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*Islam Meets Western Modernity:  
The Travels of Rifa'a al-Tahtawi (1801-1873) and Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966)*

**ABSTRACT:** *This article considers how childhood experiences, the religious climate, role models, and the sociopolitical atmosphere of the age shaped the attitudes of two Egyptian intellectuals and world travelers, Rifa'a al-Tahtawi (1801-1873) and Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966). Based on the comparison of Tahtawi's travel account and Qutb's various writings, it proposes an interdisciplinary approach to the study of personalities.*

**KEYWORDS:** *modern history; Egypt; France; U.S.; Rifa'a al-Tahtawi; Sayyid Qutb; travel narratives; personalities; Islam; Western modernity*

*Introduction*

The French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) once remarked that Americans exist in “perpetual adoration” of themselves and that “only foreigners or experience can make certain truths reach [their] ears.”<sup>1</sup> Traveling can be a perfect remedy to expand one’s horizon, and Tocqueville’s words extend well beyond Americans. Myriad individuals have traversed distant lands, and some of them—including Marco Polo, Ibn Battuta, and Mark Twain—have shared their observations in rich ethnographic accounts that have been cherished by later generations. In the age of modernity, travel narratives have become even more intriguing as they often highlight the head-on collision between the once frail West and other regions of the world. A case in point, the travel accounts of Rifa'a al-Tahtawi (1801-1873) and Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), two Muslim thinkers of Egyptian background, reveal not just inter-civilizational differences but also differences in their respective thoughts. Tahtawi visited France in 1826 and returned to his native Egypt by 1831. As for Qutb, he journeyed to the United States in 1948 and returned to Egypt by 1950. Utilizing an interdisciplinary approach, this article demonstrates how factors like childhood experiences and the religious climate shaped Tahtawi’s and Qutb’s attitudes during their visits to the West, and how role models and the sociopolitical *Zeitgeist* of the age impacted these two Egyptian intellectuals. Their experiences reveal the different responses to modernity in the realm of Islamic thought—differences which would frame the wider Islamic discourse throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Rifa'a al-Tahtawi’s travel account, *An Imam in Paris*,<sup>2</sup> covers every facet of his visit to France, from the streets he walked—via education—to gender interaction, and Daniel L. Newman’s introduction to this primary source superbly contextualizes Tahtawi’s text. In addition, Albert Hourani’s classic study *Arabic*

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<sup>1</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* [1835], trans. Arthur Goldhammer, introduction by Olivier Zunz (New York: Library of America Paperback Classics, 2012), 345.

<sup>2</sup> Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi, *An Imam in Paris: Account of a Stay in France by an Egyptian Cleric (1826-1831)*, trans. Daniel L. Newman (London: Saqi, 2011).

*Thought in the Liberal Age* (1962)<sup>3</sup> sheds light on Tahtawi's ideas, as well as those of other Arab reformers during the "liberal age" (1789-1939). Turning to Sayyid Qutb, the essay "The America I Have Seen"<sup>4</sup> contains his observations of the United States, even though his account is not as prodigious as Tahtawi's. Qutb's *A Child from the Village*<sup>5</sup> and *Social Justice in Islam*<sup>6</sup> are also critical sources as they exhibit the role that Qutb's childhood played in forming his attitude toward the West. James Nolan's *What They Saw in America* (2016),<sup>7</sup> an ethnographic work *par excellence*, contextualizes Qutb's experiences and compares them to the narratives of other thinkers. The standard scholarly work on Qutb's mentor Hassan al-Banna and the latter's revivalist Egyptian movement (which Qutb joined in the 1950s), is Richard P. Mitchell's *The Society of Muslim Brothers* (1969).<sup>8</sup> As for general works, this article employs Eugene Rogan's *The Arabs* (2009),<sup>9</sup> which introduces a number of relevant historical primary sources. It also refers to sociologist Charles Selengut's *Sacred Fury* (2017)<sup>10</sup> for the various academic theories that attempt to explain religious violence, and to jurist Khaled Abou El Fadl's *The Great Theft* (2007)<sup>11</sup> for Islamic extremism, especially Wahhabi thought.

Methodologically, this article is informed by the assertion of the Renaissance polymath Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) that everything is inextricably connected and that one discipline cannot be grasped without having full knowledge of several others.<sup>12</sup> It takes an interdisciplinary perspective – drawing on the fields of history, psychosociology, political science, religious studies, and anthropology – to understand Tahtawi's and Qutb's mindsets and to suggest this methodological procedure for the study of other personalities. Its first part considers Tahtawi's and Qutb's early upbringing, their place of origin, and the religious atmosphere that surrounded them. This is followed by a discussion of the thinkers' role

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<sup>3</sup> Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1798-1939* (first published 1962; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Sayyid Qutb, "The America I Have Seen," in *America in an Arab Mirror: Images of America in Arabic Travel Literature, 1668 to 9/11 and Beyond*, ed. Kamal Abdel-Malek and Mouna El Kahla, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 9-27.

<sup>5</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *A Child from the Village*, ed. and trans. John Calvert and William E. Shepard (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *Social Justice in Islam*, trans. John B. Hardie (New York: Octagon Books, 1980).

<sup>7</sup> James L. Nolan, Jr., *What They Saw in America: Alexis De Tocqueville, Max Weber, G. K. Chesterton, and Sayyid Qutb* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (first published 1969; New York: ACLS History E-Book Project, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: A History* (first published 2009; London: Penguin Books, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> Charles Selengut, *Sacred Fury: Understanding Religious Violence*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Waqas Ahmed, "The Mind of Leonardo da Vinci," *Philosophy Now* 134 (2019): 26-27.

models. The article's final part reflects on the respective sociopolitical undertones that molded Tahtawi's and Qutb's personalities. Both men were intellectuals from Egypt who traveled to the West for educational reasons—albeit to different destinations and in different centuries—and shared their insights.

### *I. Childhood Experiences and Religious Climate*

In sociological discourse, parents, schools, and religious groups are considered “agents of socialization” which shape an individual's self-concept, values, and conduct.<sup>13</sup> The two Arab thinkers considered here were not immune from these agents and should thus be examined accordingly.

Rifa'a al-Tahtawi was born in 1801 in the city of Tahta in Upper Egypt to a well-respected family of *shouyoukh* (scholars) and *qudat* (judges). He was trained in the Islamic sciences, studied the Arabic language and theology, and eventually became an educator at Cairo's Al-Azhar University,<sup>14</sup> an institution that continues to train Muslim scholars today. Tahtawi became a scholarly celebrity: an expert on the *Hadiths*,<sup>15</sup> logic, rhetoric, poetry, and prosody,<sup>16</sup> his specializations reflected the multifaceted nature of the education provided by Al-Azhar University, one of Islam's oldest and most prestigious institutions of higher learning.

Born in 1906, just over a century after Tahtawi, in the village of Musha in Upper Egypt, Sayyid Qutb did not hail from a family of Muslim scholars, nor was he trained at an Islamic institution. While a lack of religious training does not necessarily produce a dangerous mind, dangerous minds are almost never literate in the Islamic sciences: the leaders of most Islamic movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Qaeda, and ISIS have been engineers or doctors who have lacked religious training.<sup>17</sup> Commenting on Qutb and Maududi (1903-1979), another Islamist, legal scholar Khaled Abou El Fadl has noted that,

[i]t is not surprising that neither Qutb nor Maududi were trained jurists, and their knowledge of the Islamic jurisprudential tradition was minimal [...] Qutb imagined Islamic law to be a set of clear cut, inflexible, and rigid positive commands.<sup>18</sup>

Historian William Shepard underscores Abou El Fadl's assessment:

He [Qutb] defines the *jahili* [ignorant and corrupt] society as “every other society than the Muslim society.” *Jahili* societies may be anti-religious or religious in diverse ways [...] Likewise, ethically, “There are no agrarian ethics and no industrial ethics [...] There are no capitalist ethics or socialist ethics. There are only Islamic ethics and *jahili* ethics.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Davita Silfen Glasberg and Deric Shannon, *Political Sociology: Oppression, Resistance, and the State* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 2011), 56.

<sup>14</sup> Rogan, *Arabs*, 85.

<sup>15</sup> *Hadiths* are the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>16</sup> Tahtawi, *Imam in Paris*, 33.

<sup>17</sup> Abou El Fadl, *Great Theft*, 19.

<sup>18</sup> Abou El Fadl, *Great Theft*, 82-83.

<sup>19</sup> William E. Shepard, “Sayyid Qutb's Doctrine of ‘Jahiliyya’,” *International Journal of Middle*

According to Qutb, human society consists of the true faithful and those who live in a state of *jahiliyya* (ignorance and unbelief); it is therefore imperative for all Muslims to migrate to the realm of true Islam because failure to migrate will cause Muslims to become infidels.<sup>20</sup> If the realm of true Islam does not exist Qutb advises Muslims to isolate from the rest of society. According to Abou El Fadl:

[Qutb suggests that] [a]fter withdrawing and forming their own community, it is incumbent upon Muslims to expend every effort at founding the true Islamic state. [Abou El Fadl points to] Qutb's willingness to declare Muslims to be apostates [...] Qutb accused the vast majority of Muslims of being hypocrites and heretics.<sup>21</sup>

Commenting on some of Qutb's tendencies, his contemporary, the Egyptian thinker Hasan al-Hudaybi (1891-1973), asserted that the habit of excommunicating was incongruent with Islamic tradition, and that Muslims had not all sunk into a state of pre-Islamic ignorance but had remained Muslims even if they had become somewhat Westernized. Describing the whole Islamic world as "ignorant" and stating that Islam did not exist in the modern period was a convoluted charge which alienated many of Qutb's contemporaries, including his mentor Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949). Hudaybi emphasized that sovereignty rested with the people, since a theocratic system was alien to Islamic theology, and that a comprehensive utopian state with the divine will as its only sovereign would be impossible.<sup>22</sup> Ali Gomaa, the former *mufti*<sup>23</sup> of Egypt, describes in televised interviews that Qutb never attended Friday congregational prayer since he considered Egypt an abode of unbelief and held that Islamic society had not existed for centuries.<sup>24</sup> Gomaa is a graduate of Al-Azhar University where Qutb is considered a heretic.<sup>25</sup> Qutb's *démodé* antithetical labels of *dar al-kufr* (abode of unbelief) and *dar al-Islam* (abode of Islam) had already been rejected by a number of medieval jurists who had affirmed that the abode of Islam need not be under Muslim ownership. To many premodern jurists – particularly the Hanafi school of the Persian scholar Al-Sarakhsi (d. 1090) – the abode of Islam is the entity where Muslims are secure and can practice their religion.<sup>26</sup> Thus, contrary to Qutb's assertions, Muslims need not withdraw from society, even if Islamic rule is not applied, but can exist in any

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*East Studies* 35, no. 4 (2003): 521-545, here 525.

<sup>20</sup> Abou El Fadl, *Great Theft*, 83.

<sup>21</sup> Abou El Fadl, *Great Theft*, 82-83.

<sup>22</sup> Abou El Fadl, *Great Theft*, 84.

<sup>23</sup> A *Mufti* is a Muslim jurist entitled to issue expert opinions on Islamic law.

<sup>24</sup> Ali Gomaa, "[Sayyid Qutb did not pray on Fridays because believed to be in a land of unbelief]," *YouTube* video [Arabic], 3:12, May 11, 2017; CBC Egypt, "[Ali Gomaa: Sayyid Qutb was the one who invented that Muslim countries are lands of infidelity]," *YouTube* video [Arabic], 1:33, March 30, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Gilles Kepel, *The Prophet and Pharaoh: Muslim Extremism in Egypt*, trans. Jon Rothschild (London: Al Saqi, 1985), 58.

<sup>26</sup> Tariq Ramadan, *To Be a European Muslim: A Study of Islamic Sources in the European Context* (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 1999), 125.

realm where their freedom of religion is safeguarded. According to the Muslim scholar Al-Shawkani (1759–1839), “[a] territory can be considered *dar al-Islam*, even if it is not under Muslim rule, as long as a Muslim can reside there in safety and freely fulfil his religious obligations.”<sup>27</sup> While prevalent among some medieval theologians and constructed to make sense of their period’s geopolitical realities in which war – in contrast to today – was the default position and peace the exception,<sup>28</sup> Qutb’s dualistic labels were anachronistic in his own age and beyond. Furthermore, the concepts of the abode of Islam and the abode of unbelief are not found in the *Qur’an* or the *Hadiths*.

With regard to warfare, Qutb called on Muslims to oust the secular regimes of their societies and replace them with divine governance according to the *Shariah*. His worldview called for a vanguard of true Muslims to implement God’s law. In Qutb’s writings, one discerns frustration with the rhetoric of defensive *jihad*. To Qutb, *jihad* is purely expansionist and an instrument against all forces that might limit the Muslims; thus, to him, it is only through *jihad* that the Islamic community can realize justice and freedom. In Qutb’s own words,

[s]ome enemies of Islam may consider it expedient not to take any action against Islam, if Islam leaves them alone in their geographical boundaries [...] But Islam cannot agree to this unless they submit to its authority.<sup>29</sup>

Qutb’s theology of power departs radically from the majority of classical medieval Islamic jurists: while Qutb considered the enemies’ non-Islamic faith as the *casus belli*, most medieval jurists viewed the enemies’ aggression – not their religion *per se* – as the *casus belli*. The Hanafi, Maliki, and Hanbali schools of jurisprudence all linked *jihad* to the persecution of Muslims.<sup>30</sup> For times of war, these jurists and even the Shafi’i school (which backed offensive *jihad*) affirmed that the environment and non-combatants should be spared.<sup>31</sup>

All this underscores the important role that religious climate plays in the development of an individual’s mindset. Qutb’s binary and simplistic approach to Islam, based on his lack of religious training, paved the way for his misaligned outlook toward the United States and, by extension, the West which Qutb saw as

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Magomed Gizbulaev, “Legal Discourses on *Hijra* in the Caucasus after the Fall of the Caucasus Imamate: al-Risala al-Sharifa by the Dagestani Scholar ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Thughuri,” in *Political Quietism in Islam: Sunni and Shi’i Practice and Thought*, ed. Saud al-Sarhan (first published 2019; London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2020), 145-170, here 152.

<sup>28</sup> Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im, “Upholding International Legality against Islamic and American Jihad,” in *Worlds in Collision: Terror and the Future of Global Order*, ed. Ken Booth and Tim Dunne (London: Palgrave, 2002), 162-171, here 166.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Ahmed Al-Dawoody, *The Islamic Law of War: Justifications and Regulations* (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 75.

<sup>30</sup> Khaled Abou El Fadl, “Islam and Theology of Power,” *Middle East Report* 221 (2001): 28-33, here 29.

<sup>31</sup> John L. Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 32.

an abode of ignorance and corruption in opposition to his imagined society of the true faithful. Qutb's attitude toward the West might have developed differently had he pursued a religious path like Tahtawi. Qutb's black-and-white mindset contributed to his sense of aloofness and alienation during his stay in the United States, yet he saw this very attitude as a hallmark of true Islamic belief.<sup>32</sup>

There is a scholarly consensus that Qutb's upbringing and lack of Islamic training contributed to his future distaste of the United States. In the words of historian John Calvert, "Qutb viewed the United States not with fresh eyes but rather through the tinted spectacles of a man long captive to a particular view of the world."<sup>33</sup> Adiel Suarez Murias agrees with Calvert:

While many believe Qutb's time in America drastically influenced and fueled his anti-Western resentment and distrust, these sentiments were firmly in place before Qutb's journey. He took the trip alone, however, experiencing America as a lone Muslim surrounded by non-Muslim strangers.<sup>34</sup>

Anthropologist James Toth adds that Qutb's visit to the United States made him hate Western civilization even more than had been the case before his visit.<sup>35</sup>

Tahtawi, on the other hand, did not subscribe to such polarized discourse. As the recipient of several *ijazahs*,<sup>36</sup> as a lecturer at Al-Azhar University, and as an Islamic theologian *par excellence*, Tahtawi was much more nuanced with regard to Islam. In fact, his religious training appears to have given him a *raison d'être* for his travels: he utilized several *Hadiths*<sup>37</sup> to show the permissibility of travel in the pursuit of knowledge even to a land of polytheism. Tahtawi stated: "There is no harm in traveling to a place where a person's faith is not in danger, particularly if it involves an advantage of this kind."<sup>38</sup>

According to Tahtawi, the Prophet Muhammad himself had declared the acquisition of "knowledge by which one benefits"<sup>39</sup> permissible, and Tahtawi cited the body of Muslim scholars to validate the importance of science, stating that, "[t]here is a consensus among religious authorities that next to the Book [i.e.,

<sup>32</sup> Adnan A. Musallam, *From Secularism to Jihad: Sayyid Qutb and the Foundations of Radical Islamism* (first published 2005; Westport: Praeger, 2010), 121.

<sup>33</sup> John Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism* (first published 2010; London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers Ltd, 2018), 143.

<sup>34</sup> Adiel, Suarez-Murias, "'Jihad Is the Way and Death for the Sake of Allah Is Our Highest Aspiration': A Narrative Analysis of Sayyid Qutb's *Milestones*" (master's thesis, Wake Forest University, 2013), 3.

<sup>35</sup> James Toth, *Sayyid Qutb: The Life and Legacy of a Radical Islamic Intellectual* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 68.

<sup>36</sup> *Ijazah* is a certificate which authorizes its recipient to pass on a specific text, usually issued by an authorized teacher to a student.

<sup>37</sup> Tahtawi, *Imam in Paris*, 109.

<sup>38</sup> Tahtawi, *Imam in Paris*, 109-110.

<sup>39</sup> Indira Falk Gesink, "Islamic Reformation: A History of *Madrasa* Reform and Legal Change in Egypt," *Comparative Education Review* 50, no. 3 (2006): 325-345.

the *Qur'an*] and *Hadith*, science is the best and the most important of all things.”<sup>40</sup> Tahtawi argued against the dichotomy between religious and non-religious subjects, affirming that legal scholars – in accordance with the precepts of Islam – ought to study history, administrative techniques, military arts, and economics to benefit themselves. In addition, he considered it *halal* (good) for laws to change according to circumstances. As Hourani affirms, Tahtawi, “[h]imself well versed in the religious law, a Shafi’i by legal rite, [...] believed it was necessary to adapt the *Shariah* to new circumstances and that it was legitimate to do so.”<sup>41</sup> Tahtawi viewed it as imperative that there be a partnership between the *ulama* (Muslim preachers), scientists, and rulers. As Hourani explains, “[t]he traditional idea of a partnership between ruler and *ulama* has been brought up to date, and the idea of the *ulama* reinterpreted in terms of Saint Simon’s ‘priesthood’ of scientists.”<sup>42</sup>

Tahtawi also recognized that public opinion played a pivotal role in the modern age – unlike the past when government had been a secret activity. He realized that the modern age had to be rooted in “good relations between rulers and ruled” and that a universal political education had to be furnished.<sup>43</sup> Unlike Qutb, whose primitive religious views led him to a strictly binary distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims, Tahtawi stressed the Islamic protection of the *dhimmi*,<sup>44</sup> affirming that these should be allowed full religious freedom and that it was legitimate for Muslims to be in their company.<sup>45</sup> Such attitudes were the driving force behind Tahtawi’s perception of France, and he utilized the examples of Muhammad and his companions at every turn.<sup>46</sup> Meanwhile, Qutb lacked Tahtawi’s scholarly depth and religious knowledge; in fact, his trip to the United States was arranged by the Egyptian and American governments to facilitate a higher level of moderation in his views.<sup>47</sup>

Tahtawi emphasized that, in his assessment, Westerners fit into the category of the refined, cultured, and civilized who had reached the peak of urbanization. Meanwhile, he applied the category of the wild savages to Blacks and the category of the uncivilized barbarians to the Arabs of the desert.<sup>48</sup> Prior to his trip to France, Tahtawi had on several occasions visited Cairo’s *Institut d’Égypte*, where the European sciences were propagated, and it was there that he made the acquaintance of Frenchmen who had been hired by the Egyptian ruler in 1824 to

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<sup>40</sup> Tahtawi, *Imam in Paris*, 98.

<sup>41</sup> Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 75.

<sup>42</sup> Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 76. Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825) was a French scholar of the Enlightenment.

<sup>43</sup> Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 76.

<sup>44</sup> *Dhimmi* denotes the protected status of non-Muslims under Islamic rule.

<sup>45</sup> Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 80.

<sup>46</sup> Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 73.

<sup>47</sup> Makki Al Tahir, “Qutb and Three Unpublished Letters,” *Al Hilal* (October 1986): 120-130.

<sup>48</sup> Tahtawi, *Imam in Paris*, 102-104.

train the viceroy's army.<sup>49</sup> Tahtawi was not just an expert on Islamic scholarship; he was also familiar with the Western philosophical tradition. According to Hourani,

[Tahtawi] read books on ancient history, Greek mythology, geography, arithmetic, and logic; a life of Napoleon, some French poetry, including Racine, Lord Chesterfield's letters to his son, [...] Voltaire, Condillac, Rousseau's social contract, and the main works of Montesquieu.<sup>50</sup>

Referring to linguist Myriam Salama-Carr, Jenna Allen points to Tahtawi's nuance and objectivity – factors which molded his attitude during his travels:

[Tahtawi] negotiates conflicting discourses of modernity and tradition through his use of parallels between French and Islamic civilizations to connect and familiarize the other's values and experiences [...] the imam describes the Seine in comparison to the Nile, and the different types of Parisian roads in comparison to Cairene roads.<sup>51</sup>

Hourani claims that Tahtawi was the first writer to articulate the notion of an "Egyptian nation" and who rooted this concept in Islamic precepts.<sup>52</sup> Thus, in a way, Tahtawi's attitude toward France was the product of a dialogue between Islamic and Western thoughts.

While their respective religious background is one factor that explains Tahtawi's and Qutb's attitudes toward the West, their families and places of birth need to be considered as well because the latter also serve as "agents of socialization." Tahtawi's childhood, unlike Qutb's, was a relatively carefree one: his family was showered with respect and enjoyed considerable standing in the community since reputable scholars filled its ranks.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, Tahtawi was proud of his prestigious ancestry and referenced it on numerous occasions.<sup>54</sup> Qutb's childhood, on the other hand, was wrought by problems: his family was forced to sell some of their land due to economic woes. In addition, Qutb witnessed the abuse of fellow villagers – an experience which resonated with him throughout his life.<sup>55</sup> Qutb's difficult childhood pushed his mother to encourage him to become part of the *effendi*<sup>56</sup> class to increase his family's prestige and financial status.

These biographical details explain why Tahtawi and Qutb approached their travels differently. The trauma of seeing peasants in his village abused led Qutb to write a book on *Social Justice in Islam*. With social justice as one of his highest concerns, Qutb found this trait utterly lacking in America; to him, the United States

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<sup>49</sup> Tahtawi, *Imam in Paris*, 34.

<sup>50</sup> Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 69.

<sup>51</sup> Jenna Allen, "Negotiating Modernity: An Imam in Paris" (master's thesis, University of Colorado, 2013), 3.

<sup>52</sup> Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 69.

<sup>53</sup> Tahtawi, *Imam in Paris*, 30.

<sup>54</sup> Tahtawi, *Imam in Paris*, 30.

<sup>55</sup> Nolan, *What They Saw in America*, 165.

<sup>56</sup> *Effendi* is a title of respect for someone of high education or social status.



were saturated with toxic individualism and cut-throat capitalism, a far cry from the communal ethos of his fellow villagers. To Qutb, this toxic individualism was exemplified by Americans rarely leaving their yards to interact with others and by individual gardens reflecting their owners' selfish, utilitarian, and noncommunal attitudes. Meanwhile, Qutb viewed his own village as utopian:

The largest agricultural holding was not more than two hundred *faddans* [about 207 acres], and there was hardly an individual or family that did not have a piece of land, whether large or small. The distribution of land diminished the class differences and created a condition of personal pride in the relationships between people.<sup>57</sup>

The treatment of Native Americans and Blacks also angered Qutb,<sup>58</sup> including what he saw as America's obsessive concern with profit in the markets.<sup>59</sup> With his "agrarian distributist" mentality, Qutb did not embrace a society he saw as materialistic. Interestingly enough, Qutb himself was subjected to racism during his stay in the United States as people falsely assumed him to be African American.<sup>60</sup> To Qutb, America's racism was even uglier than that of the Nazis.<sup>61</sup>

There is an additional aspect that explains Qutb's future outlook on the United States, and it also pertains to his village of Musha. After moving away from Musha, Qutb eventually became both a member of the *effendi* class and familiar with Western theory, yet he was still chained by his village experiences. Qutb recalled how he was moved by the plight of his fellow villagers, including their joy when they worked the land:

When the men are in the fields they can forget their sorrows. The bright sunlight fills their souls and brightens them, and the sprouting of the seeds in the black earth causes dim hopes to grow in their souls even though in their profound simplicity they cannot perceive them.<sup>62</sup>

Toth notes that Qutb was by no means a cosmopolitan: he continued to idolize the local and traditional wisdom of the peasant villager as someone to follow rather than dismiss.<sup>63</sup> Considering Qutb's reverence for his village, it becomes clear why he disliked the United States so much. In contrast to his native Egypt, Qutb saw in America an indifference to nature<sup>64</sup> as well as a lack of contemplation and a high level of discontent.<sup>65</sup> Yet, it can be argued that Qutb was himself discontented. To utilize sociologist Peter Berger's terminology, Qutb was in a sense homeless in the

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<sup>57</sup> Qutb, *Child from the Village*, 115.

<sup>58</sup> William E. Shepard, *Sayyid Qutb and Islamic Activism: A Translation and Critical Analysis of "Social Justice in Islam"* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 59.

<sup>59</sup> Shepard, *Sayyid Qutb and Islamic Activism*, 350.

<sup>60</sup> Nolan, *What They Saw in America*, 186.

<sup>61</sup> Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb*, 154.

<sup>62</sup> Qutb, *Child from the Village*, 131.

<sup>63</sup> Toth, *Sayyid Qutb*, 52.

<sup>64</sup> Nolan, *What They Saw in America*, 166.

<sup>65</sup> Musallam, *From Secularism to Jihad*, 117.

cosmos and yearning to restore divine meaning.<sup>66</sup> Due to his disenchantment with modernity, Qutb's heart could not be alleviated by bureaucratic efficiency and rationality, since he observed in all societies an absence of God's law.

Qutb was, of course, not alone as someone molded by his environment. Carrying on his shoulders a vast Islamic tradition, Tahtawi looked at France as a realm of unbelief and at the French as Christians in name only, and he complained about the role of religion in French society, noting that "[a]nother of their bad customs is their claim that the intellect of their philosophers and physicists is greater and more perceptive than that of prophets."<sup>67</sup> Tahtawi's travel account criticizes the way French men were slaves to women,<sup>68</sup> the casual interaction between the sexes, and the small degree of chastity exhibited by women.<sup>69</sup> Tahtawi pointed out that the French were not charitable<sup>70</sup> and that they spent too much time on personal pleasures instead of praying during their free time.<sup>71</sup> Similar to Qutb's assertion of discontent among Americans, Tahtawi viewed the French as fickle and frivolous.<sup>72</sup> Unlike Qutb, however, Tahtawi acknowledged many rather positive traits, such as the French's curiosity, their passion for all things new, and their enthusiasm for change;<sup>73</sup> he also admired their work ethic, dignity, keeping of promises, sincerity, honesty, and gratitude.<sup>74</sup>

The difference in attitude between Tahtawi and Qutb may also be explained by the socioeconomic structures of the United States, which, in many ways, contradicted the precepts of the Islamic tradition. More so than France, the United States idolize the individual and prioritize boundless profit seeking,<sup>75</sup> whereas Islam rejects the cult of the individual and the pursuit of excessive wealth. Qutb even linked Americans' obsession with the dollar to their mocking treatment of the subject of death.<sup>76</sup> This is why the French thinker Gustave de Beaumont (1802-1866) had criticized the American farmer for merely utilizing his land as an industrial material, treating his cottage akin to a factory, and why the German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) had complained about the absolute individualism of American farmers' economics and their attitude as

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<sup>66</sup> Peter L. Berger, *Facing Up to Modernity: Excursions in Society, Politics, and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

<sup>67</sup> Tahtawi, *Imam in Paris*, 180.

<sup>68</sup> Tahtawi, *Imam in Paris*, 177.

<sup>69</sup> Tahtawi, *Imam in Paris*, 178.

<sup>70</sup> Tahtawi, *Imam in Paris*, 175.

<sup>71</sup> Tahtawi, *Imam in Paris*, 177.

<sup>72</sup> Tahtawi, *Imam in Paris*, 174.

<sup>73</sup> Tahtawi, *Imam in Paris*, 174.

<sup>74</sup> Tahtawi, *Imam in Paris*, 176.

<sup>75</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to Americas National Identity* (first published 2004; New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 67-69.

<sup>76</sup> Nolan, *What They Saw in America*, 177.

businessmen.<sup>77</sup> With regard to the Americans' indifference toward nature, Qutb cited Alexis de Tocqueville who, incidentally, was Tahtawi's contemporary and had made similar remarks.<sup>78</sup> Qutb noticed this capitalist ethos even in American churches and criticized American religious institutions for using entertainment to draw people.<sup>79</sup> According to Qutb,

[i]f the church is a place of worship in the entire Christian world, in America it is for everything but worship. You will find it difficult to differentiate between it and any other place. They go to church for carousal and enjoyment, or as they call it in their language "fun."<sup>80</sup>

Violence in sports, on the whole, is more commonly associated with America than France, and Qutb saw American football as a pure gladiatorial exhibition, feeding on the raw, primitive impulses of the fans and players. He also complained about Americans' "agitated herd mentality,"<sup>81</sup> which raises the question whether such a condition is peculiar to the American ethos: Alexis de Tocqueville, the English author G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936), and the Lebanese American scholar Philip K. Hitti (1886-1978) all made similar remarks.<sup>82</sup> Both Tocqueville and Chesterton pointed to America's tyranny of majority and conformist tendencies which, in their view, failed to truly safeguard the freedom of opinion.<sup>83</sup>

While Qutb viewed culture in American society as primitive—be it music (jazz), art, or film (with its focus on cowboys or policemen), Tahtawi saw culture in French society as sophisticated. To Tahtawi, the high-level culture of the French not merely extended to the arts but to the French themselves whom he found friendly and tolerant even toward strangers. While Tahtawi—like Qutb—disagreed with the performance of gender roles in the West, Tahtawi did regard French women as nice and amiable company. Furthermore, in contrast to Qutb's assertion that Americans are not considerate, Tahtawi saw the very opposite in France: "The basic principle with the French is that everything is done for the sake of beauty and elegance, rather than for [excessive] ornamentation, the outward show of wealth or vainglory."<sup>84</sup> Tahtawi's statement stands in sharp contrast to

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<sup>77</sup> Gustave de Beaumont, *Marie or, Slavery in the United States* [1835], trans. Barbara Chapman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 64; Peter Ghosh, "Max Weber on 'The Rural Community': A Critical Edition of the English Text," *History of European Ideas* 31, no. 3 (2005): 327-366.

<sup>78</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont in *America: Their Friendship and Their Travels*, ed. Olivier Zunz, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 411.

<sup>79</sup> American churches as businesses and outlets for leisure have also been discussed by other scholars; see, for example, Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (first published 1985; London: Methuen, 2007), 121.

<sup>80</sup> Qutb, "America I Have Seen," 19.

<sup>81</sup> Sayyid Qutb, "Hama'im fi New York" ["Pigeons in New York"], *al-Kitab* (Cairo), Sana 4, no. 10 (December 1949): 666-667.

<sup>82</sup> Nolan, *What They Saw in America*, 173.

<sup>83</sup> Nolan, *What They Saw in America*, 181.

<sup>84</sup> Tahtawi, *Imam in Paris*, 218.

Qutb's description of Americans as people of arrogance and insincerity. Finally, Tahtawi – unlike Qutb – praised the politics of the country he visited, including its freedom of expression, access to the press, the equality of all its citizens before the law, and their capability to attain any office.<sup>85</sup> He also expressed his sympathy for the July 1830 Revolution in France, affirming the view that the people had the right to set aside a monarch if their rights were not preserved.<sup>86</sup> In the words of Eugene Rogan: "The reformist cleric [i.e., Tahtawi] was captivated by the way the French constitution promoted the rights of common citizens rather than reinforcing the dominance of elites."<sup>87</sup> Yet, it would be too simplistic to attribute Qutb's cynical outlook during his trip solely to America's particular ethos. That his perspective was vastly different from Tahtawi's ultimately resulted from the fact that he and Tahtawi experienced different childhoods, faced different religious climates, and lived in very different historical periods.

## II. Role Models

Another agent of socialization that is fundamental to an individual's development is the charismatic leader. Weber alludes to this type of leader whose authority derives from his charisma.<sup>88</sup> To understand Tahtawi and Qutb, one must understand role models that shaped them.

When reading Tahtawi's travel account, one can clearly see a person entranced by the positivist realm – something that is absent from Qutb's narrative. What, then, accounts for Tahtawi's enthusiasm for the sciences, which Qutb does not seem to share? The answer lies in the personality of the distinguished Egyptian scholar Shaykh Hassan al-Attar (1776–1835). Attar was more than just an educator to Tahtawi: he was his mentor and friend. It was ultimately Attar who helped Tahtawi go on his educational mission to France – a mission sponsored by the viceroy of Egypt, Muhammad Ali (1769–1849).<sup>89</sup> Attar bridged the Islamic and "secular" sciences, instilling in his student a love for poetry as well as geography, history, astronomy, and medicine.<sup>90</sup> Thus, Tahtawi was simultaneously permeated by religious, literary, and scientific influences which would shape his outlook on the West – an advantage he had over Qutb. Tahtawi also shared Attar's opinions with regard to Islamic reformation. As Newman affirms,

[Attar] was one of the few *ulama* to establish contact with members of the Institut d'Égypte, and was invited to witness their experiments [...] his close intercourse with French scholars

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<sup>85</sup> Tahtawi, *Imam in Paris*, 194–213.

<sup>86</sup> Tahtawi, *Imam in Paris*, 194–213. See Rogan, *Arabs*, 87–88.

<sup>87</sup> Rogan, *Arabs*, 87.

<sup>88</sup> See Max Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building: Selected Writings*, ed. Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

<sup>89</sup> William Cleveland and Martin Bunton, *A History of the Modern Middle East*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2013), 86.

<sup>90</sup> Tahtawi, *Imam in Paris*, 32.

aroused his interest in the modern European sciences and raised the awareness of their importance to the development of his own country.<sup>91</sup>

Based on his early encounter with Attar, Tahtawi came to approach the West not as the “other” but as a partner in a dialogue: the West had originally benefitted from the Islamic world, and now the Islamic world had to borrow from the West – from what had originally been hers. Attar also bequeathed to Tahtawi the art of nuance, arguing that the answers for the advancement of the Muslims lay not in blindly copying the Europeans but in taking the things which might benefit Muslim societies and rediscover the treasury of Islamic culture and science.<sup>92</sup> According to Newman,

[Tahtawi] was very much part of a traditional Islamic scholarly tradition, as his literary output clearly shows, and it is therefore difficult to see that he could have conceived of “progress” as being rooted in anything other than divine law.<sup>93</sup>

The other thing Attar passed on to Tahtawi was interaction with Europeans. As Newman notes, Attar referred to the French as a “peaceful people” who are violent only toward those who make war on them.<sup>94</sup> This may explain Tahtawi’s cautious celebration of the West, a characteristic that mirrored Attar’s celebratory style. Articulating Tahtawi’s vision, historian John Livingston writes:

Tahtawi appears to see an Egypt remade in the image of an Islamic Enlightenment, wherein religion forms a legal and constitutional framework which limits and gives moral guidance to the power of a benevolent despot, and science acts as the intellectual and moral driving force creating cultural renewal.<sup>95</sup>

Qutb’s role models were of a different kind, and his perception of the United States and the West derived from these role models. His secular influences certainly included Carl Schmitt (1888-1985), a German political theorist and member of the Nazi Party,<sup>96</sup> and initially also the Egyptian polymath Abbas Mahmoud al-Aqqad (1889-1964). Qutb was also familiar with Wahhabism,<sup>97</sup> a very conservative branch of Islam.<sup>98</sup> In a sense, all these influences resurfaced when he visited the United States. While of a secular bent, Aqqad and the Diwan

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<sup>91</sup> Tahtawi, *Imam in Paris*, 35.

<sup>92</sup> Tahtawi, *Imam in Paris*, 35.

<sup>93</sup> Tahtawi, *Imam in Paris*, 36.

<sup>94</sup> Tahtawi, *Imam in Paris*, 35.

<sup>95</sup> John W. Livingston, “Western Science and Educational Reform in the Thought of Shaykh Rifa’a al-Tahtawi,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28, no. 4 (1996): 543-564, here 552.

<sup>96</sup> Roxanne L. Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism: A Work of Comparative Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 199, 181; Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Islam and Modernities* (London: Verso, 1993), 77-101; Ahmad S. Moussalli, *Radical Islamic Fundamentalism: The Ideological and Political Discourse of Sayyid Qutb* (Beirut: American University of Beirut Press, 1993).

<sup>97</sup> Abou El Fadl, *Great Theft*, 82.

<sup>98</sup> On Wahhabism, see Abou El Fadl, *Great Theft*, 47.

poetry school with their subjective, romantic, and aesthetic characteristics<sup>99</sup> impacted Qutb because Aqqad's romantic outlook made sense of the personal alienation that was suffocating Qutb during and after his university days. Indeed, in Qutb one detects a man of utter discontent who does not feel quite at home. Qutb's inner unease partially resulted from his transition from his rural origins in Musha to the city of Cairo. In the absence of the social network to which one is accustomed, sustaining one's "self" becomes difficult. The rural comfort and home from which Qutb became disconnected was embodied in the figure of his mother.<sup>100</sup>

Meanwhile, Tahtawi was also influenced by Muhammad Ali to whom he referred as the second Macedonian.<sup>101</sup> The viceroy monopolized the wealth of Egypt, used revenue to establish a bureaucratic state, and created the first peasant mass army in the Near East. Yet, it was Muhammad Ali's embrace of Westernization that left its mark on Tahtawi. Like Attar, Muhammad Ali drew on European ideas and technology, and he embarked on one of the earliest industrialization enterprises outside of the European continent. He also Europeanized the army, dispatched education missions to the capitals of Europe, and created a translation bureau.<sup>102</sup> According to Hourani,

[Tahtawi] sees in Muhammad Ali and his successors the legitimate heirs of the Pharaohs, trying to revive the glories of Egypt by following the same principles; they too have given equality to all, subjects and foreigners alike.<sup>103</sup>

It is evident that Tahtawi's perception of France, which is – on the whole – more appreciative of the West, owes much to his role model Muhammad Ali.

In Qutb's case, the political role models who shaped his sentiments toward the United States were, yet again, of a different kind and included none other than Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Society of Muslim Brothers (otherwise known as the Muslim Brotherhood). Living in Egypt during the first half of the twentieth century, Banna was troubled by the presence of Christian and Bahai missionaries, by the elite circles of theosophy, and by secular trends in his own country. Even at the Egyptian University, Banna sensed the presence of atheism, which to him was as disturbing as the nightclubs that filled Cairo's entertainment districts. Banna hoped to see a response from Egypt's scholars; yet all he saw was quietism.<sup>104</sup> This is why the literary critic Muhammad Mustafa Badawi describes the decade of the 1930s as one colored by existential angst and disillusionment.<sup>105</sup> The Society of

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<sup>99</sup> Toth, *Sayyid Qutb*, 20.

<sup>100</sup> Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb*, 66.

<sup>101</sup> Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 73.

<sup>102</sup> Rogan, *Arabs*, 67-68, 85, 88.

<sup>103</sup> Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 81.

<sup>104</sup> Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb*, 81.

<sup>105</sup> Muhammad Mustafa Badawi, *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 128.

Muslim Brothers, which Qutb embraced after the 1930s, engaged in a process called displacement and splitting. According to psychiatrist John E. Mack, groups like these direct their anger and frustration at their enemies while claiming purity and goodness for themselves.<sup>106</sup> Banna's movement should be understood in this context. Qutb's role model advocated for a united Islamic front against Western imperial forces<sup>107</sup> and for the Islamization of society instead of an Islam relegated to the private sphere.<sup>108</sup> This attracted Qutb who saw in the America he visited a country bent on crushing the doctrinal, ethical, and practical facets of Islam:<sup>109</sup>

Islam is the real force that resists the force of the materialistic thought worshipped equally in Europe, America, Russia, and China [...] [Islam] contains the universal, complete, and harmonious conception concerning existence and life [...] that gives life a spiritual basis.<sup>110</sup>

Banna shaped Qutb's attitude in yet another fundamental way, namely, through his obsession with Nazism and his belief that enemies – Jews and non-Jews – must be fought to gain victory.<sup>111</sup> Qutb came to share this sentiment.<sup>112</sup> Both he and Banna were obsessed with the notion of struggle and change, yet lacked a clear perspective for the moment when power would be fully attained by their followers. Neither Qutb nor fascist theorists like Schmitt actually envisioned what a stable and functioning order would look like once all internal and external wars would be finished.<sup>113</sup> Both fascists and radical Islamists like Qutb envision cultures as monolithic, static entities; in other words, the world is dualistic: “us” against “them.” According to Mack, such a mindset is a defense mechanism which enables individuals to see their problems as residing within their enemies, thereby giving purpose to their discontent. The language of violence is seen as a redeeming force by both fascists and militant Islamists alike, and symbolic empowerment is very much at play.<sup>114</sup> Qutb and Schmitt – as well as the Italian scholar Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923) and the French philosopher Georges Sorel (1847-1922) – emphasized the non-rational and inspirational undertones of these worldviews.<sup>115</sup> In addition, Qutb's fascist connection should be viewed in the wider context of an anti-

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<sup>106</sup> See Selengut, *Sacred Fury*, 72.

<sup>107</sup> Tommy Larsson, “The Islamist Ideology of Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb: A Comparative Analysis” (master's thesis, University of Oslo, 2017).

<sup>108</sup> Mitchell, *Society of the Muslim Brothers*, 242.

<sup>109</sup> Quoted in Shepard, *Sayyid Qutb and Islamic Activism*, 287.

<sup>110</sup> See Shepard, *Sayyid Qutb and Islamic Activism*, 350.

<sup>111</sup> Tony Duheume, “ANALYSIS: The Nazi Roots of Muslim Brotherhood,” *Al Arabiya News* [English], June 27, 2018 (updated May 20, 2020).

<sup>112</sup> Micah Halpern, “Islamic Extremism and White Nationalism Both Salute Nazism: Groups’ Core Philosophies Directly Borrow from Hitler’s,” *Observer*, August 21, 2017.

<sup>113</sup> Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (first published 1991; London: Routledge, 2016), 39.

<sup>114</sup> Vamik D. Volkan, *Cyprus-War and Adaptation: A Psychoanalytic History of Two Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1979), ix-xxi.

<sup>115</sup> Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb*, 213.

Westernism that was generally dominated by German-language theorists like the poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926), the philosopher and Nazi-supporter Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), and the author Ernst Jünger (1895-1998).

Finally, Qutb's Islamist debt to secular personalities includes Alexis Carrel (1873-1944), a French medical scientist who was sympathetic to fascism. Qutb's article in *Majallat al-Shu'un al-Ijtima'iyya* shows his infatuation with Carrel<sup>116</sup> whom he saw as a paragon of anti-Westernism. Qutb agreed with Carrel that life is, in essence, a work of art which cannot be reduced to its parts.<sup>117</sup> Carrel's distinction between spiritual and material components appealed to Qutb as well. Both stood against an increasingly modern and materialistic Western culture, and both rejected the Enlightenment which, in their view, had plunged people into spiritually dead networks of control and discipline. To them, rather than encouraging communalism and compassion, Western modernity had produced utilitarianism and toxic individualism, and was obsessed with the machine at the expense of the soul.<sup>118</sup> Their views are, of course, part of the greater neo-Romantic war against the manifestations of industrialization.

### III. The Sociopolitical Atmosphere

Lastly, one factor that explains Tahtawi's and Qutb's difference in attitudes is the respective sociopolitical climate they experienced. Western colonialism was simply more pronounced during Qutb's time, including Westernization in the ranks of the Egyptian masses. Banna, the founder of the Society of Muslim Brothers, agreed that such Westernization was rampant and stated: "We are weary of this life of humiliation and restriction. They [Muslims and Arabs] are not more than mere hirelings belonging to foreigners."<sup>119</sup> During Qutb's time, Egypt also witnessed aggressive forms of proselytism:

Egyptians across religious divides often experienced missionary seduction, attempts to divert one from her truth into Protestantism, as an attack (ta'n) on the collective body that, despite its limited success, caused moral injury on the communal level.<sup>120</sup>

During Tahtawi's time, on the other hand, Westernization was still at an earlier stage and was not yet reaching the general populace. This point is reinforced by Tahtawi's contemporary and fellow theologian Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti (1753-1825). Jabarti's account reveals the extent to which the Egyptian masses were unaware of Westernization and modernization during the Napoleonic invasion of their country (1798-1801). According to him, Egyptians displayed ignorance and

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<sup>116</sup> Sayyid Qutb, "Fi Mustaqbal Amal wa Furas: Muhayya'a li-Istiqlal," *Majallat al-Shu'un al-Ijtima'iyya* 4 (January 1943): 30-32, here 31.

<sup>117</sup> See Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb*, 91.

<sup>118</sup> Qutb, "Fi Mustaqbal Amal," 30-31.

<sup>119</sup> Quoted in Mitchell, *Society of the Muslim Brothers*, 5.

<sup>120</sup> Jeffrey Culang, "Liberal Translations: Secular Concepts, Law, and Religion in Colonial Egypt" (PhD dissertation, City University of New York, 2017), 26.



bewilderment toward the French's scientific experiments: "They [i.e., the French] had strange things in [the institute], devices and apparatus achieving results which minds like ours cannot comprehend."<sup>121</sup> Many Muslims present during these experiments wondered whether French scientists could make it so that Egyptians would be in Morocco and Egypt at the same time, yet others saw the experiments as a form of alchemy.<sup>122</sup> According to Hourani, Tahtawi lived during a happy interlude of history where religious tensions between the Abrahamic religions were relaxed and had not yet been displaced by the new turmoil between East and West. In Hourani's words: "In his [i.e., [Tahtawi's] thought, there is no sense of Europe's being a political danger. France and Europe stood not for political power and expansion but for science and material progress."<sup>123</sup>

The Enlightenment's notion of progress likely shaped Tahtawi's outlook, as he had faith that technological innovations would eventually lead to humanity coming together and living in peace.<sup>124</sup> By Qutb's time, however, Western colonialism was felt more intensely. Qutb's contemporary Banna spoke about the political and social confusion that had befallen Egypt and how he and his friends had been moved to tears as students in Cairo.<sup>125</sup> Banna was also distraught by the luxurious homes of the British in Egypt and the miserable hovels of the Egyptian masses.<sup>126</sup> According to British author Karen Armstrong, "[t]he parties engaged in fruitless and vociferous debate and were still manipulated by the British [...] The British kept a firm hand on the economy and public utilities."<sup>127</sup>

Meanwhile, during Tahtawi's lifetime, Islam was more firmly rooted in Egypt. Just a few years before Tahtawi's birth, even Napoleon had played the Islamic card and claimed his allegiance to the Islamic tradition and to Muhammad. One century later, Banna and Qutb witnessed the spreading of Western ideas on a large scale in newspapers, journals, and magazines that were anti-Islamic in tone.<sup>128</sup> Banna was particularly concerned with Egyptians turning away from the mosque<sup>129</sup> – an institution traditionally considered inseparable from the life of a Muslim. Clearly, during Qutb's and Banna's period, a noticeable segment of the population was beginning to partake in a life of secularism and Westernization:

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<sup>121</sup> 'Abd al-Rahman Al Jabarti's *History of Egypt*, ed. Thomas Philipp, Moshe Perlmann, and Guido Schwald, 4 vols. and Guie (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1994). 3:2.

<sup>122</sup> J. G. Alger, "Napoleon in Egypt," *Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature, Science, and Art* 68, no. 6 (December 1898): 750-760, here 756.

<sup>123</sup> Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 81.

<sup>124</sup> Hourani, *Arabic Thought*, 81.

<sup>125</sup> Mitchell, *Society of the Muslim Brothers*, 4-5.

<sup>126</sup> Mitchell, *Society of the Muslim Brothers*, 242.

<sup>127</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (first published 2000; New York: Harper Perennial, 2004), 219.

<sup>128</sup> Armstrong, *Battle for God*, 219.

<sup>129</sup> Armstrong, *Battle for God*, 219.

They had access to European-style modern social clubs, urban private social spaces, horse racing, schools, casinos, resorts and other tourist destinations with alcohol, mixed-gender dance halls, and swimming pools, as well as Western music and dress codes and fashion.<sup>130</sup>

That these educated Egyptian elites posed a problem is underscored by historian Tommy Larsson: “[Banna] found himself incomprehensibly against the educated Egyptian elite in the country who blindly enfolded Western values to a considerable extent.”<sup>131</sup> Thus, society in Egypt and, by extension, other Arab countries was gradually changing under the influence of European powers. Recognizing the extent of this secularization, Qutb remarked:

When humanity closes the windows to faith in religion, faith in art, and faith in spiritual values altogether, there remains no outlet for its energy to be expended except in the realm of applied science and labor, or to be dissipated in sexual pleasure.<sup>132</sup>

Qutb’s attitude was rooted in the deep concern that the entire world might eventually become like the United States.<sup>133</sup> According to scholar Fernando Reese,

[l]ooking back at Egypt, Qutb seemed to fear that what he saw as the banality of the religious environments in the United States could transform the religious life of Muslim societies as well.<sup>134</sup>

Watching Muslims copying Westerners, Qutb diagnosed a defeated mentality in the Muslim *ummah* (community). Psychologically, Qutb was dealing with the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance – a phenomenon described by the American psychologist Leon Festinger whereby two beliefs are dissonant with each other if they do not fit together.<sup>135</sup> In Qutb’s Egypt, religion was no longer in the “public square” – to use theologian Richard Neuhaus’s term<sup>136</sup> – but it was merely in the personal realm, solely tied to leisurely activities and life-cycle events. Secularism, self-expression, and individualism had diminished the once pivotal role of religion and relegated personalities like Qutb to a place of a cognitive minority. As Selengut affirms, “intellectual and government elites look down upon the cognitive minority religions, consider them primitive, even irrational, and ignore

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<sup>130</sup> Mohammad Salama and Rachel Friedman, “Locating the Secular in Sayyid Qutb,” *The Arab Studies Journal* 20, no. 1 (2012): 104-131, here 113.

<sup>131</sup> Larsson, “Islamist Ideology,” 21.

<sup>132</sup> Qutb, “America I Have Seen,” 14.

<sup>133</sup> Jamaludin Noordin Ibrahim, “The Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb” (master’s thesis, University of St. Andrews, 1988), 142.

<sup>134</sup> Fernando Rees, “Clash of Constructed Perceptions: A Frame Analysis of Sayyid Qutb and Samuel Huntington” (master’s thesis, The American University of Paris, 2011).

<sup>135</sup> Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails: A Social and Psychological Study of a Modern Group That Predicted the Destruction of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956), 25.

<sup>136</sup> Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

or deny their beliefs.”<sup>137</sup> As we have seen, Berger and Festinger emphasize the human desire for an established social network to cultivate one’s sense of self and preserve one’s concept of reality. Selengut’s statement concerning the intellectual and government elites reinforces Larsson’s observation with regard to Qutb’s position toward the educated Egyptian elites whom he mistrusted. Reacting to the cognitive dissonance, Qutb adopted a militant approach. Tahtawi, meanwhile, opted for reinterpretation: he negotiated or, as theorists call it, “cognitively bargained” with modernity.<sup>138</sup> Unlike Qutb, Tahtawi had not experienced the abuse of villagers, nor do we get the impression that he considered himself a cognitive minority; this enabled him to develop a much more objective and appreciative attitude.

There is another way to assess Qutb’s outrage, namely, via the parameters of Freudian and Girardian theories. According to Sigmund Freud, religion—while an illusory thing—provides humans with *mythos* (i.e., a narrative) that serves to reduce their innate aggression; without this *mythos*, aggression might spill badly into society. René Girard also discussed the place of rituals and myths in religions:

For Girard, religious institutions are critical to the wellbeing of society because religion functions to defuse the anger and aggression that inevitably develop among people by providing rituals that serve as an outlet for real anger and fury.<sup>139</sup>

Yet, when myths and rituals are challenged by the secular, modern Western world, the worst may happen, and “actual” rather than symbolical scapegoating may occur. In Girardian terms, Qutb’s hostility to the United States and the West in general can be explained as a product of “mimetic desire,” namely, the desire to take on the idealized attributes of the “other”—in this case the powerful and dominating West. During Tahtawi’s lifetime, myths and rituals were not yet under siege; hence, violence—from a Girardian perspective—was contained.

There are additional reasons why Qutb’s attitude toward the United States was bleaker than Tahtawi’s perception of France. Firstly, the issue of Zionism was nonexistent during Tahtawi’s time. However, when Qutb came to the United States, his view of the country was already compromised due to America’s support for Zionist ideas.<sup>140</sup> Secondly, communism was unknown during Tahtawi’s time. Qutb, on the other hand, viewed both the communist and the capitalist blocs as real threats.<sup>141</sup> Finally, Qutb’s trauma of witnessing the abuse of villagers shaped his future resentment and darker outlook at the West in general.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Selengut, *Sacred Fury*, 54.

<sup>138</sup> Peter L. Berger, “Some Sociological Comments on Theological Education,” *Perspective: A Journal of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary* 2 (Summer 1968): 127-138.

<sup>139</sup> Selengut, *Sacred Fury*, 41-44; René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* [1972], trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 143-168.

<sup>140</sup> Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb*, 121.

<sup>141</sup> Shepard, *Sayyid Qutb and Islamic Activism*, 350.

<sup>142</sup> Qutb, *Child from the Village*.

### Conclusion

Childhood experiences and religious climate shaped both Rifa'a al-Tahtawi's and Sayyid Qutb's attitudes. The former's attitude was largely a product of his relatively carefree childhood and thorough religious training, while Qutb's mindset was formed by his – at times – traumatic childhood and lack of religious training. More fundamentally, Qutb's attitude may be explained by the role models who influenced him, including Aqqad, Banna, and Schmitt. Tahtawi, on the other hand, was inspired by role models like Attar who combined Islamic and Western scholarship as well as science, and Muhammad Ali who encouraged the exposure to Western ideas. As for the sociopolitical atmosphere of their times, this article has highlighted the immense gap between Tahtawi's and Qutb's respective experiences with colonialism. Tahtawi's Egypt was not yet ruled by the British, and Westernization was not yet prevalent among the masses. Qutb, however, had to reckon with British rule, Zionism, and communism, and he found his fellow Egyptians, on all levels of society, much more vulnerable to secularization.

Future research on Tahtawi and Qutb may consider the effect of colonialism on religious institutions and assess the scope of Westernization in Egypt during Tahtawi's and Qutb's respective careers. More research is also needed to understand the connection between religious illiteracy and dualistic, militant mindsets. Guided by Leonardo da Vinci's notion of universal interconnectedness, this article has sought to demonstrate its findings by combining historical, psychological, sociological, anthropological, religious, and political approaches. By engaging in "system thinking" with its principles of "connectedness, relationships, and context,"<sup>143</sup> scholars are certainly better equipped to study complex questions such as the ones raised here.

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<sup>143</sup> Ahmed, "Mind of Leonardo da Vinci," 26-27.