

The Congruent Critique of Despotism in 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi and Shaykh 'Ali Abdel-Raziq⁽¹⁾

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The question of political and religious despotism is investigated here through an examination of the most important manifestations of the congruent critique, made by two prominent modern Arab thinkers: al-Kawakibi and Abdel-Raziq. The study aims to demonstrate that they have various critical features in common despite their multiple differences, since the goal of critiquing despotism, whether political or religious, is the critique of politics from inside using its own tools. Both thinkers worked ceaselessly to sow the seeds of enlightened thinking in order to break the essentialist and interest-based links between the political and religious domains and re-establish the relationship between them according to a modern, and rational understanding..

Despotism Politics Religion Nahda Al-Kawakibi Abdel-Raziq Islamic Caliphate

In this study, we wish to examine the question of political and religious despotism in *Nahda* (Arab renaissance) thought. We will consider the extent to which pioneers of the *Nahda* concerned themselves with this question, examining the overt and latent relationships between the two, based on representations of the question of religion and religious power by political actors in Islamic Arab heritage and the nature of subsequent political and intellectual effects. In doing so, we will attempt to identify the extent to which this shaped the project of the *Nahda* in modern Arab thought.

This attempt adopts as its frame of reference the experience of two pioneering thinkers in the *Nahda* movement during the nineteenth century and at the turn of the twentieth: 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi (Part One) and Shaykh 'Ali 'Abdel Raziq (Part Two).

By congruency in critique of political and religious despotism, I mean that the critiques of al-Kawakibi and Abdel-Raziq overlap closely, whether in the sense of their explicit, *nahda*-related concerns as prominent reformists, or in how that concern manifested in their thinking and their discourse. By congruency, however, and for the purposes of this discussion, I do not mean that al-Kawakibi and Abdel-Raziq spoke and acted in harmony with one another. I mean rather that, given that they both took as their starting point a *nahdawī* and reformist concern and were united by their burning awareness of the grave difference between their reality and that of other, more socially, politically and religiously advanced countries, a number of their concerns intersect with one another; principally the critique of political and religious despotism as a necessary entry-point to the hoped-for renaissance (*Nahda*).

Part One: Al-Kawakibi: Critiquing politics with politics

This section discusses various aspects of 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi's (1854-1902) critique of despotism. Although he dealt with various aspects of despotism in connection to other fields, including religion, science, finance, education, grandeur, and progress, I will look particularly at the issue of how

political despotism relates to these fields and the extent to which it makes use of them, especially religion. Both contemporaneous and former rulers invested in these fields to bolster their political power, while simultaneously employing this power to construct their trajectories and images.

¹ This study was originally published in Issue 20, Spring 2017 of the quarterly journal on philosophy and cultural studies, Tabayyun.

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Section One: Al-Kawakibi as a political thinker

This section will attempt to analyze the political vision that was the focus of 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi's work as a pioneer during the *Nahḍa* period. The vision he presented of politics and its misuse, and the machinery with which politicians were required to conduct the affairs of state, were new to the literature of the *Nahḍa*, which began in the middle of the nineteenth century. This means we are presented with a new kind of thinker and political practitioner, open to new perspectives on the meaning of politics.

Al-Kawakibi sets out by declaring that the primary cause of the lethargy experienced by the Islamic *ummaḥ* is the very structure of politics and government: "It became clear to me that political despotism was the source of the disease".⁽³⁾ We must understand this statement in the context of the man's personal trajectory. The statement is not the product of a detached thinker reflecting on politics. Instead, it must be linked to al-Kawakibi's experience of repression and arbitrary government in Syria under the Ottoman Empire. This experience was extensive: Al-Kawakibi worked in various sectors including commerce, government and journalism, particularly during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when he "entered official state employment at the age of twenty-eight [...] was appointed editor of the official gazette [...] an honorary clerk at the provincial Education Board (*Majlis al-Ma'ārif*) [...] and an executive commissioner in Aleppo *vilayet* [...] then a member of the Commercial Court in Aleppo *vilayet*",⁽⁴⁾ in addition to other official positions.

The scope of al-Kawakibi's work begins and ends with politics and the practice of power as he directly experienced and observed it. As previously indicated, he also evokes other fields, such that "whoever declares, for example, that the source of the disease lies in a neglect for religion, grows puzzled when he asks himself: why did people neglect religion in

the first place? And whoever declares that difference of opinion is the disease is left bewildered when trying to find the cause of the difference [...] thus he finds himself in an endless vicious circle".⁽⁵⁾ Here, al-Kawakibi's argument serves to refute rather than prove anything positive. Islam cannot be the origin of the disease, since religion – any religion – is in the eyes of its adherents the path to happiness in this world and reward in the hereafter. Similarly, the problem cannot lie with difference of opinion, given that human society is based on difference and diversity. Rather, the disease lies in the nature of the political system that tends towards despotism and its kind. The answer, meanwhile, is embodied to his mind in the devotees of "political science" as it was promoted in European countries.

In addition, we observe that al-Kawakibi treats politics scientifically, in the manner of the ancient philosophers. For him it is a broad and multifaceted science, having separated from philosophy. He uses the term "political scientist" to describe people such as Plato, Aristotle, Ibn al-Muqaffa' and Ibn Khaldun who approached politics from other disciplinary fields, including philosophy, history and ethics. He defines this science as "the management of public affairs based on wisdom",⁽⁶⁾ and its opposite is the management of public affairs based on whim.

We can infer two things from this. The first is methodological, that al-Kawakibi was reluctant to propose a definition of politics, preferring instead to talk about it as a series of separate fields. This reluctance appears to make sense, since he adopts a descriptive approach, rather than one based on a particular methodology. Thus he does not define politics as a basis for a discussion of what it is, but rather into a discussion of what it is not, in such a way that that we are presented with a negative definition of politics. The second salient issue relates to the specific terms that al-Kawakibi selects and employs. We find him contrasting two extremes, wisdom and whim, in order to demonstrate the essential contradiction between politics as a science based on psychology

3 'Abd al-Rahman Al-Kawakibi, *Ṭabā'ī' al-Isṭibād wa-Maṣāri' al-Isṭi'bād [The Nature of Despotism]*, ed. with intro. by Muhammad Imarah. 2nd edition (Cairo: Dar al-Shorouk, 2009) p. 15.

4 Sa'd Zaghul Al-Kawakibi, *'Abd ar-Rahmān al-Kawākibī: as-Sīrah adh-Dhātīyah ['Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi: A Biography]*, Beirut: Bissan Publishing and Distribution, 1998), pp. 18 - 19.

5 Al-Kawakibi, *The Nature of Despotism*, pp. 15 - 16.

6 George Katurah, *Ṭabā'ī' al-Kawākibī fī Ṭabā'ī' al-Isṭibād [The Nature of Al-Kawakibi on the Nature of Despotism]* (Beirut: University Foundation for Studies, Publishing and Distribution, 1987), p. 29.

and ethics, and despotism as a shameless practice that can only emanate from sick and depraved individuals.

Thus politics is power in the hands of a government. Either such a government regulates public affairs using a model derived from the states that pioneered this approach (such as the British political model) and based on treaties, agreements and the conscious and active will of the nation and its representatives, or this "unimpeded government behaves as it pleases in national affairs".⁽⁷⁾ This was the reality that al-Kawakibi inhabited and critiqued: a state of despotism that can only be abolished through a combination of responsibility, oversight and accountability. As such, the cure for this disease is "constitutional consultation (*shūrā*)".⁽⁸⁾ We find al-Kawakibi seeking the reader's pardon for his presentation of ideas from Western political thought. He believed that in the case of Europe, periods of despotism were followed by revolutions and democracy, and when Western despots were ousted, fair governments replaced them and implemented a state of affairs that the circumstances had helped to establish. When, on the other hand, eastern despots were removed from power, they were simply replaced by still worse forms of despotism; "thus all these Roman, Greeks, Americans, Italians, Japanese *et cetera* are nations like us, and recovered having been completely drained of all the resources required for political life".⁽⁹⁾

Al-Kawakibi draws a link between the despotism of the despot, the deference of his subjects and the oppression and evil that emerge as a result. As with most pioneering thinkers of the *Nahḍa* – Muhammad 'Abduh's humble reference to 'citizenship' (*muwāṭānah*) notwithstanding – he does not use the term 'citizen' (*muwāṭīn*) but 'subject' (*ra'īyah*). If a despot only derives his power from the sycophants that surround him, he holds sway over people's lives "by his will, not theirs, and puts them on trial based on his desire, not their law".⁽¹⁰⁾ He only behaves in

this way because he has been able to acquire the loyalty of the rich and the powerful, and by drawing his support from "the lowest in virtue, morals and science, appointing them the judges of free persons and making them masters over those who are more distinguished".⁽¹¹⁾ Despotism thus emerges as the product of fear generated by public ignorance; when ignorance is removed, fear disappears, the situation is reversed and despotism is lifted.

Anyone reading this particular point of al-Kawakibi's, whereby he links despotism to fear, will be reminded of another political scholar, the Frenchman Étienne de La Boétie (1530-1563), his critique of the disease afflicting the people under the rule of '*les Seigneurs*', and his discussion of the treatment necessary to stop such illnesses. He analyses the enslavement of the people and proposes an explanation based on human tendencies, the role of despots, their regimes and styles of rule. In this context, he explains: "For the present I strive to understand how it happens that so many men, so many villages, so many cities, so many nations, sometimes suffer under a single tyrant who has no other power than the power they give him; who is able to harm them only to the extent to which they have the willingness to bear with him; who could do them absolutely no injury unless they prefer to put up with him rather than contradict him [...] not constrained by a greater multitude than they, but simply, it would seem, delighted and charmed by the name of one man alone whose power they need not fear, for he is evidently the one person whose qualities they cannot admire because of his inhumanity and brutality toward them".⁽¹²⁾

Al-Kawakibi and de La Boétie not only find common ground in their consideration of the reasons for the spread of despotism — how people become habituated to it —but in the way they set out their views. If it is true to say that al-Kawakibi's style is "descriptive and reportorial"⁽¹³⁾ and does not set out

7 Al-Kawakibi, *Nature of Despotism*, pp. 23 - 24.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

9 'Abd al-Rahman Al-Kawakibi, *Umm al-Qurā: wa-Huwa Ḍabṭ Mufāwāḍāt wa-Muqarrarāt Mu'tamar an-Nahḍa al-Islāmiyya fī Makka al-Mukarrama 'Ām 1316H [Mother of Villages: A Record of Discussions and Decisions Taken at the Islamic Nahḍa Conference Convened in Mecca in 1316 AH]*, introduction by Fatimah Hafiz (Cairo: Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 2014)

10 Al-Kawakibi, *Nature of Despotism*, p. 26.

11 Al-Kawakibi, *Mecca*, p. 231.

12 Étienne De La Boétie, *The Politics of Obedience: The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, trans. Harry Kurz (Alabama: The Mises Institute, 1975) p. 42.

13 Katurah, p. 35.

to prove anything or draw any conclusions, then it would be mistaken to see de La Boétie's essay as its Arabic translator has - as one based on "proof that advances rationally by means of deduction,"⁽¹⁴⁾ on the basis that its discursive construction is so enchanting.

It remains to be said that al-Kawakibi's style is characterized by pessimism and sorrow. The reader may find this understandable, given al-Kawakibi's sufferings under the scourge of despotism and his critique thereof and his ultimate aim of promoting reform and renaissance. This is particularly true since, as with other reformists, his thought and desire oscillate between his listless backward and stagnant reality and the "ideal model" he hoped to install on the ruins of the old reality. He draws on this "ideal model" following his examination of thought in civilised countries - countries that simultaneously exhibited coercive and colonial tendencies.

This runs contrary to Hassan Hanafi's conclusion that *The Nature of Despotism* is only "an examination of qualities, origins and characteristics, not of the political, social and economic situation. It is a philosophical, not a sociological study."⁽¹⁵⁾ I believe that the harshness and pressure of this reality caused al-Kawakibi, as with other *Naḥḍa* leaders, to write as he wrote, in a style infused with passion: doing politics by writing on politics.

Section Two: On The Congruent Critique of Despotism

Here I pose the same question as numerous other researchers have regarding the secret to al-Kawakibi's enduring courage in the face of a world where freedoms, including the freedom to write and publish, were strictly limited. Did this have to do with the nature of al-Kawakibi's personality? Was it related to

how broad his analysis was, and how he compared the situation in his country to the situation of the civilized countries of his time, given that he was monolingual? Or was it the fact that his sharp awareness, the product of his abundant life experience, caused him to venture off the beaten track? Perhaps it was this, since "he was sharp, cutting and rejected all shades of despotism, whether political or religious."⁽¹⁶⁾ Fahmi Jad'an argues that "al-Kawakibi is surely the first Arab to have conducted a serious analysis of despotism, despite drawing several of his ideas about despotism from the Italian writer Vittorio Alferi (1749-1803)".⁽¹⁷⁾

We assume that al-Kawakibi may have studied Alferi's writings, whether directly or indirectly, particularly if we consider that he had a strong relationship with the Italian diaspora in Aleppo at that time and his enlightenment sensibility was increased through his "close contact with the broad Italian diaspora resident in Aleppo, specifically in al-Jalūm (the area where al-Kawakibi was born and lived)".⁽¹⁸⁾ If we return to Alferi's book on despotism, it becomes apparent that it intersects with al-Kawakibi's book in its cutting critique and its focus on a group of overlapping issues – despotism, despots, freedom, fear *et cetera* – in a cutting analytical and critical style. We see his definition of despotism: "We must without hesitation apply the term despotism to every government comprised of one person charged with implementing the law, where he is able to implement it, tamper with it, abuse it, interpret it, fail to implement it or delay in doing so, or avoid implementing it at all in order to protect himself from being exposed to punishment".⁽¹⁹⁾

It is essential to examine the context of al-Kawakibi's courage and the extent of his knowledge, since any link between the element of fear and the way he saw it, as the principal cause of submissiveness to political and religious despotism, did not occur in a vacuum,

14 Étienne De La Boétie, *Maqālat al-'Ubūdiyyah at-Ṭaw'īyyah [The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude]*, trans. 'Abud Kasuhah (Beirut: Arab Organization for Translation, 2008), p. 93.

15 Hassan Hanafi, "Ṭabā'ī' al-Isībād wa-Maṣāri' al-Isī' bād: Qirā'a Jadīda ["A New Reading of Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi's *The Nature of Despotism*"] in Ahmad Al-Qadi 'Arafat et al., *Falsafat al-Hurriyyah [The Philosophy of Freedom]*. Produced by the 17th Philosophical Conference organised by the Egyptian Philosophical Association at the University of Cairo (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 2009), p. 177.

16 Samir Abu Hamdan, *'Abd ar-Raḥmān al-Kawākibī wa-Falsafat al-Isībād [Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi and the Philosophy of Despotism]* (Beirut: World Book Publishing, 1992), p. 9.

17 Fahmi Jad'an, *Usus al-Taqaḍdum 'ind Mufakkirī al-Islām fi-l-'Ālam al-'Arabī al-Ḥadīth [The Foundations of Progress among Islamic Thinkers in the Modern Arab World]* (Beirut: Arab Network for Research and Publishing, 2010), p. 292; Hanafi, footnote 5, p. 177 also refers.

18 Muhammad Jamal Barut, *Ḥarakat al-Tanwīr al-'Arabīyya fi'l-Qarn al-Tāsi' 'Ashar: Ḥalaqat Ḥalab Dirāsah wa-Mukhtārāt [The Arab Enlightenment Movement in the Nineteenth Century: A Study and Extracts from the Aleppo Circle]* (Damascus: Syrian Ministry of Culture Publications, 1994), p. 128.

19 Alfieri Vittorio, *On Despotism*, M. Merget (trad.), (Paris: Molini Books, 1802), p. 10; compare with al-Kawakibi's definition of despotism in: al-Kawakibi, *Nature of Despotism*, p. 23 ff.

but rather through his study of foreign theoretical and political practices as well as his study of the historical lived experience of Muslims in general (with specific regard to the Ottoman Empire). If it is true that "[t]he political class construct their despotism [by] attempt[ing] to awe people through personal pomp and splendor, they humiliate them with misery and power and by parting them from their money, thus creating loyal subjects out of them",⁽²⁰⁾ various Western political analysts likewise unanimously agree that political despotism was the product of religious despotism, while others are of the opinion that, if there was no overlap between the two, they both undoubtedly conspired together to humiliate mankind. Their mutual resemblance is due to the fact that the first governs the spiritual world, while the other governs the physical.

Al-Kawakibi argues that rulers exploit the public's fear, ignorance and terror regarding religious matters relating to the hereafter. He thus saw "rulers" as having appointed themselves in the role of God on earth and promoting the idea that God's favor was conditional upon the imitation of his deputy (*khalīfa*) and representative (*qā'im bi-amrihi*) on earth. The will of the despot to subjugate his subjects is matched by their ignorance and subservience; as his rule increasingly resembles that of God, the people's fear grows worse, the vengeance and torments promised by the ruler come to occupy the prime place and God's retribution is delayed: "The people are put to death by their own hands as a result of the fear that comes from ignorance. When ignorance is driven out and reason flourishes, fear disappears".⁽²¹⁾ Nary a political despot has not arrogated to himself some sacred quality shared with and identified with Almighty God and appointed a group of despotic clerics who assist him in oppressing and enslaving the people in God's name.

The state and society, as observed by al-Kawakibi in his personal experience and the history of his people, exist within a system of values which sees the king

as appointed by God to lead His worshippers and grant him authority over their affairs. The result is a situation where a "regression in the sphere of values, the dominance of Khosravid⁽²²⁾ values, values of obedience and the use of religion to enforce them" takes place, and "legends of the ancients" are substituted for the scientific mind, the mind of reflection, knowledge and contemplation, in the creation of "happiness and how to achieve it in the material world before the hereafter".⁽²³⁾ These are the values that the book "*The Etiquette of the Sultanates*" uses as its subject material, drawing on the overlap between Persian cultural and moral heritage and Arab and Islamic heritage; the values of blind obedience and a parallel between the ruler and God.

In the same context, al-Kawakibi examines the reasons for the spread of religious despotism and its relationship with political despotism, drawing on the historical manifestation of this relationship in Europe and linking it to his own world. He adopts a staged approach in his examination of history, stating that "all political analysts argue that politics and religion go hand in hand, and that religious reform is the easiest, soundest and quickest way to political reform".⁽²⁴⁾ They also assert that there is a growing comparison between political and religious despotism, since whenever one of them is present in a country, the other is drawn towards it, or whenever it disappears, so too does its companion; and if one of them weakens or strengthens, so does the other.

Al-Kawakibi employed many well-known examples from Athenian political history, and from the Protestant reforms in Europe in the modern era, which he supported. He believed that Protestantism had clearly influenced political reform more than political freedom had influenced Catholic reform. Both of these promote the argument that religion was more influential than politics, in that "there are a great number of examples of this from every time and place";⁽²⁵⁾ at the same time, politics works dishonestly to exploit religion and use it to achieve its own ends.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

21 Al-Kawakibi, *Nature of Despotism*, p. 47; we find the same bold critique in Shaykh 'Ali Abdel-Raziq (see following chapter).

22 Khosravid in reference to the kings of the Sassanid Empire. The term is used by some Muslim and Arab scholars pejoratively to refer to absolutist rule.

23 Muhammad Abed Al-Jabari, *Naqd al-'Aql al-'Arabī (4): Al-'Aql al-Akhlāqī al-'Arabī, Dirāsah Tahlīliyyah Naqdiyyah li-Nuẓum al-Qiyam fī th-Thaqāfah al-'Arabīyyah* [Critique of Arab Reason: Arab Moral Reason: An Critical Analytical Study of Moral Systems in Arab Culture] (Casablanca: Arab Cultural Centre / Moroccan Publishing House, 2001), p. 629.

24 Al-Kawakibi, *Nature of Despotism*, p. 32.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

The historical analysis employed by al-Kawakibi applies to the study of this issue across Judaism and Christianity equally, although he does not examine the question of state formation in a Jewish or Christian context. Although his references to historical examples lend his research significant evidential weight, various scholars believe that he frequently "deviated from the subject, instead of following through with his discussion of the fundamental problem that he had begun with and instead of evincing the links between different time periods, taking into account the specific manifestations of contemporary thought at that time, and swiftly moves on to religious conclusions that do not necessarily relate to the context that they are presented in".⁽²⁶⁾ This occurs specifically when he discusses religious despotism and its relationship to Christianity and Judaism.

Notwithstanding Katurah's apt methodological critique of the structure of the text, I believe that al-Kawakibi's ultimate goal of criticizing despotism in the name of religion remains a necessary political and ethical project – even, inasmuch as it deals with those most crucial of human values, liberty and

liberation, an existential project. This is to say that "the call to liberation from the chains of tyranny is a vital issue, wholly connected to the sustained existence of the individual; the individual cannot dispense with his freedom since it is his lifeblood",⁽²⁷⁾ in the same way that "the presence of the blessing of freedom in any society is important because it indicates that the society is ready to accept the call of freedom".⁽²⁸⁾ For al-Kawakibi, freedom is the mother of humanity, since justice is the father.

As such, the ultimate goal of what we have called the congruent critique of despotism, which, for al-Kawakibi, lies between the religious and the political, retains a continued applicability elevated beyond time and space, given that it has to do with people's lives, wherever they may be, and that it relates to the most basic and most important of their rights, the right to live with dignity. It is an irony that all religions and political theories advocate for the achievement and preservation of this right. In short, we consider that this congruent despotism is what the philosopher Immanuel Kant described as "radical evil".

Part Two: 'Ali Abdel-Raziq and the Seeds of Secular Thought

Shaykh 'Ali Abdel-Raziq (1888-1966) was primarily occupied with the issue of the Islamic Caliphate, in addition to the relationship between the religious and the political in Islam, which he attempted to continue developing following Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh. His approach, however, was heterodox and daring. He examined the system of the Caliphate in Islam in response to the socio-political situation that he had grown up in during the last years of the Ottoman *tanzimat*. This formed the entry point to his discussion of the relationship between the religious and the political in Islam in text and history, drawing on the era of the prophets as a foundational focal point in history.

Section One: The Caliphate as a Political Office Par Excellence

Shaykh 'Ali Abdel-Raziq's book, *Islam and the Foundations of Governance*, became prominent

immediately after the broad controversy generated by the Turkish Grand National Assembly's decision to announce the abolition of the system of Sultanate and Caliphate. This was based on a decision by the Turkish leader, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, which met sharp discontent and opposition from the traditional institutions associated with this system. During this discussion, 'Ali Abdel Rizaq set out to respond to those who were in favor of retaining the Caliphate system and who claimed that it was specifically required by the religion. As a scion of Islamic reform, he found that the support for the idea of the Caliphate had no objective basis and that it was impossible to find any substantial evidence to vindicate it in Islam's foundational texts.

'Ali Abdel-Raziq posed a preliminary two-part question: "is the Caliphate really necessary? [...] Is there such a thing as an Islamic system of

26 Katurah, p. 31.

27 Locke, John. *Two Treatises of Government*. Edition revised and corrected based on the most recent London edition (Paris: Calixte Volland Books, 1802), p. 64.

28 Abdallah Laroui, *Maḥmūd al-Ḥurriyyah [The Concept of Freedom]*, 4th edition (Casablanca / Beirut: Arab Cultural Centre, 2008), p. 30.

government?"⁽²⁹⁾ This was very controversial at the time, not only because of the daring and power of the question asked, but also because of the identity of the person asking it. It might have been considered 'ordinary' had it had been asked by an liberal intellectual, for example, but the reason that the traditionalists were shocked was because the one asking the question was one of their own: an Egyptian religious scholar [*faqīh*] from al-Azhar.

Anyone reading the text in terms of its terminology and its definition of the Caliphate will find that it does not stray far from the traditional concept of legitimate politics as defined by al-Mawardi and Ibn Taymiyyah. It uses terms such as public obedience (*aṭ-ṭaw'ā al-āmma*), public guardianship (*al-walāya al-āmma*), and the implementation of *ḥudūd* punishments and *sharī'a* etc. Nevertheless, the author makes use of this traditional definition of the Caliphate, insofar as it dealt with the unification of the two authorities of religion and the material world. Indeed, he sets out a clear and salient perspective on the matter: "If, on the other hand, one examines the writings of several religious scholars ('*ulamā'*), especially after the fifth century of the hijra, one finds that they begin their work by mentioning a king or potentate. Invariably, they place him above the rest of humankind, crediting him with quasi-divine qualities (*maqām al-izzah al-ilāhiyyah*)"⁽³⁰⁾. This Caliph or Sultan enjoys a status that protects him from any kind of scrutiny, accountability or critique of his words or actions, whether in religion or politics: "the theory according to which the Caliph derives his authority from God was dominant in the discourse [of the theologians]; hence, it became widespread among Muslims."⁽³¹⁾ It was natural that this sublime quality should preclude the possibility that anyone should think about sharing power with the Caliph; he did not like to share his 'guardianship', nor did anyone else have guardianship over the Muslims. The result was that he was not asked about what he did.

We see how this exalted status was necessary to achieve a still higher and more all-encompassing status: that of divine oneness; an office concealing a paradoxical and metaphysical theological idea used to advance secular and human interests. In other words, we can say that we have arrived at tyranny, as outlined by Plato in his famous distinction between different systems of government.

'Ali Abdel Rizaq refutes the supporters of the Caliphate and their justifications for the claim that the power of the Caliph was always delimited by law, and that discipline and this delimitation were enough to correct his course if it was feared that he was overreaching his authority. He declared that these were claims that did not stand up to the reality of texts and the history of events: "None of the scholarly investigations that we have come across that have claimed that the appointment of a prayer leader (*Imām*) [for the whole Muslim community] is a religious obligation (*farḍ*) has attempted to substantiate this thesis with a verse from God's noble book. And I swear that if such a verse had existed, the scholars concerned would not have hesitated to utilize and expound it at length."⁽³²⁾

There is thus no basis to the assertion that the appointment of the Caliph is an obligation under *sharī'a* failure to meet means the sin of the whole *Umma*. The matter does not stop with the Qur'an, despite its profound authority for Muslims, but also extends to the *ḥadīth*: "the [issue of the Caliphate] is not only passed over in the Qur'an, it is equally ignored in the *Sunna*. This is borne out by the fact that the religious scholars were unable to provide even a single hadith in support of their case on this issue."⁽³³⁾ If such a *ḥadīth* had been available to them, they would not have let pass the opportunity to use it as evidence in order to reach consensus (*ijmā'*) concerning the necessity and legitimacy of the Caliphate. This compelled some Islamic legal scholars to respond that 'Abdel Rizaq had "not consulted the Qur'an in

29 Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age (1798-1939)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 184.

30 'Ali Abdel-Raziq, *Al-Islām wa-'Uṣūl al-Ḥukm [Islam and the Foundations of Political Power]*, with analysis and documentation by Muhammad Imarah, 2nd edition (Beirut: Arab Institute for Studies and Publishing, 1988), p. 128. [Translator's note: An English-language translation of this text is available, but the liberties taken in rendering the original Arabic in that version have meant that in this article we have chosen to use our own original or adapted versions rather than the existing English text. See: Ali Abdel Razeq, *Islam and the Foundations of Political Power*, Maryam Loutfi trans. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).]

31 *Ibid.*, p. 129.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 132.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 133.

the first instance when determining the precise nature of Islam, and was persuaded by research based on a foreign source".⁽³⁴⁾

This brings us to Ali Abdel Rizaq's refutation of the idea that any consensus on this matter existed, despite the fact that the alleged direction of consensus rested on the "consensus of the Companions and the Followers [of the Prophet Muhammad]" on the one hand, and the absolute necessity in this matter (politics) of consensus over a Sultan or Caliph in the interests of his subjects on the other. "We are of the opinion that the argument for consensus in this matter is quite unreliable, and that it would be impossible for the authors we have discussed to produce evidence in support of their thesis [...] whether [by 'consensus'] they mean the consensus of the Companions of the Prophet, or whether along with the Companions it also includes the second generation of Muslims, or even the entire body of Muslim theologians".⁽³⁵⁾ Abdel-Raziq does not deny the legitimacy of consensus as a source of religious law – he searched for evidence of consensus in this regard, but was unable to find any. How could he, with a topic of such sensitivity, a sensitivity stretching throughout Islam's entire political history? With the exception of the period of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon Him, and the first three *Rāshidūn* Caliphs, he believes that rulers only ascended the throne of the Caliphate under the shadow of the sword and the tip of the lance.

Shaykh Abdel-Raziq's search for real proof of the existence of a consensus on the establishment of the Caliphate in Islam was made difficult by how coy the texts are on the subject. He thus had to work hard to establish evidence based on other factors of historical import. In this context, he addresses advocates of a Caliphate, and argues that, if they furnish the Caliph with such power, elevate him to such a status and bestow on him such authority, they are obliged to tell us the source of the power they claim for him. Since he believes that the evidence they provide to establish the legitimacy of the Caliphate are false or "corrupt"

(*fāsīd*), in Ibn Rushd's terms, he presents evidence for his own case, relying on the historical experience of the *Ummah*. Thus he writes: "We have no doubt that coercion has always been the basis of the caliphate. History does not offer us a single example of a caliph whose image is not associated with the armed force supporting him, with the fear inspired by the brutal force surrounding him and the unsheathed swords that lent him protection".⁽³⁶⁾

Here, we are faced with a group of concepts that are clearly drawn from the thought of Ibn Khaldun: coercion, intimidation, brute force, *et cetera*. Moreover, he is convinced that "these things called 'thrones' are erected only on the heads of mankind and carried upon their necks. These things called 'crowns' are preserved only at the expense of human lives. The power of rulers is upheld by destroying the power of human beings. Their pomp and grandeur is fed by extortions from people, just as night thrives at the expense of day and shortens it. Their light springs from the glimmer of swords and flames, ignited in wars".⁽³⁷⁾ Thus the comparison with al-Kawakibi is an apt one, whether in terms of the problematic or in terms of the discourse and the ultimate goal.

The conclusion is that the system of the Islamic Caliphate does not possess religious legitimacy; rather, its legitimacy extends from how politics was practiced in reality, which saw the adoption of various forms of oppression, coercion and material and moral despotism. To Balqaziz, however, it is more apt to raise a major question regarding how Shaykh Abdel-Raziq severed the link between the Caliphate and religion: "Does the refutation of the Caliphate as both a political and religious institution, as it was typically described, represent a categorical refutation of the principle of government in the specific experience of Islam?"⁽³⁸⁾

We believe that Abdel-Raziq's work is full of evidence and ideas that indicate that the answer is 'no'. He did not seek, by refuting the Caliphate, to also refute the legitimacy of politics in Islam or elsewhere. Indeed,

34 Muhammad Al-Bahi, *Al-Fikr al-Islāmī al-Ḥadīth wa-Ṣīlatuhu bi-l-Isī' mār al-Gharbī* [Modern Islamic Thought and its Connection to Western Colonialism], 4th edition (Cairo: Wahba booksellers, date unknown), p. 252.

35 'Ali Abdel-Raziq, p. 137; for his discussion of 'ijmā', see his book, *'Ijmā' in Islamic Shari'ah*.

36 Abdel-Raziq, p. 139.

37 *Ibid.*

38 Abdel-Ilah Balqaziz, *Al-'Arab wa-'l-Ḥadāthah, Dirāsa fī Maqālāt al-Ḥadāthiyyīn* [Arabs and Modernity: A Study of Essays by Modernisers] (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 2007), p. 133.

his discussion focused exclusively on the system of the Islamic Caliphate, whose legitimacy and aims he called into question: "Observation supported by reasoning and evidence from ancient and modern history show that the performance of religious rites as well as other aspects of religion do not necessitate the kind of government which theologians (*fuqahā'*) call the Caliphate [...] Neither the conduct of our spiritual life, nor the direction of our temporal affairs calls for the Caliphate. To extend this analysis, the Caliphate has always been, and still remains, a disaster for Islam and for Muslims. It has been a constant source of evil and corruption".⁽³⁹⁾ The *fuqahā'* who defended the Caliphate, meanwhile, were at best able only to attack Abdel-Raziq's thought by smearing it as incitement to unrest, and claiming that "the source of this unrest [...] is, firstly, the acceptance of the idea of the West, then an attempt to subordinate Islam to it".⁽⁴⁰⁾

It is clear, then, how Abdel-Raziq refutes any link between the system of the Caliphate and the explicit texts of Islam, and identifies its actual rationale in the practice of politics, as it manifested in the historical experience of Muslims. Moreover, he argues that this system is not necessary for the conduct of religious affairs; indeed, it is the source of decay and decline. Since religion and the material world did not need the Caliphate, this meant that it was possible to approach it from a modern perspective whereby the relationship between the religious and the political spheres are reconfigured.

Section 2: Reconfiguring the relationship between the religious and the political spheres

In order to present a new vision capable of transcending the suffering, conflict and oppression carried out in the name of religion by the Islamic Caliphate, and to conduct a re-reading of the political in its relationship to the Supreme Being, Shaykh Abdel Rizaq goes back to a foundational, sensitive and fascinating period in the history of Islam: the period of the Prophet and the "State of Madinah". His principal question in

this regard is: Was the Prophet Muhammad able to establish a state? Did he wield political power during the Madinah period? In other words, what was the relationship between Muhammad's message and his politics? That is to say, "[w]hat is really essential to determine is whether the Prophet's sovereignty over his people stemmed from his role as the Apostle of God or whether it was an imperial phenomenon; whether the occasional display of power in his actions points to the presence of a state, or of a spiritual authority."⁽⁴¹⁾

Nevertheless, it can still be confusing to deal with the contradictions in Abdel-Raziq's argument when he discusses the political in the experience of the Prophet. On the one hand, there is no doubt that "the Prophet's authority included certain elements that could be compared with those of a temporal government, thereby reflecting some aspects of power and regality."⁽⁴²⁾ On the other, we find him asking whether the Prophet had founded a political state and: "why should this "state" have remained bereft of the pillars typical of any temporal power? Why has it not been possible to identify the procedures for the nomination of judges and governors? Why did the Prophet not speak to his subjects about government and about the rules of popular consultation?"⁽⁴³⁾

As such, there is a certain amount of hesitation when he discusses the system of judges. He denies that the state was bereft of the pillars typical of any temporal power, returning to a discussion of how the Prophet appointed various Companions as judges over various cities. We notice that his discussion of politics and the state at the time of the Prophet employs various modern concepts, including his discussion of the "the Prophet's government". Abdel-Raziq appears to pre-emptively refute, rather than confirm, the subject of his discussion. In other words, how can he possibly describe the form of the Prophet's government while he is still asking questions about it and investigating its precise nature and how it came to be?

Nevertheless, his argument becomes clearer when he distinguishes between the nature of the Prophet's role

39 Abdel-Raziq, 146.

40 Al-Bahi, p. 255.

41 Abdel-Raziq, p. 168.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 156; for more detail, see Abdel-Ilah Balqaziz, *Takwīn al-Majāl as-Siyāsī al-Islāmī: an-Nubuwwah wa š-Siyāsah* [The Formation of the Islamic Political Sphere: Prophethood and Politics] (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 2005), p. 38 ff.

43 Abdel-Raziq, p. 160.

as the Apostle of God and the nature of a political ruler. He states: "You know that to be a messenger (*ar-risāla*) is different from being a king (*al-mulk*) and that one does not imply the other in any sense: to be a messenger is one thing, to be a king another. How many kings have there been who were not prophets or messengers of God? Likewise, how many among the messengers of God were kings? Most of the messengers of God we know of were solely messengers of God."⁽⁴⁴⁾ We thus find a clear desire to reconfigure the relationship between the political sphere that the king is entrusted with on the one hand and the religious sphere – the sphere of God's message – on the other. The first is a sphere for conflict and struggle, the sphere of the relative and the circumstantial, the sphere of the "purely human". The second is the sphere of the absolute, God, the ideal and what should be, the sphere of the "perfect human".

Abdel-Raziq believed that the Qur'an was explicitly clear that "Muhammad (PBUH) did not have any claim over his people save those stemming from his proclamation of the prophetic message. If he had been

a worldly ruler, he would also have had the right of rule over his people. Temporal power entails rights, privileges and consequences quite distinct from those pertaining to a prophetic mission."⁽⁴⁵⁾ It was also clear that the Prophet's rule over his people "was religious and not civil leadership. Their obedience to him was the obedience of doctrine and faith, and not of government and power."⁽⁴⁶⁾ Abdel-Raziq's argumentation is direct and forceful, and attempts to make a "procedural distinction" between the religious and the political by identifying each of their attributes one by one and rejecting any hint of a connection between them. It confronts the culture presented by the classical essay-writers (*at-tarassul*) and the mirrors for princes (*marāyā al-mulūk*) of Arab-Islamic literature, as well as the culture of consensus that studies in contemporary Islamic thought have shown to be as "more theoretical in nature than grounded in tangible historical reality to start with."⁽⁴⁷⁾ It is an irony of history that we continue to experience a number of these issues, both discursively and in reality in the Islamic Arab space, despite all of the signs of modernization.

Conclusion

To conclude our discussion of al-Kawakibi and Abdel-Raziq: we are presented with two persuasive and courageous theses, in terms of their argumentation and respective world-views, and in terms of the knowledge and justifications they advance in order to defend these theses. We have attempted to articulate the extent to which their critiques overlap on multiple levels, despite their differences in terms of style, research techniques and particular space. Nevertheless, their critique of the two forms of despotism is congruent and unified, as a clear function of their *Nahda* and reformist tendencies and ideologies.

We say this given the various contextual factors related to their contemporary political, social and cultural situation. In terms of their argumentation, we were struck by their articulate and flowing

language. This language draws on a persuasive body of references inside the cultural context of the Islamic Arab religious and political experience to present a string of evidence for a thesis – a thesis that reflects on politics politically – and to rule out all attempts at counter-theses that might distort and exploit religious arguments to impose a specific model of political government and advance all possible justifications to legitimate it.

Al-Kawakibi and Abdel-Raziq have shown us that politics, forms of government, and the organization of the Islamic Arab body of references were never religious or directly related to an aspect of religion. Rather, politics is purely a matter for the temporal world, for individuals and societies to reflect on and use in the search for forms and theories capable of achieving human dignity and happiness for

44 *Ibid.*

45 *Ibid.*, p. 155.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 181.

47 Abd al-Majid Al-Sharfi, *Al-Islām wa-l-Ḥadāthah [Islam and Modernity]*, 2nd edition (Tunis: Tunisian Publishing House, 1991), p. 164.

individuals and societies, based on rational thought and the use of the experience of advanced countries in this sphere, while taking into account the specificities of time and space and ensuring that the public interest is the ultimate goal.

We are thus faced with a homogenous vision that seeks to undertake what we have called a congruent critique of despotism by means of a critique of political thought and reality as they were in circulation, and through a refutation of the Caliphate system as the midwife of despotism and the resulting attempt to reconstruct the relationship between the religious and the political spheres based on a new configuration. This prompts us to venture that they conducted their thinking using a secular logic, in a space where everyone thought with a logic in which the religious

and the political were intertwined, supporting one another at the expense of human dignity and freedom. We can distill the most important features of this congruence into the following points:

- Nahḍa* as a goal that directs thought;
- A critique of political and religious despotism based on lived experience (the Ottoman *tanzimat* state);
- A reliance on foundational religious texts: the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet;
- The use of history and legacy as part of persuasive debate;
- A keen awareness of the differences between their countries and other advanced countries;
- Features of secular thought on the issues of religion and the state.

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