**Rifaʿa al-Tahtawi’s Mirror for Muhammad ʿAli**

*Takhlis al-Ibriz fi Talkhis Bariz* Between Tradition and Change

**Abstract:** This paper argues for a reinterpretation of *Takhlis al-Ibriz fi Talkhis Bariz* by Rifaʿa al-Tahtawi (1801-1873) based on the fact that the text should be read as belonging to the genre of *naṣīḥa* (advice literature) rather than solely as a *riḥla* (travel literature) about his journey to Paris in 1826. While many understand the text to be a self-interested justification of the rule of Muhammad ʿAli, the governor of Egypt and al-Tahtawi’s patron, I read the text to be a genuine criticism of the cultural and political milieu of the time and an articulation of Islam as a tradition that, at is core, is heteronomous and open to influence from the non-Muslim world. Through his engagement in the tradition of the *naṣīḥa* genre, al-Tahtawi charts a middle ground between tradition and change, defining Islamic tradition as one that inherently involves the incorporation of difference.

All transliterations follow the International Journal for Middle East Studies (IJMES) guidelines.

Introduction

In 1826, Rifaʿa Rafiʿ al-Tahtawi (1801-1873), a young and recent graduate of the prestigious university-mosque of al-Azhar in Cairo, secured an appointment as the religious attaché to a military expedition sent to France to study military technologies and tactics. Upon his return to Egypt, Al-Tahtawi wrote his best-known work, *Takhlis al-Ibriz fi Talkhis Bariz* (in English, “The Extraction of Pure Gold from a Summary of Paris”), an account that describes in vivid detail the mannerisms, customs, and mores of the French people, implicitly juxtaposing them with the customs of Egypt and the Islamic world. The work, originally published in 1834, is notable because, later in life, al-Tahtawi became a government official, responsible for advising Muhammad ʿAli, the reigning *wālī* (governor), on how to reform and modernize the Egyptian government and economy.

At first glance, the *Takhlis* seems to be a fairly straightforward example of a *riḥla* (travel literature)—al-Tahtawi even describes the work as such (2011: 106). This authorial designation has led many scholars to emphasize his status as a traveler in a foreign, unknown, and unintelligible land, and what emerges is a stereotypical account of the relationship between East and West: the preternaturally liberty-averse Arab-Muslim goes to France and discovers Western values, which he then attempts to transport back to the Islamic world—an attempt that is inevitably unsuccessful.[[1]](#footnote-1) In the words of Peter Gran, for such scholars, the *Takhlis*’ importance “rests on the fact, or more precisely, on the scholarly assumption of its being an early if not the first example of the Arab discovery of modern Europe” (2013: 190). However, as is almost always the case, the reality is significantly more complex. To begin, we must dispense with the notion that in the early nineteenth century the Islamic world and Europe were completely isolated from each other: since Napoleon’s expedition to Egypt in 1798 there had been regular exchange between Egypt and France, and al-Tahtawi himself records that there were a number of Egyptians and Muslims living in France upon his arrival, many of whom had wholeheartedly adopted French customs and mores, some even going so far as to convert to Christianity (2011: 158-9).

The goals of this article are twofold. The first goal concerns this literary, generic classification of the *Takhlis*. I argue that the *Takhlis* is more than a conventional *riḥla* as itengages in recognizable conventions characteristic of the genre of advice literature, or *naṣīḥa*.[[2]](#footnote-2) While the best-known European example of *naṣīḥa*, or the “mirrors for princes” genre as it is sometimes called, is Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, the genrehas a long and rich history across the Mediterranean, dating back to the Byzantine Empire in late antiquity. The Byzantine tradition of advice literature, like many others, was incorporated into the cultural milieu of early Islam. Many prophets in the Qurʾan present themselves as “advisors,” using the *n-ṣ-ḥ* root of the word “*naṣīḥa*.” For example, the prophet Nuh (Noah) says, “I convey to you the messages of my Lord and advise you [*anṣaḥ lakum*]” (Quʾran 7:62), and a well-known hadith—an account of something the Prophet or his companions said or did—similarly invokes the term: “Religion is sincerity [*naṣīḥa*]” (al-Nawawi, 1977: 44).[[3]](#footnote-3) If we assume a more robust definition of *naṣīḥa* that considers the literary conventions that I will identify as emblematic of the genre, it becomes clear that the *Takhlis* should be read as belonging to the *naṣīḥa* tradition.

The second goal of this paper regards my interpretation of the text of the *Takhlis* itself. Reading the *Taklhis* as *naṣīḥa* rather than as a *riḥla* accentuates and draws attention to the moments of political analysis within the text. Rather than a straightforward description of his trip to France, al-Tahtawi is offering a genuine criticism of the political milieu of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century—he is adamant that the Ottoman Empire must make certain reforms in order to maintain its political and military prowess in the face of the growing threats of European colonialism. I additionally argue that in doing so, he makes an implicit argument about the nature of Islamic tradition, suggesting that it is a heteronomous tradition that can and should be accommodating of the new forms of knowledge that he found in France. Al-Tahtawi’s *naṣīḥa* is that his sovereign, Muhammad ʿAli, can and should incorporate foreign sciences into Egyptian society without fear that doing so would be un-Islamic. In fact, to not do so would be un-Islamic as it would leave the Islamic world at the mercy of the rapidly-advancing European colonial powers.

It is here that the political stakes of my argument are most acute, as it concerns the relationship between al-Tahtawi’s vision of Islam and its relation to the non-Muslim world Regarding the question of change and difference in the Islamic intellectual tradition, Ebrahim Moosa, a prominent scholar of Islamic studies, notes:

The question of innovation and continuity in tradition has never been an unproblematic one in Muslim societies. From Islam’s very inception in the seventh century and afterwards, Muslim intellectuals have found themselves embattled by this question. It has its roots in the furious debates about the legitimacy of borrowing knowledge and insights from the Greeks, Indians, Persians, especially Aristotelian philosophy and Neoplatonic mystical knowledge. Intellectuals have found themselves on both sides of the debate (2003, 112).

This question is particularly relevant in the modern period. As a result of the tension between those calling for continuity with Islam’s past and those calling for rupture and change, Moosa notes, Muslims today are paradoxically called to “modernize” Islam and distance themselves from fundamentalist groups who adamantly and sometimes violently reject any attempts to reform Islam, while at the same time feeling compelled to resist the cultural hegemony of the West by remaining meaningfully connected to Islamic tradition: “Muslim thinkers are not only challenged to be innovative, but they are also simultaneously required to engage with tradition” (2003: 111). Muslims are demanded to be simultaneously autonomous and heteronomous, engaging meaningfully with Islamic tradition while also reforming it and modernizing it.

Because I read the *Takhlis* as engaging in the genre *nasīha* rather than exclusively as a *riḥla*, I understand al-Tahtawi to be offering a resolution to the paradox that Moosa mentions, and I push against de Bellaigue’s characterization of al-Tahtawi as a representative of an “Islamic Enlightenment.” Al-Tahtawi defies categorization as either a hard-core orthodox traditionalist demanding complete adherence to Islamic tradition or as a radical reformist hoping to promote liberal values in Egypt and make it more “modern.” He argues instead that the Islamic tradition does not need to be replaced by liberal values because, in its most authentic form, it is already defined by a degree of malleability and adaptability in the face of the contingencies of the changing world around it. Through his use of *nasīha*, a traditional genre of Islamic political writing, al-Tahtawi troubles the strict division between tradition and change by arguing that certain changes, even those of European provenance, can be incorporated into Egyptian and Ottoman society without compromising its Islamic identity—Islamic tradition is more than rote repetition of a particular idyllic past, but rather is sustained and propelled forward through dialogue and interaction with the rest of the world.

Historical Context: Egypt in Flux

Al-Tahtawi was born into a historical milieu defined by political, cultural, and military transition. In Egypt, the nineteenth century began in the midst of Napoleon Bonaparte’s ill-fated occupation of the Ottoman province, which, despite lasting only from 1798 to 1801, had a lasting impact on Egyptian society and politics. Justifying the invasion as an extension of the liberating ideals of the French Revolution to a new land, Napoleon recognized the importance of emphasizing the compatibility of revolutionary ideals with traditional Islamic values. The French claimed that they had no intention of overthrowing traditional Islamic practices: rather, they were merely freeing the Egyptian people from the clutches of the Mamluks, the dynasty of typically foreign-born slave-soldiers that had ruled Egypt semi-independently of the Ottoman Empire for centuries. Upon arrival, Napoleon published these justifications in a series of letters intended to reassure the local population of his affinity for Islam and his benevolent political intentions.

Of course, Napoleon’s apparent Islamic piety and his emancipatory claims were a thinly veiled attempt to curry favor with the local religious elite, known in Arabic as the ʿulamaʾ, and to preempt the formation of any potential popular insurgency. In the words of Dominique Martin Dupuy, one of Napoleon’s officers, “Nous trompons les Egyptiens par notre simili-attachement à leur religion, à laquelle Bonaparte et nous ne croyons pas plus qu’à celle de Pie le défunt” (Bainville, 1931: 119).[[4]](#footnote-4) The local Egyptians recognized Napoleon’s piety as false, as the chronicler ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Jabarti, a first-hand witness of the invasion, attests in his rather amusingly meticulous, line-by-line excoriation of the first epistle published by Napoleon to the Egyptian people, viciously mocking him for a litany of reasons, from the blatantly un-Islamic practices of the French people to the many grammatical and linguistic errors contained within the letter (2003, 27-33).

The military invasion brought with it a cultural one: Napoleon’s goal was not merely to overthrow the Mamluk dynasty but to establish an enlightened, revolutionary, and republican state. According to Jacques Bainville, an early-20th century French monarchist and critical biographer of Napoleon, “Il part pour l’Egypte avec des soldats et aussi avec des savants, des artistes, des ingénieurs, des naturalists, des jurists, de quoi composer une administration, fonder un Etat, render à la lumière ce qui dort sous la terre des Pharaons, mettre en valeur les richesses du pays, preparer le percement de l’isthme de Suez” (1931: 119). These “cultural ambassadors” led to the production of a variety of fascinating cultural artifacts, including the massive, multi-volume *Description de l’Égypte* and the establishment of a French-style Egyptological society, the Institut d’Egypte, in Cairo (Tageldin, 2011: 111).[[5]](#footnote-5)

Napoleon’s desire to create a new, enlightened state in Egypt, however, was cut short by a myriad of military blunders: the British fleet, under the command of Admiral Horatio Nelson, destroyed the French fleet at the Battle of the Nile one month after Napoleon’s troops landed in Alexandria, leaving them cut off from France. The French also faced indigenous harassment, both in the form of popular uprisings in Cairo and from leftover mamluk troops who launched an insurgency from the desert regions. After the departure of the French armies in 1801, a mercenary named Muhammad ʿAli, who had been sent by the Ottoman sultan to help defeat the French, seized power from the Mamluks in a violent struggle and was named *wālī* (local governor) of Egypt by the sultan in 1805. Immensely impressed by the hegemonic French military-political-scientific machine, Muhammad ʿAli was convinced that the Ottoman Empire was in danger of being overwhelmed by a rapidly-advancing Europe. In response, he engaged in several decisive moves: he began investing resources in the Institut d’Egypte and other scientific and educational organizations, he encouraged the liberalization of the Egyptian economy and the development of industry and modern factories, he invited military innovators from France and Italy to instruct and train Egyptian soldiers, and he began to develop stronger political ties with European powers (Newman, 2011: 18-20).

These innovations came at both the material and cultural expense of the ʿulamaʾ, who had possessed a great deal of political power and cultural clout under the mamluks and who relied on traditional forms of taxation that were abolished of as part of Muhammad ʿAli’s economic reforms (Hourani, 1981: 51-52). As a result, we see a tension emerging between Muhammad ʿAli and his partisans, who supported a more liberal economy, the industrialization of Egypt, and moderate political reforms, and the “conservative” ʿulamaʾ, who appealed to traditional forms of Islamic governance. That said, it would be overly-simplistic to assert that Muhammad ʿAli was a liberal, enlightened, and forward-looking ruler while the Egyptian ʿulamaʾ were an exclusively conservative group attempting to maintain the status quo. Muhammad ʿAli himself appealed in many ways to medieval Islamic models of kingship, and certain members of the ʿulamaʾ, such as al-Tahtawi’s mentor Hasan al-ʿAtar, vocally supported liberal reforms. Nevertheless, it is possible to see a general tension between what we might call “reformist” Egyptians, inspired by their encounters with Europe, pushing for innovation and change, and those Egyptians who rejected any European cultural, scientific, or social influence as inherently a foreign threat to an authentic, autonomous Islamic tradition. Al-Tahtawi emerges from this tension with a foot in both camps.

Al-Tahtawi and *Naṣīḥa* in the Existing Scholarship

To my knowledge, only three scholars have considered the possibility that the *Takhlis* might be a *naṣīḥa*. Of these, only Peter Gran’s “Al-Tahtawi’s Trip to Paris in Light of Recent Historical Analysis: Travel Literature or Mirror for Princes?” concludes definitively that it should indeed be considered *naṣīḥa*. However, each of these accounts, including that of Gran, demonstrates an incomplete understanding of *naṣīḥa*, suggesting that it is a genre that is, at its core, defined by sycophancy, in which the author of the textsolely hopes to procure the favor of the ruler. Drawing on Talal Asad’s analysis of *naṣīḥa* in a chapter in *Genealogies of Religion*, I suggest instead an alternative and more robust definition of *naṣīḥa*. While it is certainly true that works of *naṣīḥa* tend to be deferential to the authorities to which they are addressed, this should not be mistaken for mere sycophancy. Rather, true *naṣīḥa* must be given out of a legitimate desire to correct improper and un-Islamic behavior of the ruler.

Gran reaches his conclusion that the *Takhlis* should be read as *naṣīḥa* based on biographical and historical information about al-Tahtawi and 19th-century Egypt. He argues that the Egyptian political system of the 19th century follows what he describes as the “Italian Road” model, based on the work of the early-20th-century Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci (Gramsci, 1978: ch. 76). According to Gran’s model, al-Tahtawi takes on the role of the “Southern Intellectual,” a distinct scholarly type who, according to Gramsci, is born into the impoverished agrarian south, is forced to find work as a state official, and as a result, serves as a class traitor who justifies the preservation of the status quo on the part of the state against the express material interest of the peasant class.

Gran argues that al-Tahtawi’s biography lends credence to such a model: a product of the intellectual class of the small village of Tahta in the agrarian regions of southern Egypt, al-Tahtawi moved north to Cairo to attend al-Azhar and, eventually, became a government official. According to Gran, as a southern intellectual, al-Tahtawi’s successful entrance into government service came “at a certain price. He would have to defend the regime and not directly acknowledge that it was oppressing the people of his home region. In return, he would be honored for his services” (2013: 199-200). We must read the *Takhlis* as a work of *naṣīḥa*, according to Gran, precisely because of its author’s desire to procure a government position and his attachment to the state and its ruler, Muhammad ʿAli. Gran’s conclusion, then, is that *because* he allies himself with Muhammad ʿAli and offers him *naṣīḥa*,al-Tahtawi is a traitor to his own people, the pre-industrialized and agrarian southern Egyptians. It appears that *naṣīḥa*, at least according to Gran, is defined by a degree of sycophancy and careerism at the expense of any abstract, non-material moral concern.

In *Journeys to the Other Shore*, Roxanne Euben gives a different reading of al-Tahtawi’s *Takhlis*. She concludes that the *Takhlis* is explicitly *not* an example of *naṣīḥa*, precisely because al-Tahtawi was *not* a sycophant looking to curry favor with Muhammad ʿAli. We should not, she writes, “characterize his entire corpus as an ‘elaborate legitimation’ for Muhammad ʿAli’s policies, casting Tahtawi as little more than a writer in the ‘Mirror for Princes’ tradition eager to justify, rationalize, and solidify absolutist rule, administrative centralization, and Egyptian autonomy” (2006: 123). *Naṣīḥa* is nothing more than an “elaborate legitimation” for the ruler, Euben suggests. In her discussion of the *Takhlis*, Euben cites a conceptualization of *naṣīḥa* established by Israel Altman in his unpublished dissertation examining al-Tahtawi’s contributions to political thought. According to Altman, the purpose of *naṣīḥa* is solely to justify the rule of the sovereign power: “The only incentive for the king to rule justly is a utilitarian one—that his subjects’ happiness is also his own. From this point of view, namely the justification of just conduct on the ruler’s part by visible, earthly advantages, rather than by absolute moral principles, this approach resembles the attitude of the ‘mirrors for princes’ literature in Islam and elsewhere” (1976: 203). For Altman, al-Tahtawi’s “justification of just conduct on the ruler’s part” is evidence of his use of *naṣīḥa*, suggesting that *naṣīḥa*, once again, is defined merely as a sycophantic genre in which the author curries favor with the sovereign by justifying the sovereign’s actions.

Thus, Gran, Euben, and Altman each operate under a similar conceptualization of *naṣīḥa*, despite the fact that they do not agree about whether or not we should read the *Takhlis* as *naṣīḥa*: all three assume that the genre requires that the writer be, essentially, a sycophant, attempting to ingratiate himself to the powers that be. This is an extremely limited understanding of *naṣīḥa* that does not account for the complexity of the genre. Indeed, throughout Islamic history, the importance of *naṣīḥa* is due, in large part, to its ability to serve as a subtle yet subversive form of protest, one that would register the writers’ desires for political change without (the author hopes) upsetting the head of state.

A competing and much more robust account of *naṣīḥa* is offered by Talal Asad in *Genealogies of Religion* (1993: ch.6). According to Asad, “*Naṣīḥa* signifies advice that is given for someone’s good, honestly and faithfully. It also has the meaning of sincerity, integrity, and doing justice to a situation. *Naṣīḥa*, then, is much more than an expression of good intention on the part of the advice giver (*nāṣiḥ*): since in this context it carries the sense of offering moral advice to an erring fellow Muslim (*manṣūḥ*), it is at once an obligation to be fulfilled and a virtue to be cultivated by all Muslims” (1993: 214). *Naṣīḥa*, therefore, requires more than mere sycophancy. If one were to give counsel out of a base desire to earn praise rather than out of a desire to provide useful, moral advice, this would not be true *naṣīḥa*. Rather, *naṣīḥa* must be a sincere, good-faith critique meant to genuinely aid the *manṣūḥ*, the receiver of the advice, by correcting immoral and un-Islamic behavior.

Because the purpose of *naṣīḥa* is to correct immoral behavior, it is intimately connected with the author’s conception of Islam. In asserting that a certain behavior is un-Islamic, the *nāṣiḥ* (the advice-giver) implicitly articulates a corrective that suggests a more authentically Islamic one. According to Asad, then, what implicitly occurs in the act of giving *naṣīḥa* is an articulation of “a definition of orthodoxy—a (re)ordering of knowledge that governs the ‘correct’ form of Islamic practices” (1993: 210). When an individual gives *naṣīḥa*, he or she implicitly articulates a vision of how he or she understands Islamic tradition. If I were to provide *naṣīḥa* to a ruler to be thriftier with public funds, for example, I would implicitly be making a claim that the misuse of public funds is un-Islamic. Thus, *naṣīḥa* becomes an opportunity to publicly articulate one’s relationship with the broader Islamic tradition.

Such a “definition of orthodoxy” is al-Tahtawi’s project in the *Takhlis*. He provides Muhammad ‘Ali and the Egyptian ʿulamaʾof al-Azhar with his own definition of Islam, informed by his experiences in Paris. Al-Tahtawi is clear that he is not advocating a blind imitation of French society—he complains bitterly throughout the *Takhlis* that the French are a deeply immoral people. Instead, he calls for a more fluid articulation of Islamic orthodoxy, one that can remain authentically Islamic while simultaneously incorporating elements, ideas, and knowledge from Europe.

Literary Analysis: al-Tahtawi’s *Takhlis* as *Naṣīḥa*

Three themes and characteristics emblematic of works of *naṣīḥa* feature heavily in the *Takhlis*: the authors’ claims to have access to authoritative and proprietary knowledge, literary and aesthetic uses of poetry and storytelling, and most importantly, the authors’ invocations and descriptions of the ruler to whom the text is addressed. Unlike Gran, who contends that the *Takhlis* is *naṣīḥa* is based solely on biographical details about al-Tahtawi and historiographical information about 19th-century Egypt, I argue that evidence that the *Takhlis* is *naṣīḥa* can be found by identifying these three characteristics through a close textual analysis of the work itself.

The trope of secret knowledge is widespread in the *naṣīḥa* tradition. By far the most obvious example of this is *Sirr al-Asrar* (commonly known in Europe by its Latin name, *Secreta Secretorum*, or “The Secret of Secrets”). Although the text claims that it is a letter written by Aristotle to Alexander the Great, most scholars date the text to the 10th century and place its origins somewhere within the Islamic Empire (Micheau, n.d.). Throughout the text, the pseudo-Aristotle offers Alexander secret knowledge to which he has exclusive access, and which is meant for Alexander’s eyes only. Thereafter, this trope of secret or proprietary knowledge becomes a running theme in subsequent works of advice literature within the Islamic context. In *Tarikh al-Tabari*, for example, the author relates a story about the Caliph al-Mansur passing on his political know-how to his son and heir, al-Mahdi, by literally giving him access to notebooks full of secret, proprietary knowledge that nobody else is permitted to see: “He had a container in which he kept the notebooks (*dafātīr*) of his knowledge, and it was locked and he trusted no one to open it and he kept its keys in the sleeve of his shirt” (al-Ṭabarī, 1990: 150).

Al-Tahtawi similarly claims to have access to a form of proprietary knowledge in the full title of the *Takhlis*, which, as previously noted, can be translated as “The Extraction of Pure Gold from a Summary of Paris.” Like the pseudo-Aristotle’s claim to secret knowledge in *Sirr al-Asrar* and al-Mansur’s secret trove of notebooks, al-Tahtawi claims to have sifted through the filth that he found in Paris to uncover the nuggets of “pure gold” that he wishes to present as a gift to Muhammad ‘Ali. Even more fundamentally, al-Tahtawi’s engagement with a *foreign* culture that was largely unknown to the Egyptian scholarly class cements his proprietary claims to the secret knowledge that France offers. Al-Tahtawi’s claims to exclusive knowledge are made concrete in the preface, where he states: “as far as I know, nothing has appeared in Arabic up until now on the history of the city of Paris, the seat of the Kingdom of the French, nor is there any information on its condition or the condition of its people” (2011: 105). Because of his status as a learned scholar in a foreign and unfamiliar land, al-Tahtawi has exclusive access to the beneficial information that he has discovered in France.

A striking feature of the *Takhlis* is al-Tahtawi’s frequent use of poetry to support his political claims. When discussing the importance of travel, for example, al-Tahtawi cites as evidence the following verse: “*Traversing other countries—even in destitution— / is preferable for me to high rank*” (2011, 128). The incorporation of poetry and vivid, descriptive imageryis an essential characteristic of works of *naṣīḥa.* Regarding its use in works of *naṣīḥa*, the historian of Islam Louise Marlow has argued that “[m]any authors of mirrors set out not only to impart advice, but to delight their audiences with the subtle use of illustrative Qurʾanic quotations and hadith, narrative accounts concerning caliphs and sultans, pleasing stories, wise and witty proverbs, and verses of poetry; such writers aimed to provide aesthetic pleasure as well as gentle edification” (Marlow, n.d.).Authors of *naṣīḥa* occasionally even acknowledge that rulers are busy, and that they must employ a beautiful style and good storytelling in order to keep the ruler interested and invested in what the advisor is saying. Al-Tahtawi notes in the preface to the *Takhlis*, for example, that he has “adorned” his account of his time in Paris with “some useful digressions and convincing corroborations” (2011: 105). These adornments, digressions, and corroborations serve to keep the reader of the *naṣīḥa* entertained and invested in the text.

Perhaps more importantly, the incorporation of poetic language serves to soften the blow of the criticism contained within the *naṣīḥa*, a crucial move when the *mansūh* is a powerful figure such as Muhammad ‘Ali. According to Marlow, “mirrors employ direct or oblique forms of address and a range of discursive techniques, in an effort to persuade. The offering of advice to a ruler was by its nature a somewhat delicate exercise; several authors go so far as to state explicitly that their recipients already embody the ideals of justice, wisdom, and generosity and therefore stand in no need of the advice proffered” (Marlow, n.d.). Works of *naṣīḥa*, take advantage of stylistic and poetic language to frame the advice given as polite suggestion to the ruler rather than overt (and potentially inflammatory) criticism. Of course, the advisor is wordlessly acknowledging the fact that the recipient is *not* a paragon of virtue, despite claims within the text to the contrary—otherwise they would have no need of advice. Such stylistic devices therefore serve to delicately straddle the fine line between polite, helpful advice and overt, incendiary criticism that might anger the ruler.

Although she does not recognize it as a characteristic of *naṣīḥa*, Euben draws attention to what she calls the “multivocal” character that develops in al-Tahtawi’s writing, referring to his use of several different styles. For Euben, the *Takhlis* is a combination of three different literary traditions, making it “multiply hybrid, bearing the imprint of nineteenth-century French thought, the conventions of the *riḥla* genre in which an emphasis on *ʿajaʾib* (things that are marvelous, strange, or unusual) is central, and an ecumenical *adab* style” (2006: 115). Euben is right to emphasize the hybridity of the text, which serves to obfuscate al-Tahtawi’s actual opinion on the issues he describes. Given his potentially tenuous relation to Muhammad ‘Ali, Euben claims that such obfuscation may have been intentional. “Tahtawi’s own position,” she writes, “is further obscured by the many textual gestures designed to please or at least avoid offending his powerful patron, who not only sponsored the student mission to Paris but, as *Takhlis* attests, exercised a fair amount of control over what the visitors studied and how hard they worked from his perch in distant Cairo” (2006: 116). The generic hybridity and textual multivocality that Euben describes, I would argue, are precisely the hallmarks of *naṣīḥa*, in which poetic language and flowery prose are incorporated as a way of entertaining the audience, but more importantly, in order to slightly obfuscate the writer’s argument so as to lessen the blow of the advice being given.

Arguably the most recognizable characteristic of *naṣīḥa* is one that can be identified throughout the *Takhlis* and concerns the author’s insecure and potentially unstable relationship with the audience to whom the counsel is directed. According to Marlow, “[n]ot infrequently, authors of advice literature were themselves attached to the courts to whom their books were addressed, and in some cases their works were clearly designed to portray a specific image of the ruler and to promote particular claims to sovereignty and legitimacy” (Marlow, n.d.). An excellent example of this characteristic can be seen in the prologue to Nizam al-Mulk’s *Siyasatnameh*, arguably the best-known example of *nasīha* from the Islamic world. Nizam al-Mulk, an influential vizier attached to the court of the Seljuk sultan Malik-Shah I, introduces his *naṣīḥa* by lavishing over-the-top adoration on his lofty sultan: “The wisdom of the Master of the World is like a taper from which many lamps have been lighted; by its light men find their way and emerge from darkness. He has no need of any counsellor or guide; nevertheless, he is not without cares, and perhaps he wishes to test his servants, and assess their intelligence and wisdom” (Nizam al-Mulk, 1960: 11). It is this laudatory aspect of *naṣīḥa* that likely led Gran, Euben, and Altman to conclude that *naṣīḥa* works are necessarily sycophantic. And this element of *naṣīḥa* can, indeed, be seen quite clearly in the *Takhlis*. For example, al-Tahtawi begins the work with an exhortation to Muhammad ʿAli, whom he refers to throughout the text as “the Benefactor”: “I implore God—praise to Him the Exalted—that this book be favourably received by his Excellency, the Benefactor, the source of virtue and generosity, and that with it He will arouse all Islamic nations—both Arab and non-Arab—from their sleep of indifference” (2011: 106).

In addition to this conventional *captatio benevolentiae*, al-Tahtawi flatters Muhammad ʿAli for more genuine reasons, namely the ruler’s willingness to send al-Tahtawi to France and his receptivity to European sciences. Al-Tahtawi goes so far as to claim that the political and cultural clout of Islam declined due to the failure of previous leaders to sponsor scientific ventures. In contrast, he cites legendary caliphs from the history of Islam who, like Muhammad ʿAli, were patrons of the sciences and encouraged their courtiers to pursue knowledge:

Indeed, in the time of the caliphs we were the most perfect of all countries. The reason for this is that the caliphs helped scholars, artists and others like them. Some of the caliphs even got personally involved in these pursuits. Take for instance al-Maʾmun, the son of Harun al-Rashid, who in addition to his support of the timekeepers in his realm was himself engaged in astronomy. And look at how he determined the angle between the zodiac and the equator, finding, after examination, that it amounted to 23 degrees, 35 minutes. The Abbasid Jaʿfar al-Mutawakkil encouraged Stephen (Istifan) to translate Greek books like that of Dioscorides on medicines, while the ruler of al-Andalus, ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Nasir, asked the King of Constantinople, Armanius (Armaniyus), to send him a man who could speak Greek and Latin to train his slaves as translators, after which a monk by the name of Nicolas was sent (2011: 112-113).

Al-Tahtawi’s allusion to legendary Islamic caliphs such as al-Maʾmun, Harun al-Rashid, and ʿAbd al-Rahman is extremely politically charged because Muhammad ʿAli was, at that time, beginning to assert Egypt’s independence from the Ottoman caliph in Istanbul. In placing Muhammad ʿAli in the same circle as the great, legendary caliphs of old, al-Tahtawi is asserting Muhammad ʿAli’s claim to political authority and legitimacy. Furthermore, al-Tahtawi’s invocations of these legendary caliphs demonstrates that “foreign” science was welcomed by the caliphs who were upheld as ideal Islamic rulers by the conservative ʿulamaʾ––investing in the European sciences could not possibly be un-Islamic if al-Maʾmun, Harun al-Rashid, and ʿAbd al-Rahman did the same. Thus, in praising Muhammad ‘Ali’s openness to counsel and his support of scientific inquiry, al-Tahtawi is subtly participating in the *naṣīḥa* tradition of emphasizing the ruler’s lofty claims to political legitimacy and authority, asserting Muhammad ʿAli’s claims to independence from the Ottoman Empire in addition to reinforcing al-Tahtawi’s desire for continued support for the sciences, regardless of their origins.

While al-Tahtawi’s over-the-top praise for Muhammad ʿAli might seem excessive to some readers, it would be inappropriate to assume that writers of *naṣīḥa* are merely sycophants due to their submissive and deferential approach to their benefactors, as the act of giving meaningful counsel itself is inherently rather subversive. That, as Talal Asad reminds us, the goal of *naṣīḥa* is to genuinely aid the *manṣūḥ* (the advisee) in correcting bad behavior does not detract from *naṣīḥa*’s subversive-ness––if anything, it reinforces it. If al-Tahtawi sincerely hopes to give good advice to his *manṣūḥ*, Muhammad ʿAli, he is first obliged to offer a public criticism of him by articulating the policies that are holding Egypt back and encouraging the *manṣūḥ* to change them.

Finally, as I have already pointed out, al-Tahtawi describes his text as a *riḥla*, or travel literature. However, there are marked differences in the language and the tone used in the *Taklhis* by al-Tahtawi and that used in other *riḥlāt* (plural of *riḥla*). The archetypal *riḥla* of the prolific North African explorer Ibn Battuta, for example, contains of a number of anecdotes that depict and describe the diverse Muslim communities that the author visited across the world. While the reader may see glimpses of Ibn Battuta’s opinions about specific political and theological matters,[[6]](#footnote-6) the language of his *riḥla* is, generally speaking, meant to be descriptive, and he does not advance a cohesive political message throughout the work. By contrast, al-Tahtawi’s *Taklhis* carries through it a consistent critical, political message. Additionally, it would be wrong to assume that the *Taklhis* is a *riḥla* becauseal-Tahtawi himself explicitly notes that his analyses of the European sciences and philosophies go beyond the scope of pure *riḥla*: “This short *riḥla* is not just an account of the journey and its events; rather, it also includes its fruits and goals. It also contains a short exposé on the sought-after sciences and skills, presented in the way that the Franks use to record, conceive, and establish them” (2011: 106). The “fruits and goals” that al-Tahtawi here describes are, I argue, moments of *naṣīḥa*, the “pure gold” that are referred to in the subtitle of the work (“The Extraction of Pure Gold from a Summary of Paris), and which al-Tahtawi is presenting as a gift to his patron, Muhammad ʿAli.

Al-Tahtawi’s Counsel: the *Naṣīḥa* within the *Takhlis*

Given that al-Tahtawi engages in recognizable characteristics of *naṣīḥa* in the *Takhlis*, and keeping in mind Asad’s argument that *naṣīḥa* can be understood as an attempt at a definition of Islam, I now turn to the content of the *Takhlis* in order to clarify al-Tahtawi’s particular articulation of Islam. The text focuses, primarily, on the lack of sciences and practical technologies in Egypt. Al-Tahtawi suggests that the comparative disadvantage of the Ottoman Empire in this regard is due to its focus on the religious sciences, specifically *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), at the expense of the other sciences. It is this comparative advantage that worries al-Tahtawi, as it leaves the Ottoman Empire at the mercy of Europe’s military and cultural might. Thus, we can understand al-Tahtawi to be directing his *naṣīḥa* on the one hand to Muhammad ʿAli, who could be convinced to invest more public money in the sciences, but on the other hand to the conservative members of the ʿulamaʾ, who al-Tahtawi hopes to convince that the sciences, even those that are “foreign,” are not diametrically opposed to Islam and thus a threat.

Al-Tahtawi begins his description of the people of Paris by noting their love of science, and claiming that “they are in no ways prisoners of tradition. Rather, they wish to always know the origin of things, while seeking proof to support it” (2011: 177). This implicit critique of the ʿulamaʾ and their exclusive concern with abstract, esoteric religious questions becomes more explicit in a passage in which al-Tahtawi discusses the differences between scholars and priests in France. According to al-Tahtawi, in France, “when one talks of learned men, this refers to people who have a knowledge of the rational sciences, since their scholars are not very conversant with the branches of Christian theology. If in France people say, ‘this is a learned man,’ they do not mean by this that he is knowledgeable about his religion, rather that he has knowledge of one of the other sciences” (2011: 259). The division between priests and scholars is significant because the term “scholar” in Egypt would traditionally refer to the ʿulamaʾ who explicitly avoid studying the rational sciences. The implication, then, is that the ʿulamaʾ, by French standards, are not true scholars and do not even count as “learned men.”

Al-Tahtawi’s criticism of the ʿulamaʾ, however, should not be taken to mean that he was an adversary of Islam as a whole. Indeed, he dedicates a great deal of the text to proving his religious *bona fides*. The criticism of the ʿulamaʾ is not directed at their virtuous dedication to the Islamic religion, but rather to their blanket rejection of anything foreign and scientific as un-Islamic. Al-Tahtawi goes to great length to stress that, despite their advanced knowledge of the practical sciences, most French people are morally bankrupt precisely because of their irreligiosity. He is shocked, for example, that the French “reject anything that transcends the rational,” and that they “claim that the intellect of their philosophers and physicists is greater and more perceptive than that of prophets” (2011: 183). The French err, he argues, in the fact that they define the good, the bad, and moral principles in general on the basis of reason alone rather than on divine revelation. He includes an original poem pointing to the absurdity that the French are so advanced in the realm of knowledge, and yet so lacking in the realm of morals and religion:

*Is there another place like Paris*

*where the suns of knowledge never set*

*where the night of unbelief has no mornings?*

*Forsooth, is this not the strangest of things!* (2011: 256).

In positing multiple “suns,” al-Tahtawi is claiming that there exist a variety of different sources of knowledge, but that all knowledge, regardless of its origin, is potentially moral, and that the existence of a science in the absence of a coherent moral system based on the teachings of Islam is as paradoxical as there being both night and day at the same time. The provenance of knowledge does not make it either good or bad, but the manner in which it is used does. The sciences, broadly conceived and of diverse origins, can certainly be accommodated within al-Tahtawi’s vision of an Islamic world—indeed, they are necessary to ensure the survival of the Islamic world in the face of the rapidly-advancing Europeans. However, they are insufficient for the creation of such a world if they are not paired with the moral teachings of the Qurʾan, the hadith, and the religious scholarship of the ʿulamaʾ. One without the other is insufficient: without the material benefits of the European sciences, Islam will likely be overcome by the colonial ambitions of the European powers, but without the moral and spiritual guidance of Islam, the European sciences will inevitably lead to sin and distance from God.

As a result, despite their obvious moral shortcomings, al-Tahtawi does not believe that the knowledge imparted by French scholars should be thrown out wholesale, as a conservative member of the ʿulamaʾ would insist. Instead, he suggests that the beneficial elements of the European scientific project can be incorporated into an Islamic country without fear, as long as steps are taken to preserve the central moral characteristics of Islam. For example, al-Tahtawi encourages the study of the French language with the following caveat: “It is therefore necessary for anyone wishing to delve into the French language, which includes some philosophical elements, to be well versed in the Qurʾan and the sunna, in order to prevent him from being misled by this and his belief from weakening, and lest he should lose his footing” (2011: 255-256). So, while al-Tahtawi is certainly offering a critique of the ʿulamaʾ, it is a limited critique, and he clearly acknowledges the importance of the religious sciences in general. It would be wrong to suggest that he hopes to supplant traditional Egyptian and Islamic values with liberal, French ones.

In addition to the compatibility of the French sciences with Islam, al-Tahtawi asserts that the French political reforms are similarly compatible with proper Islamic forms of government. For example, in his discussion of the appearance of the concepts of freedom and equality in the French Constitutional Charter of 1814, he notes: “That which they call freedom and which they crave is what we call ‘justice’ [*ʿadl*] and ‘equity’ [*inṣāf*], inasmuch as ‘rule by freedom’ means establishing equality in judgments and laws so that the ruler cannot oppress any human being” (2011: 208). As the translator, Daniel L. Newman, clarifies in a footnote, “[t]he use of the Arabic terms *ʿadl* and *inṣāf* is of some significance since it relates the European concept of ‘freedom’ to classical Islamic notions of governance, in which the ruler is enjoined to eschew oppression (*ẓulm*), to act justly and lawfully and to ensure the welfare of his subjects” (2011: n.4, 208). Thus, in connecting the modern, liberal values of liberty and equality to the traditional Islamic ideals of *ʿadl* and *inṣāf*, ideals which are at the core of any Islamic form of government, al-Tahtawi is attempting to draw a specific analogy between the Charter of 1814 and Islamic juridical norms.

The most explicit critique directed at Muhammad ʿAli comes in one of the most poignant moments of the work, a chapter in which al-Tahtawi gives a first-hand account of the July Revolution of 1830 that ended the reign of King Charles X and led to the coronation of Louis Philippe I, who would later become known as the “bourgeois king.” Al-Tahtawi begins with a description of the warring factions of the revolt: on the one hand are the royalists, the majority of whom are “priests and their followers,” while on the other, are the liberals, who “have a predilection for freedom,” and are “philosophers, scholars, doctors and the majority of the population” (2011: 306). Given al-Tahtawi’s association with prominent French *philosophes* and scholars, such as the orientalists Silvestre de Sacy and Edme-François Jomard (the supervisor of the Egyptian mission to France), in addition to his above-mentioned disdain for the French priestly class, we need hardly guess where al-Tahtawi’s loyalties lay.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Interestingly, al-Tahtawi attempts to justify the representative government that the liberals hope for by noting its similarity to the *jumhūriyya iltizāmiyya* [*iltizām*-based republic[[8]](#footnote-8)] created by Hammam ibn Yusuf al-Hawari, a sheikh who led a revolt against the mamluks in the 18th century: “However, as the people cannot simultaneously govern and be governed, there must be people who represent them and are chosen by them to rule; this is ‘republican government’, and the leading members are called ‘senators’. This is similar to what happened in Egypt during the Hammam regime, when Upper Egypt was governed through *iltizām*-based majority rule [*jumhūriyya iltizāmiyya*]” (2011: 306-307).[[9]](#footnote-9) In the case of al-Hawari, a group *shuyūkh* (or village elders) take the place of senators in the French system, and are charged with representing the interests of their communities. It should be noted that although al-Tahtawi uses the term *jumhūriyya*, which nowadays is translated as “republic,” al-Tahtawi is only vaguely referring to any form of representative government rather than referring specifically to the European republican political tradition.

Al-Tahtawi’s loyalties are made even more explicit in his discussion of the events of the revolt. He blames the collapse of the monarchy directly on the failure of King Charles X to uphold and abide by the Charter of 1814, especially the ordinances protecting the freedom of speech and the freedom of the press. King Charles’ political blunders began when he appointed Auguste-Jules-Armand-Marie, Prince de Polignac, who, according to al-Tahtawi, “is famous for being unjust and oppressive,” as prime minister. Additionally, al-Tahtawi insinuates that Polignac is King Charles’ illegitimate son, subtly emphasizing King Charles’ lack of moral credibility while also making Polignac’s appointment as prime minister an act of nepotism (2011: 309). Fascinatingly, al-Tahtawi cites a hadith to justify the revolution: “In a hadith, we find the following: ‘*He who pulls out the sword of injustice, against him the sword of defeat is drawn, and sorrow will stay with him for ever*’” (2011: 309). Despite the fact that Polignac, not King Charles, committed the crimes, the revolution is justified based on the fact that King Charles “pulls out the sword of injustice” by appointing Polignac to such a prominent position. That King Charles’ ultimate downfall was caused by his reliance on an unreliable counsellor, Polignac, is significant. Al-Tahtawi implicitly suggests that Muhammad ʿAli will suffer the same fate as King Charles if he does not uphold the principles of good governance (freedom, justice, and equity), and if he relies on bad counsellors rather than good counsellors (presumably, like al-Tahtawi).

Conclusion: Tradition and Change

*Naṣīḥa* is a fascinatingly complex genre that implies the articulation of a definition of Islam on the part of the advice giver. As we have seen, this genre operates through al-Tahtawi’s *Takhlis*, not as a kowtowing means to justify authoritarianism and absolute monarchy, as some critics argue, but as a genuine attempt to assert an articulation of Islamic tradition as something that can accommodate and integrate newness and difference. Because of their characterization of *naṣīḥa* as sycophantic, for Gran, Euben, and Altman, al-Tahtawi either can be or cannot be described as a *nāsiḥ* depending on the degree to which they understand him to be a sycophant. This leads all three of them to an account of the text that is too heavily invested in the deference al-Tahtawi shows to Muhammad ʿAli and the apparent submissiveness of his character. Approaching the text with a more nuanced understanding of *naṣīḥa*, I have argued, significantly affects the way that we might read it. Rather than merely looking to curry favor with his liege, al-Tahtawi takes on a much more active role, subtly criticizing the guiding principles of Egypt and asserting his own conceptualization of Islam.

A reconsideration of al-Tahtawi’s and other 19th century thinkers allows us to move away from an assumption that many bring to the field in political theory that Islam is static and opposed to modernity and liberal values. Critics of Islam see it as a religion that places too much emphasis on tradition and claim that Islam must be refashioned to de-emphasize its past and accept the values demanded of it by Westerners. By being attentive to the moments of *naṣīḥa*  in the *Takhlis*, it becomes clear that al-Tahtawi offers a competing vision of Islam. Rather than replacing Islamic tradition with an Islam that is friendlier to the West, he conceives of Islamic tradition as something that, at its core, is open to tweaks and modifications over the centuries. These tweaks are not imposed from the outside, but rather develop from within the Islamic community in response to its interactions with non-Muslims.

The history of the genre of *naṣīḥa*, which has its roots primarily in the Byzantine Empire, lends credence to such an articulation of Islamic tradition. As Marlow notes, it is a deeply syncretic genre: “The later Umayyad period saw the initiation of a large-scale movement in which many works of advice were translated from Greek (usually via Syriac), Pahlavi and Sanskrit (via Pahlavi) into Arabic…The processes of transposition and adaptation continued within the Islamic world and beyond it, as works in Arabic passed into Hebrew, Latin, and European languages as well as into Persian, Turkish, and Urdu” (Marlow, n.d.). A litany of cultures, stretching from Spain to western China and the Indian subcontinent, have left an imprint on *naṣīḥa*. That *naṣīḥa* remains to this day an important genre of Islamic writing is a testament to the fact that Islam itself is such a rich tradition due to its integration of ideas and practices of diverse origins.

Al-Tahtawi offers *naṣīḥa* to the leaders of Egypt that Islam provides a coherent worldview that can accommodate change and the development of new and foreign sciences and forms of political organization. Al-Tahtawi’s goal is, fundamentally, to preserve the Islamic tradition at all costs—he suggests that if the Islamic world continues to lag behind Europe, it will be completely subsumed by it. However, he simultaneously does *not* wish to reform or refashion Islam so as to make it more liberal, more enlightened, or more European. Rather, al-Tahtawi mediates between tradition and progress so as to trouble a strictly defined boundary between the two. If Muslims conceive of Islamic tradition properly, they are not forced to choose between either tradition or progress, either religion or science––they can have both.

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1. For an example of such an interpretation of al-Tahtawi’s significance, see Heyworth-Dunne 1940; Lewis 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a more detailed discussions of *naṣīḥa* as a genre within the history of Islam, see Marlow, n.d. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Fascinatingly, Napoleon Bonaparte cites this hadith in a letter written to local Egyptian leaders in an attempt to assure them of the invading French army’s good intentions (al-Jabarti 2003, 103). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Pie le défunt” refers to Pope Pius VI, who was deposed by Napoleon in 1798 and died in prison the following year. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Al-Jabarti also provides a fascinating account of his own personal experiences with the Institut d’Egypte (2003: 109-110). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For example, ibn Battuta makes clear his opinion of the popular yet controversial scholar, ibn Taymiyya, in the process of describing the city of Damascus: “There was living in Damascus [a certain] Taqīal-Dīn Ibn Taimīya, one of the principal Ḥanbalite doctors there, a man greatly esteemed and able to discourse on various sciences, but with some kink in his brain” (1958: 135). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In addition to discussing at length his relationship with Edme-François Jomard throughout the text, al-Tahtawi includes in the *Takhlis* a number of correspondences between him and a variety of French scholars including Silvestre de Sacy, Caussin de Perceval, Jules Saladin, and Joseph-Toussaint Reinaud (2011: 284-291). He also explicitly mentions that he read the work of French *philosophes* like Rousseau, Voltaire, and Montesquieu, and expresses admiration for their erudition (2011: 295-297). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The *iltizām* system was the Ottoman tax farming method that began in the 16th century and was abolished during the Tanzimatreforms of the 19th century. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. According to Daniel Newman, this passage is notable for being the first instance in which the Arabic word *jumhūriyya* is used in its modern sense to mean the word “republic” (2011: n.3, 307). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)