuni, Lufti as-Saidi) and at-Tahtawi is offered. The article also deals with at-Tahtawi's views on problems of women's emancipation, his attitude towards the questions of upbringing and education. In addition, attention is devoted to his views on the notions of "lawfulness", "freedom", "equality", "justice", etc.). At-Tahtawi was the first among the Arabs, if not among the Egyptians, who turned the notion of "citizen" into an object of public discussion and defined the status of "citizen". The study of these questions leads to the conclusion that at-Tahtawi supports the successful achievements and reasonable synthesis of Western and Eastern civilizations, that European science and in general European civilization do not contradict Islam and the Koran.

Keywords: *Enlightener; Rifa'a at-Tahtawi; homeland; Western and Earstern civilizations*

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Introduction

From the 19th c. in Arab countries, first of all in Egypt, Syria and Lebanon, after a long decline, the political, economic and cultural life begins to revive, which reaches its climax in the second half of the same century. The main reason of this revival was the interest of advanced capitalist countries in the Arab world, the rule of Muhammad Ali (1805-1848) and the reforms carried out by him, the activities of Western missionaries, especially in Syria and Lebanon. This process is known as the Revival ("the Nahda"). In this process enlighteners played the crucial role. The enlightenment movement became widespread in the second half of the 19th c. and covered almost all spheres of Arab life. The enlightenment movement reached its summit at various times in different countries. E.g. in Syria-Lebanon it occurred circa 1850s-1870s, more exactly, from the opening of the first enlightenment organization till the end of the 1870s. In Egypt this occurred in the 1880s-1890s, which was caused by the establishment of the rule of Abdul Hamid II in the Ottoman Empire, when everything progressive and progressive-minded public figures were persecuted in the countries of the Empire. This was especially strong in Syria-Lebanon, neighboring upon the centre of the Empire. Many enlighteners working here, such as Adib Ishaq, Farah Antuni, Jirji Zaidan and others, had to leave their homeland and move to Egypt. Although Egypt was within the Ottoman Empire, due to its territorial remoteness, the Turkish dominance there had the formal character. The migrated Syrian and Lebanese enlighteners continued their intensive educational activities there. As regards the other Arab countries, the revival and rise of the political, economic and cultural life there begin later, at the end of the 19th c., more from the beginning of the 20th c.

In the enlightenment movement in Egypt and the entire Arab world, in general, an especially outstanding place is occupied by Rifa'a at-Tahtawi. In fact, together with Ali Mubarak (1822/4 – 1893) he is considered as the first enlightener in Egypt.

Rifa'a at-Tahtawi (1801-1873) was a cleric. He was educated at the Al-Azhar University. He, as a mullah, was the head of the 40-person group sent by Muhammad Ali to France in 1826 with the purpose of training necessary specialists for the state. At-Tahtawi stayed five years in France, mostly in Paris, he familiarized thoroughly with the political, economic and cultural life of the country, its achievements in all spheres of social life, which had a tremendous influence on the formation of his world outlook. Practically there was hardly

found another person in Egypt of the 19th-century, who was so enthusiastic about the achievements of the Western civilization, was such an active supporter of the introduction of the Western achievements that would be acceptable for the Arabs. It should also be noted that at-Tahtawi did not support blind imitation, borrowing and adoption of everything Western, but his aim was the adoption and introduction of what would be acceptable and useful in the conditions of local life. Actually, he was against any extremes – accepting everything without hesitation, or rejecting everything. By his activity and work he was a propagandist of these two, as though opposite and incompatible sides (cf. R.Kipling's words: "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" or the below-cited words of Al-Afghani), a reasonable synthesis of the achievements of civilization. This is confirmed clearly by his work.

The aim of the present article is to focus attention on several questions of at-Tahtawi's world outlook, in particular, his interpretation of the notion of "homeland" and "nation" and his views on the relationship between the West and the East, as well as his vision of upbringing and education, etc.

Overview of the viewpoints

At first, in order to demonstrate the question, I offer a brief overview of the viewpoint of Arab enlighteners on the above-mentioned problems, the more so as their bringing to the forefront was directly linked with the beginning of the national liberation movement in the Arab countries.

As the national liberation movement did not develop in a similar way in the Arab countries, proceeding from this, the attitude towards the Western countries and the Ottoman Turks was not identical. E.g. Syrian and Lebanese progressive thinkers in the second half of the 19th c., when Syria was still a colony of the West, struggled against the Turkish dominance and set hopes on the Western assistance. In Egypt, on the contrary, they expected assistance from the Turkish Sultan in the struggle against the British colonists (Levin, 1972: 101-102). Pan-Islamism that took shape in the same period and preached the unification of the Muslim world around the Ottoman Turks in order to resist European colonialism and defend the interests of the Muslim world, found many followers in Egypt (Levin, 1972: 104). Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838 – 1897/8), a public and political figure of the Afghan origin, living in Egypt, always an adversary of the West and said: "The West opposes the East. The spirit of the crusades still makes hearts thrill" (Levin, 1972: 109). In his view, only the Ottoman Empire, which

would unite in its boundaries the majority of the Muslims, could fight against the West. Muhammad Abdo (1849 - 1905) and Adib Ishak (1856 - 1885) shared this opinion almost fully. Mustafa Kamil (1874 - 1908) considered the acquisition of the complete independence of Egypt from Great Britain as the main objective of all Egyptians. Like al-Afghani, he regarded the creation of a common Muslim caliphate under the direction of the Sultan as the only solution of the Eastern problem (Dolinina, 1968: 88, 89). In Farah Antun's (1874 - 1922) opinion, the decisive role in all the misfortunes of the East was played by Western colonists, without the deliverance from which the progress of the Arab countries was impossible. Therefore he called upon the Egyptians to struggle (Dolinina, 1973: 167). The viewpoint of the enlighteners in the sphere of culture was almost identical: to borrow from the West what was useful – the energetic, free, independent spirit, and to reject everything what opposed the interests of the Eastern countries and was alien to the Eastern morality (Dolinina, 1973: 171).

Syrian enlighteners, as noted above, were distinguished by anti-Turkish tendencies and inclined to the West. Some of them wished to create the Arab caliphate, in which the Arab countries situated on the Arabian Peninsula would be united. Al-Kavakibi (1849 – 1902/3) called upon foreigners to allow the Arabs to solve their affairs by themselves (Dolinina, 1973: 63). Notably enough, the attitude of the Egyptians and the Syrians to the West and the Ottoman state was determined by the fact that the Turkish dominance over Syria-Lebanon, neighboring directly upon the centre, was stronger, whereas the Western colonists were not politically strengthened there yet. Egypt, due to its territorial remoteness, was in the Ottoman Empire only formally and in fact was a British colony.

Naturally, under such conditions the notions of "homeland" and "nation" moved to the forefront. According to the concept accepted in Europe, Adib Ishaq formulated the notion of homeland as follows: "Homeland as a political notion which denotes the place from which a person originates, where the safety of this person, his family and property is guaranteed" (Levin, 1972: 63). He and Al-Kavakibi stated that "there is no homeland in the conditions of despotism", because in this case man is stripped of rights (Levin, 1972: 178). Lutfi As-Seidi (1872 – 1953/63) added to this notion the common material (economic) interests (Levin, 1972: 178). Farah Antuni interpreted "homeland" as the commonwealth of the peoples making up the Ottoman Empire, the union which should have resisted the European expansion (Dolinina, 1973: 169).

"Nation" in the Arabic sense was the unity of all Muslims regardless of the language, race and ethnicity, or location (Levin, 1972: 179). In the course of time such a concept changed. It was not already a mere group of persons united by kinship, but a collective of persons having a common language, a single place of residence and religion (Levin, 1972: 179). Here the emphasis is on the language and territory. Al-Kavakibi ruled out the link with the religion and defined "nation" as "the unity of persons related through a common race, homeland and rights (Levin, 1972: 180). Lutfi As-Seidi characterized "nation" as a social group united by common interests, and not by the religion (Levin, 1972: 180).

Such were in brief the views of the Arab enlighteners concerning the mentioned questions. But this was later, in the period of the upsurge of the enlightenment movement, circa middle of the second half of the 19th c. at-Tahtawi, who worked in an earlier period, outstripped them in time and in fact these questions were put on the agenda thanks to him.

What was at-Tahtawi's attitude towards the above questions like?

Let us begin from at-Tahtawi's idea of "homeland" and "nation". It should be noted that these two concepts are not demarcated clearly with at-Tahtawi. As is known, the traditional idea of "homeland" derived from the meaning of this word in Arabic "Al-Watan" – the place of a person's birth and residence. At-Tahtawi as early as the 1860s added to the traditional notion of "homeland" the idea of patriotism, love for the homeland. In his view, tireless work for the interests of the homeland, making one's contribution to its building was the primary duty of a citizen of a country. To the theme of the homeland he added the national theme and placed both even above the religious ties. According to at-Tahtawi, there is a close relation between fellow countrymen, there exist certain rights and duties with respect to one another, and what is the most important there is national brotherhood between them, which is higher and more important than religious brotherhood. Each citizen of the country has moral obligations, he should spare no effort for the glory and dignity of his homeland. At that time it was not easy to voice similar ideas in public, especially for a person having a religious education, as the entire Muslim world, and not any particular country, was usually regarded as the homeland for all Muslims. As noted above, many Arab enlighteners, proceeding from the traditional idea of the homeland, in the struggle for independence from the colonists demanded the creation of the common Muslim caliphate, or the unification of all Muslims

around the Ottoman state. Egyptian enlighteners were especially distinguished in this regard. The reason for this was discussed above. The idea of the creation of the common Muslim, or the common Arab caliphate or state is not found in at-Tahtawi's work available to us. This is also supported by the fact that at the period of the upsurge of the enlightenment movement (circa final quarter of the 19th c.) Egyptian nationalism originated. At-Tahtawi as early as the 1860s on the basis of the patriotic sentiments stressed that "Egypt is the dearest land for its children." (Levin, 1972: 179). One might say that at-Tahtawi's these views, as many others, outstrip the slogan "Egypt for the Egyptians" put forward by the Egyptian nationalists.

As regards at-Tahtawi's attitude towards the Western world, it may be said with confidence that he was one of the first, if not the first, propagandist of the Western, namely, French civilization in Egypt. His loyal attitude found reflection in his entire activity. This is demonstrated especially clearly in his book "A Paris Profile" dealing with the five-year period spent in France. At-Tahtawi takes a great liking to the European civilization, the tendency of the French people to move forward, to perfect their knowledge, which, in his view, the Arabs should adopt and introduce. He pays great attention to the system of education in France. Indeed, later on, several years before his death, at-Tahtawi was put at the head of the commission drafting the curricula in connection with the foundation of the first girls' school in Egypt (Kakharova, 1968: 22-23). He introduces many things from the French education system and tries to adjust them to the local conditions. In addition, when in "A Paris Profile" he offers the analysis of the political and public institutions, he writes with exceptional sympathy about the constitutional government, the parliament and electoral system. He thinks that the people must take active part in the ruling of the country. Dealing with the legal issues, at-Tahtawi notes that "… Justice is the basis of civilization" (št-ṭšḥṭāvī, 1991: 66). He partly touched upon the notion of "freedom" in the book, but he, the first of the Egyptians, offered its detailed analysis at the beginning of the 1870s. He regarded it as the most important factor of the existence of human beings, and singled out its five varieties: 1. Freedom as the natural state of a human being, 2. Freedom of behavior, 3. Freedom of conscience, 4. Civil freedom, and 5. Political freedom (Levin, 1972: 27). Interest attaches in the book to the author's reasoning concerning the principles of "lawfulness" and "equality". He believes that citizens must respect the rule of law. At-Tahtawi recognizes the equality of all persons before the law,

the demands that the rulers of the country also follow the laws, obey the law and control the protection of the people's rights. Actually, he preaches the supremacy of law. At-Tahtawi already at the beginning of the 1870s, earlier than Muslim reformers, was the first to focus attention on the fact that it is necessary to bring the laws into conformity with the requirements of time. In "A Paris Profile" he arrives at the conclusion that notions "freedom", "equality", "lawfulness" (justice), as the form of the social structure were known to the Muslims for a long time, and they do not contradict Islam.

Arabic education was closely linked with the religion. Enlighteners considered reformed Islam as a resource of spreading their ideas. They planned to establish the new public and political ideas with the help of Islam and to explain scientific achievements on its basis. They believed that the only way of progress was in Islam, free from any "strange disfigurements". These were the ways which created the reforms or modernism in the 1870s. The key principle for the modernists was that Islam was the universal, world religion, useful for any nationalities, any periods and any kind of cultural circumstances, and that it did not contradict modern civilization.

At-Tahtawi lived before the modernists, but one finds a number of modernist religious approaches among his sayings, e.g. when members of the modernist movement noted that Islam was the universal, world religion, he asserted the same in his saying: "Islam is the religion of the heaven" or "...I saw Islam in France without Muslims..."(Ibrāhīm Jšwdšt, 2008: 27-28). He noted that many generations have been distorting the provisions, dogmas and doctrines of Islam for a long time, a lot of people pretended to be Muslims, but in fact they did not fulfill the requirements of Islamic legislation. The continuation of the above-mentioned quotation: "...I saw Muslims in Egypt without Islam..." is in fact a confirmation of this. When At-Tahtawi speaks about "the laws of nature", he notes that modern states and societies should be formed according to them (i.e. according to the rules of nature). He does not see any contradiction between Islam and "the laws of nature". That is why he thinks it is necessary to explain and comment on Islam, to gain insight correctly into the ideas of Islam, in order to identify in what Islam agrees with the requirements of time, and hence, to see what is the contradiction between science (knowledge) and religion. He believes that the contradiction between them is false, invented, feigned and it may be eradicated. At-Tahtawi also notes that rationalistic notions, dominating in Europe, are not strange to Islam, Islam appeals us towards them. Therefore it is

not Islam that contains flaws, but in the course of time Muslims themselves distorted it ("...I saw Muslims in Egypt without Islam"). So, it is necessary to give back Islam its original form. Hence, his belief that the task (mission) of the Muslim civilization is to create a balance between the great bifurcation, which divides the world into two opposing parts: belief and disbelief, paradise and hell, rational truth and religious truth, etc. (Ibrāhīm Jšwdšt, 2008: 28).

Let us return again in brief to the attitude of the Egyptians towards the West. It is a fact that the attitude of the Egyptians and the Arabs in general to the West and the Western culture was not homogeneous. The West and its culture influenced greatly the Arab enlighteners, cultural workers, as well as representatives of another trend which followed them, it gave a stimulus to the revival and rise of the Arab life and culture, appearance of new literary trends, overcoming old literary forms, formation and development of new genres, etc. But this was not a simple process. The progressive part of the society had to overcome great obstacles due to predominant views in themselves as well as the society. The Arab, especially Muslim society was unprepared for serious transformations. It should also be taken into consideration that the Western culture and life greatly differed from the Arabic, at the same time, for the Egyptians this was the culture of the colonists (England). Along with this, superficial borrowing and imitation of everything European occurred in every sphere of life, which in its turn caused in every strata of the population great aggression, a back reaction to anything new, the tendency to retain at any cost their old image, customs, the centuries-old Muslim world-view. E.g. in literature this was manifested in the protest against translated books, in the tendency somehow to revive, to breathe new life to old literary forms, subjects, to retain intact the Arabic language, etc. Such negative phenomena were successfully used by conservative powers against supporters of progress (enlighteners). The opposition was in fact uncompromising, which eventually ended in the revival of Arab life. However, the struggle between these two powers did not cease at any stage of the development.

The viewpoint of Arab enlighteners about the interrelation of the West and the East, according to "A Paris Profile", at-Tahtawi's attitude towards the West, the influence on his views on laws, "freedom", "equality", "justice", "homeland", and other notions have already been discussed above. Here I would like to add at-Tahtawi's opinion about "citizenship of a country", as the Western influence is obvious there. At-Tahtawi was the first to pose as the object of public

discussion the notion of "citizen". A citizen did not exist in the Arab world. In his place there was a subject. So, here the population of a country did not consist of citizens, as in Europe, but subjects. The difference was that the notion of "citizen" implied independent existence of an individual, who had rights and obligations defined by the law before the country and fellow countrymen. A "subject" had obligations, but he was devoid of legitimate rights. His fate was governed by his master, or the ruler of the country, or e.g. in the Ottoman Empire – by the Sultan (IbrÁh×m Jawdat, 2008: 30). At-Tahtawi raised the question of introducing the status of "citizen" in Egypt, and defining a citizen's rights, in which he primarily implied the political right: the right to criticize the authorities, in case a citizen found mistakes in their actions, to express one's opinion concerning rectifying those mistakes, the right to take part in the political life of the state, which was directly linked with the principles of freedom of the individual, justice and equality.

Along with this, under the influence of the European civilization, at-Tahtawi was the first among the Egyptians to begin struggling for women's rights. His views were not less progressive than those of the well-known enlighteners Kasim Amin (1865 - 1908), Wali Ad-Din Yakun (1873 - 1921) and others.

Conclusion

At-Tahtawi made great contribution to the upbringing and education of the youth. He, as an excellent specialist of school affairs in Egypt, was actively engaged in the improvement and provision of school education of the country. In the school curricula, prepared under his guidance, and in his view on upbringing and education, he rested on the experience of the French system of education, but he also took into consideration the requirements and needs of the Egyptian society, the specificity of the Muslim culture and life. The basic requirements (see At-Tahtawi's main work "Reliable Guide in Education of Girls and Boys") may be formulated in brief as follows: 1) upbringing and education of girls and boys is one of the main supports of the revival of the country; 2) it is necessary to evaluate and use properly the experience of other countries (mostly, the West), to introduce its positive aspects and adapt them to the problems and needs of the local society, to take into consideration the specificity of the Muslim and Arab culture and life; 3) upbringing and education should be based on the love for the homeland, kindling of patriotic feelings; 4) the basis for upbringing and education should be relevant laws; 5) it is necessary to work out appropriate and well-organized school and educational programs; 6) girls and boys should study

at school together, there should be no difference between their teaching, etc. (šṭ-ṭšḥṭāvī, 2000).

A great role in the formation of At-Tahtawi's world view, along with the education received at the Al-Azhar University, was performed by the years spent in France, profound familiarization with French culture, literature, philosophy, social and political works, which ultimately defined his Western orientation. In addition, his close cooperation with well-known French orientalists – Silvestre de Sacy and Caussin de Perceval, his direct supervisor Academician E.F.Jomard, a participant of Napoleon Bonaparte' s expedition as a military engineer, apparently also played a certain role.

It is obvious that by his active public work at-Tahtawi tried to convince the Arab readers, which is also clear in his "A Paris Profile", that European science and European civilization, in general, do not at all contradict Islam and the Koran.

At-Tahtawi was a great and versatile public figure, excellent translator, author of good original works. His mental outlook was quite broad and, proceeding from this, his service to the homeland was enormous. Doctor Shukri al-'Ayad in the book "The History of New Arabic Literature" refers to him as "a herald of the new revival" (šl-'Ayād, n.d.: 20), but K. Öhrnberg in his book "Rifāʿa Bey al-ṭahṭāwī (1801-73)" writes: "... standard-bearer and symbol of Arabic renaissance, the most well-known thinker of his epoch" (Kutelia, 2007: 141).

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